"Then Nothing be my Speech": Identity and Its Discontents in Margaret Cavendish's *The Convent of Pleasure*

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ABSTRACT:

In this paper, I wish to discuss Margaret Cavendish's *The Convent of Pleasure* (1688) and argue that the narrow lenses of feminist theory or performance studies have been inadequate in portraying the play as a provocative site of cultural contestation where the writer interrogates the limits of performance with a dizzying mix of theoretical conventions that emphasizes the instability of performance itself as a genre. Cavendish transcends the rigid categories of gender and class, playfully probing, ridiculing and ultimately rejecting dominant assumptions that structured early modern beliefs; through the depiction of female-female erotic behaviour followed by a reinstatement of heteronormativity at the end, she fashions a personal identity that poses a challenge to any theory that attempts to classify her position or categorize her play.

When Margaret Cavendish, The Duchess of Newcastle, visited the Royal Society in London in the spring of 1667, a startled John Evelyn remarked that she looked "so like a Cavalier/But that she had no beard". Not only did the Duchess wear a gown with an eight foot train, but she also wore a wide-brimmed cavalier hat and a knee length riding coat. Two years earlier,

Sir Charles Lyttelton recalled meeting her when she was "dressed in a vest" and he was struck by her masculine gestures: instead of curtsies she made "legs and bows to the ground with her hand and head."[1] These carefully choreographed public appearances as a kind of "self-fashioned artifact"[2] and a deliberate attempt to project a sexually ambivalent image are instructive markers that indicate Cavendish's emancipating acts of gender transformation. Dismissed as the "crazy duchess," she apparently enjoyed playing the "disorderly woman" who defies the repressive manifestations of male authority.[3]

One of the most prolific writers in the early modern period, Margaret Cavendish acquired a reputation for eccentricity that began in the 17th century and remains in force today. She spent much of her adult life writing, experimenting with—and stretching the bounds of—genres as diverse as poetry, utopian fiction, oration, scientific writing, autobiography and drama. Famously ridiculed by Samuel Pepys as "a mad, conceited" woman,[4] Cavendish's works, particularly her plays (which were never staged), have suffered from the inevitable bias in favour of market-oriented writing.

The critical neglect of Cavendish's plays chiefly stem from the question as to how "dramatic" they really are, poised as they are in a nebulous state between stage drama and closet drama. Despite Cavendish's personal decision not to stage her plays, they do not, as Anne Shaver argues, fall neatly into the category of closet drama meant to be read in the privacy of one's room. The two printed collections of Cavendish's plays, mostly written in Antwerp during the Interregnum, were published in 1662 and 1668. The rhetorical ploys that Cavendish uses to reject the canons of genre and her steadfast refusal to be restrained by the rules of writing, is a feature of her entire literary oeuvre.

In the Preface to the latter edition entitled "Plays Never Before

Printed" she is almost apologetic in suggesting that she is unable to compose "Plays" in conformity to "ancient Rules"; yet, this self-deprecatory tone serves only to highlight her remarkable originality and her deliberate departure from established generic norms:

> . . . for it would be too great a fondness to my Works to think such Plays as these suitable to Ancient rules, in which I pretend no skill, or agreeable to the modern Humour, to which I dare acknowledge my aversion: but having pleased my Fancy in writing many Dialogues upon several Subjects, and having afterwards order'd them into Acts and Scenes, I will venture, in spight of the Criticks, to call them Plays.

This article will focus on one particular drama by Cavendish—*The Convent of Pleasure* (1668), a play about a group of women who create a separatist community and who are then reined back into heteronormativity, highlighting the instabilities of identity and of performance as a genre. However, arguments about performability often miss the more central issue of performativity in her plays. I would like to contend that the play calls into question Judith Butler's distinction between performance and performativity in which "the former presumes a subject, but the latter contests the very notion of the subject."[5] As a play that exhibits theatrical performances (the play-within-theplay, the masque of the sea deities and the Maypole festivities) *and* questions the stability of its own bodies, *The Convent of Pleasure* reveals the acute difficulties of opposing or even disentangling performance and performativity. The "performances" in the convent are not just masks that the women take on, but are also performative in that they unveil the contingent nature of patriarchy, of identity, of bodies themselves. Performativity and

performance intersect in this play, revealing, as Cavendish's peculiarly bodiless play demonstrates, that performance is not a narrow genre limited to lived, bounded acts, but instead proves an expansive, metamorphic one that contests the constraints of such categorizations.

In an article on Aphra Behn (a contemporary of Cavendish), Roberta Martin contends that the seventeenth and early eighteenth century was a period of transition and instability in attitudes towards gender classification; in fiction, poetry and drama, individuals created subject positions that were based on "transitional experiences of gender and sexuality."[6] Behn's adventurous life as a poet, playwright, novelist, libertine and spy and her determination to support herself solely through her writing made her defiantly challenge existing social orthodoxy and demand payment for her literary efforts. Needless to say, she came from a very different socio-economic background than Cavendish, but despite their differences in class, it is perhaps instructive to note here that both Cavendish and Behn were constantly involved in gender performances. Like Behn, it is clear that through social performance and elaborate costuming, Cavendish unsettles fixed ideas about identity and sexuality. In her dramatic work, Cavendish not only marks out the borders of female identity but postulates ways to transcend them. She interrogates the woman's role and spotlights "ceremonial moments of awakening"[7] when the female self is involved in a process of metamorphosis, and offers, however briefly, challenges to masculinist assumptions, providing glimpses of utopian alternatives for her female characters. Her plays thus emerge as a provocative site of cultural contestation. *The Convent of Pleasure* incorporates an extravagant mode of self-fashioning through cross-dressing, role-playing, a display of the experimental pleasures of same-sex erotic friendship, a synthesis of print and performance techniques; it comprises a spectacular

and subversive hybridity of theatrical conventions, stubbornly resisting classification. Just as theories of performativity dismantle the concept of essential, stable identity, so does Cavendish's *Convent* refigure subjectivity by challenging the norms of what Judith Butler calls the "heterosexual imperative"[8] demonstrating the performative construction of gender. So extraordinary are Cavendish's generic manipulations and her parodic critique of a gender order that postulates fixed binaries between the masculine and the feminine, that the play resists any kind of codification. In particular, the article examines how gender and generic issues are cleverly manipulated by Cavendish to problematize identity formation in her work. Feminist theories, queer theory, theories of performance or of genre all ultimately prove to be inadequate in their interpretations of a play where what first seems to be a specifically female, oppositional space to heteronormativity, becomes, with closer analysis, a rapidly changing environment that transforms with the language that creates it. Its resistance to stabilization, its curiously immaterial space, suggests that the subversive power of identity exists not merely in bodies, but in the discourse that produces those bodies.

The Convent of Pleasure opens with the startling revelation that the central protagonist Lady Happy, who is "handsome, young, rich and virtuous" and therefore a valuable 'commodity', refuses to perform her "natural" role as wife and mother. She institutes a convent, arguing that its source of pleasure is within. It is not a place of constraint or self-denial, but as she asserts: "I intend to encloister myself from the world, to enjoy pleasure, and not to bury myself from it . . ."[9] Exposing tropes of flattery as pleasing only to the male giver, Lady Happy resignifies pleasure itself. The patriarchal paradigms of marriage, family and state are overturned by the creation of this convent, for the women who have chosen to live there are, if one may use Luce Irigaray's

phrase, "commodities" who have refused to go to "market", putting their bodies and their possessions out of circulation.[10] Cavendish asserts that the power of the convent stems not from a material rejection of patriarchy—a mere physical escape—but from Lady Happy's discursive ability to resignify the patriarchal world that inhibits her. Nothing is barred in this convent except the interaction with men. Ironically, the very qualities traditionally attributed to women are seen here to be the prerogative of men: "And since there is so much folly, vanity and falsehood in men, why should women trouble and vex themselves for their sake . . ." (*Convent* 259). Moreover, she does not delight in admirers since ". . . they might gaze on my Beauty, and praise my Wit, and I receive nothing from their eyes, nor lips; for Words vanish as soon as spoken, and Sights are not substantial" (*Convent,* 258). In this enclosure, marked by its inclusiveness, women perform all the tasks—from prioress and physician to gardener and cook. There are no stereotyped polarities in terms of masculine and feminine occupations. Revelling in the physical and intellectual bounty of the convent, the women follow the rule of nature in this self sufficient enclosure, the delights of which are described in succulently physical descriptions: they fill their minds with delight, they eat, drink and decorate their rooms in conformity to the dictates of the season. In spring they plan to hang silk damask in their chambers; in winter, beds will be lined with velvet and fires will be lit with fragrant juniper and cypress wood, while in summer the floor will be "strewed every day with green rushes or reaves . . ." (*Convent* 264). They will indulge in an Epicurean gratification of the senses:

> We'll clothe ourselves with softest silk,
> And linen fine as white as milk.
> We'll please our sight with pictures rare;
> Our nostrils with perfumed air.

Our ears, with sweet melodious sound,
Whose substance can nowhere be found;
Our taste with sweet delicious meat,
And savoury sauces we will eat.

(*Convent* 261)

Yet these sensual pleasures exist textually rather than materially: Lady Happy's richly detailed, description takes on a performative quality because the luxuriant items never achieve visibility with the audience but instead remain suspended in her promiscuously profuse words. Most significant is Lady Happy's declaration that there will be "a great looking-glass in each chamber, that we may view ourselves and take pleasure in our own Beauties, whilst they are fresh and young . . ." (*Convent* 264). Here there is a benign notion of narcissism that is clearly different from the Lacanian interpretation where narcissism is imagined to have an effect of alienation.[11] In Cavendish's text there seems to be a clear negation of the carefully controlled heterosexual economy: the process of ego formation and identification operate in an economy of self sufficiency and pleasure. Luce Irigaray points out that the "body has to be subordinated to the exigencies of its transformation into an object of circulation among men. Like a commodity it has no mirror to reflect itself, so woman serves as reflection, as image, of and for man".[12] Within the convent, women can, for the first time, autonomously take pleasure in their own beauty and indeed in their own bodies. The women also perform male roles, not merely as a cathartic expression of their common female suffering but also because this role playing is pleasurable and performed for their "Recreations". The convent thus becomes a locus of shifting gender roles where individuals recreate their bodies through language.

The convent's discourse reinforces its separatist stance with Lady Happy's copious and vivid descriptions celebrating the

sensual and aesthetic pleasures the convent has to offer. Against this rhetoric of luxury is juxtaposed the conversation of the men who stand outside the medieval walls of the convent. Unable to enter, they can only rant against the unnatural and potentially dangerous behaviour of the women inside. The convent, with its rich symbolic potential, becomes the locus for the desires and fears about female sexuality and power. The men's ongoing debate about what constitutes female "natural behaviour" is interesting in many ways. Monsieur Adviser, on hearing from Madame Mediator that Lady Happy is of the opinion that "men are obstructors" since "instead of increasing pleasure they produce pain," voices the fear that patriarchal institutions like marriage and the church may be threatened by these dangerous views. He contends firmly that her "heretical opinions ought not to be suffered, nor her doctrine allowed; and she ought to be examined by a masculine synod, and punished with a severe husband, or tortured with a deboist husband." Monsieur Facil sees larger political contexts threatened and suggests "Let us fee the clergy to persuade her out, for the good of the Commonwealth." (*Convent* 262-263). In another of Cavendish's plays, *The Female Academy*, men are seen as violently opposed to women's educational aspirations when they try to drown out female oratory by blowing vigorously on trumpets. In *The Convent of Pleasure*, the men outside, now marginalized, decide to take manly action to get the women out, but this proves to be elusive: they plan to set the convent on fire and "smoke them out, as they do a swarm of bees;" they decide to storm the walls, only to discover they are a yard thick and impossible to penetrate; ultimately they devise a plan to enter the convent dressed as women. But there are problems here as well: they fear that their garb, their behaviour and voices will give them away, especially since they are unable to "frame" their eyes and mouths to "such coy, dissembling looks, and pretty simpering

mopes . . ." (*Convent* 267). With a collapse of their otherwise "willing minds", the Monsieurs turn out to be inept at performing the very roles they help construct and validate.

The only man who is able to perform "woman" in a constructive way is the Prince, dressed as a Princess. The scenes between Lady Happy and the Princess are sophisticated and witty in their gender negotiations. For Lady Happy, who has been described by Madame Mediator as "a princely brave woman truly, of a masculine presence" (*Convent* 265) kissing the Princess (Prince) is a supremely pleasurable act: "But why may not I love a woman with the same affection I could a man?" (*Convent* 274). It is interesting to note that at their most intimate moments, Lady Happy and the Princess are dressed as shepherdess and shepherd respectively. What seems to be an act of cross-dressing on the Princess's part is really a genuine act without any true implication of gender change: "she" is in reality a Prince, and thus dressed as a shepherd. By simultaneously participating in female-female love (Lady Happy believes the Princess is a woman) and male-female love (they are dressed as shepherd and shepherdess) both the characters performatively resist traditional sexual hegemony and reinscribe it, blurring sexual identities and deconstructing all binaries. Judith Butler's notion of the gendered body as "performative" is useful at this point. As Butler cogently points out, "Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*".[13] The Princess suggests that "These my Imbraces though of Female Kind,/ May be as fervent as a Masculine mind" (*Convent*, 275). Cavendish demonstrates how her characters resignify their positions from abjection to one of self sufficiency by challenging the norms of the "heterosexual imperative".[14] Cavendish herself seems to know how to best avoid

the distorting constructs of social ideologies by masculinizing the female and feminizing the male. In the Preface to the Readers in *The Convent of Pleasure*, she writes:

> I do not keep strictly to the Masculine and the Feminine Genders, as they call them. The Furies are shees, and the Graces are shees, the Virtues are shees, and the seven deadly sins are shees, which I am sorry for; but I know no reason but that I may as well make them Hees, as others did Shees, or Shees as Others did Hees.[15]

Yet Cavendish constructs only a temporary utopia of liminality where the conception of gender is, to use Butler's phrase, "a constituted social temporality".[16] Just as one is expecting the play to end dramatically with a radical assertion of female-female desire, the real identity of the Princess is revealed— she (he) is a Prince. These sexually hybrid characters call into question traditional gender categorizations and assert the ambiguity of sexual signifiers. But while the performative dimension of gender allows Cavendish's characters to create identities outside the restricting frames of socially enforced behaviour, these identities are never stable. Butler points out that

> . . . acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications*... the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality . . .[17]

Yet Cavendish goes even beyond the notion of a performative, fabricated self, calling into question the very notion of self. Significantly, she chooses to conclude her play with the

introduction of a new character—the Mimick, whose very name suggests a self-reflexive, mirrored copy. The Mimick utters the Epilogue which consists of a series of questions that he answers himself:

> I have it, I have it; No faith, I have it not; I lie, I have it, I say, I have it not . . . But I say, it is gone. What is gone? The Epilogue. When had you it? I never had it; then you did not lose it; that is all one, but I must speak it, although I never had it. How can you speak it and never had it? I, marry, that's the question; but words are nothing, and then an Epilogue is nothing, and so I may speak nothing. Then nothing be my speech. (*Convent,* 286).

In this maze of assertions and retractions, the Mimick realizes that the Epilogue really has no material body: he is a construct that exists only through discourse and can thus be deconstructed in an instant: "I dare not beg applause, our poetess then/Will be enraged, and kill me with her pen" (*Convent,* 287). In her *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* (1666), Cavendish reveals a scepticism regarding the essence of bodies when she speaks of the use of microscopes: "it is not the real body of the object which the glass presents, but the glass only figures or patterns out the picture presented in and by the glass, and there mistakes may easily be committed in taking copies from copies".[18] This could well have been a comment on her dramatic characters whose identities refuse to be stable.

Queer theory has also proved to be inadequate and limited in examining *The Convent of Pleasure.* Valerie Traub views same-sex desire between Lady Happy and the Princess as a subversive force that threatens patriarchal authority.[19] Theodora A. Jankowski contends that by representing a "queer space" the play resists the restrictive Protestant notion that normative sexuality

for women exists only in marriage.[20] These arguments, which polarize one kind of space against another, while illuminating many hitherto neglected aspects of the play, fall short of explaining Cavendish's irrepressible singularity in making the play end on a heteronormative note with the final union of Lady Happy and the Prince (erstwhile Princess). Perhaps what is important to notice is that Cavendish is not creating a queer space as oppositional to heterosexual space: rather both spaces are questioned, challenged and destabilized. Earlier in the play, heterosexual behaviour has been depicted as an arbitary and violent construct. If this is deconstructed through the depiction of a same-sex love performance, that performance too is challenged with a return to heteronormativity at the end. The space in the convent, like its inhabitants, resists materialization.

This in turn, may lead us to try and look at the play from the point of view of performance theory and theories of genre. Marta Stranznicky has argued that though Cavendish's plays are part of the genre of "closet drama" because of their apparent unstageability and undramatic proclivities, "representing an unstaged theatrical event in print has the unique benefit of enabling the author to participate in an ostensibly public occasion without leaving in fact, the security of the closet."[21] There is no doubt that Cavendish, while engaged in the "Action of setting out of a Booke"[22] invites from her readers a kind of mental spectatorship. Her heroines give protracted dissertations, for instance Lady Happy's long discourse on wit, which can only succeed in print. Yet one cannot ignore the fact that this discourse is embedded within a full scale masque, a highly "performable" generic form. Gweno Williams staged the first known production of *The Convent of Pleasure* precisely to reiterate the "performability" of the play, arguing against its categorization as "closet drama".[23] Neither Stranznicky nor Williams can provide a satisfactory explanation in terms of generic definition

because the play simply resists any kind of categorization. In an untitled prefatory epistle to the first collection of her plays, Cavendish points out that "scenes must be read as if they were spoke or Acted".[24] Poised as it is between private and public, the author and reader in the play are simultaneously secluded and socially engaged.

Cavendish, considered radical to her genre-bound contemporaries, rejects the Aristotelian principles of dramatic structure with their classical unities. She experiments extensively with dramatic form, flaunting different theatrical performances. *The Convent of Pleasure* is presented almost like a tableau with masque-like scenes, a play-within-a-play, pastoral scenes with Maypole festivities, all culminating in a full-fledged masque of the sea deities at the end. The reader is led through a generic maze where each section introduces a new kind of performance, which in turn creates a kaleidoscopic flux. The dizzying mix of theoretical conventions that Cavendish introduces emphasizes the instability of performance itself as a genre. The dislocation of time, place and action and the breaking of formulaic rules, allows Cavendish to open up avenues of possibilities for her women characters so that they may get a glimpse of economic freedom, self-government and emancipation from stereotyped gendered roles. The entire play-within-a-play, for instance, is devoted to a litany of complaints about abusive husbands who drink, gamble and beat their wives. It is important that Lady Happy and the Princess are "spectators" rather than actors here. Not only do they watch the play about the cobbler's wife and her negligent husband carefully, but the final conclusion reached—that "Marriage is a curse" and child-bearing a misfortune, is brought home forcefully in their presence (*Convent* 272-273). While these conclusions are being drawn within the enclosed space of the convent, outside the convent walls Monsieur Take-Pleasure finds it impossible to understand why Lady Happy's

decision of being a "vot'ress to Nature" is not synonomous to being a "mistress to men" (*Convent* 263).

In the last two acts of the play, Cavendish introduces a pastoral scene with Maypole festivities depicted and the masque of the sea deities. Both these theatrical forms assert a strong heterosexual tone but it is difficult to agree with Erin Lang Bonin's contention that "Succumbing to patriarchal pressures, Cavendish's utopian heroines eventually rejoin worlds turned right side up in which women are men's political inferiors".[25] The Maypole festival, derived from fertility rituals, was a traditional celebration of virginal initiation into marriage. Although Lady Happy and the Princess are eventually crowned King and Queen of the shepherds after the rural sports and country dances, the Princess reiterates that "in amorous pastoral verse we did not woo/As other pastoral lovers use to do" (*Convent* 278). If the Princess uses examples from seasonal regeneration to justify heterosexuality, Lady Happy's speech on the rational soul and its sovreignity counters and modifies the traditional idea of a married relationship where the importance of the physical body is highlighted. If a heterosexual relationship is to be accommodated, the persons concerned must first comprehend that true love involves joining "as one body and soul, or Heav'nly spirit" (*Convent* 278). Similarly, the masque seems at first to be an overt gesture towards convention, where the Princess, depicted as Neptune becomes the "sole Monarch of the Sea." Yet I would like to contend that here too, while using a form that was usually meant for the mythic idealization of the monarch, Cavendish subtly uses it as a vehicle of self-affirmation. It may be recalled that the masque, often used to promote hegemony, was also used subversively. As Barbara Lewalski has demonstrated in her study of the Jacobean masque, it could be "a site for contestation about gender, power and status."[26] Cavendish's belated use of the masque form is interesting. In

the 1630s, when she was growing up, the glory of Charles I and Henrietta Maria was celebrated through the Caroline court masque. Often the mediating power of the Queen and her ladies would bring about the final scene of harmony, peace and love, as in Ben Jonson's *Chloridia*, where Chloris (played by the Queen) transforms a monstrous world into a green paradise. In *The Convent of Pleasure*, the ceremonial exchanges of the masque arrange the bounty of the oceans to the pleasure of the Sea-Goddess and to the sovereign use of Neptune. The Earth pays tribute to Neptune by bringing him presents from the land, but Lady Happy, the Sea-Goddess, is seen as the radiating source of power for it is she who gives the sun its light:

> I feed the sun, which gives them light,
> And makes them shine in darkest night,
> Moist vapour from my breast I give,
> Which he sucks forth, and makes him live,
> Or else his fire would soon go out,
> Grow dark, or burn the world throughout.
>
> (*Convent* 280)

The very presence of Lady Happy as performer in the masque makes the female body the locus of action and meaning. She, as the Sea-Goddess, is the spectacular centre of attention with her crown of orient pearls and the blushing coral with which she adorns herself. If Nature gives provisions and gifts to Neptune, it seems mersmerized by the Sea-Goddess's power: when she sings, the fish "lie listening" and the tide acts like keys to open her cabinets of oyster-shells. Even Apollo dries her hair with his beams, but what is perhaps more telling is how Apollo's light makes the sea a looking glass "So when I swim on waters high/I see myself as I glide by" (*Convent* 281). Cavendish deliberately draws attention to the Sea-Goddess's mirror image

in the water, allowing her a space for self definition and self assertion. Through Cavendish's use of the masque, we are thus offered a patently subversive "royal" example to patriarchal culture, an unstable but influential locus of female resistance to patriarchy. Cavendish's clever use of the masque as a vehicle of female self affirmation, while apparently displaying a traditional deference and tribute to a patriarchal structure, is only one example of her ingenious manipulations of genre.

In *The Convent of Pleasure*, Cavendish makes it clear that it is through discourse and not merely physical escape that the patriarchal frame can be destroyed. In a way the play demonstrates Helene Cixous's insurgent notion of the "écriture féminine" where the body and voice are freed in the feminine practice of writing:

> A feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive. It is volcanic; as it is written it brings about an upheaval of the old property crust, carrier of masculine investments . . . There's no room for her if she's not a he. If she's a her-she, it's in order to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the truth with laughter.[27]

Cavendish's preoccupation with the liberating realm of female expression is thus remarkably similar to Cixous's vision of the female writer constructing a "self". As demonstrated earlier, this self involves a polyvalent play of multiple possibilities. Such heterogeneity mocks any authoratative or dominant language which must always insist on its version of identity as single and unquestionable. The Prince, disguised as Princess is ultimately seen as lover rather than as master: even when he is depicted as Neptune, the monarch, we are insistently made aware of the

fact that his monarchical and patriarchal role exists only in the realm of "recreations" (*Convent* 280). Through a mode of "serious play" that challenges all theoretical attempts to classify her drama, Cavendish probes, ridicules and rejects the dominant patriarchal assumptions that structured early modern beliefs and behaviour, giving her readers brief but clear visions of female authority and accomplishment. This subtle modus operandi is perhaps best elucidated by the author herself in one of her letters, where she says that men

> . . . seem to govern the world, but we really govern the world, in that we govern men: for what man is he, that is not govern'd by a woman more or less? . . . And not only Wives and Mistresses have prevalent power with Men, but Mothers, Daughters, Sisters, Aunts, Cousins, nay, Maid-Servants have many times a persuasive power with their Masters, and a Land-lady with her Lodger . . . yet men will not believe this, and 'tis the better for us, for by that we govern as it were by an insensible power, so as men perceive not how they are Led, Guided, and Rul'd by the Feminine Sex.[28]

In the final analysis therefore, despite being impossible to categorize, *The Convent of Pleasure* ensures that even a return to heteronormativity and an adherence to social expectations cannot hinder women from thinking about alternatives. These threshold moments of thought exemplify Cavendish's scrutiny of traditional, ideological constructions of "woman." If the act of writing itself was a way of usurping a masculine subject position, Cavendish goes much beyond that: the rules of dramatic composition are transgressed so that her characters may transgress the boundaries of gender.

NOTES

1 Anna Battigelli, *Margaret Cavendish and the Exiles of the Mind*, (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998), 5

2 Sophie Tomlinson, "'My Brain the Stage': Margaret Cavendish and the Fantasy of Female Performance" in *Women, Texts and Histories 1575-1760*, ed. Clare Brant and Dianne Purkiss, (London: Routledge 1992), 156.

3 Sara Mendelson, "Playing Games with Gender" in *Authorial Conquests: Essays on Genre in the Writings of Margaret Cavendish, e*d. Line Cottegnies and Nancy Weiss, (Madison NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003), 199.

4 Samuel Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, ed. Robert Latham and William Matthews, 11 vols. (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1976), 9:123

5 Judith Butler, 'Gender as Performance: An Interview with Judith Butler', Peter Osborne and Lynne Segal, Radical Philosophy 67 (Summer 1994), 32-9.

6 Roberta C. Martin, "'Beauteous Wonder of a Different Kind': Aphra Behn's Destabilization of Sexual Categories" College English Vol 61, no. 2, (Nov 1998), 193.

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8 Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 3.

9 Margaret Cavendish, "The Convent of Pleasure" (1668) in *Women's Writing of the Early Modern Period 1588-1688: An Anthology*, ed. Stephanie Hodgson Wright, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002), 260. All references henceforth are to this edition and cited parenthetically as *Convent* with page no.

10 Irigaray, Luce. "Commodities Among Themselves" in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 192-97.

11 Lacan, Jacques-Marie E. *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Rouledge, 1977), 25.

12 Irigaray, 196
13 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 191
14 Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 3
15 Margaret Cavendish, *"The Convent of Pleasure" and Other Plays*, ed. Anne Shaver, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 259.
16 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 191.
17 Butler, *Gender Trouble* 185.
18 Margaret Cavendish, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, in Kellet, Katherine R. "Performance, Performativity, and Identity in Margaret Cavendish's *The Convent of Pleasure*." SEL 48, 2 (Spring 2008), 51
19 Valerie Traub, "The (In)significance of Lesbian Desire," in *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England*, Cambridge Studies in Renaissance Literature and Culture, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 181
20 Theodora A. Jankowski,. "Pure Resistance:Queer(y)ing Virginity in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* and Margaret Cavendish's *The Convent of Pleasure*," Shakespeare Survey 26 (1998), 220.
21 Marta Stranznicky, "Reading the Stage: Margaret Cavendish and Commonwealth Closet Drama", Criticism 37.3 (Summer 1995), 104.
22 Margaret Cavendish, *Poems and Fancies,* A4v
23 Gweno Williams, "'Why May Not a Lady Write a Good Play?' in Plays by Early Modern Women Reassessed as Performance Texts" in *Readings in Renaissance Women's Drama: Criticism, History and Performance 1594-1998*, ed. S.P. Cerasano and M.Wynne-Davies (London: Routledge, 1998).
24 Margaret Cavendish, *Playes,* A6v
25 Erin Lang Bonin, "Margaret Cavendish's Dramatic Utopias and the Politics of Gender". SEL, 40.2 (2000), 340
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