

Guyonne Leduc

Université Charles de Gaulle, Lille III

WOMEN'S EDUCATION IN MARGARET CAVENDISH'S PLAYS

The first demands for women's better education in Britain are generally ascribed to Bathsua Makin and Mary Astell. Yet, in the 1660s, Cavendish (1623-1676), Duchess of Newcastle, had already argued the case; education being understood as the development of both knowledge and character. The question of women's education is one facet of the debate of the war between the sexes: it is linked to the philosophical and theological questions of woman's nature and of the (in)equality between men and women and it raises the political question of women's roles in society. The problem of women's education was at the heart of Cavendish's life and work. "Like most women in the Stuart period, she was relatively uneducated,"¹ which proved an impediment to her "desire for fame."² She knew that society gave women little opportunity for public use or display of intellect. That awareness was increased by the intellectual climate she lived in, be it Queen Henrietta Maria's French entourage or the countries of Continental Europe where she spent some years in exile and where things were changing more rapidly than in Britain. The ideas developed in the Paris salons "appear frequently in her published work"³ and she was cognizant of contemporary prefeminist arguments. The contrast between her happy private life and, in Smith's words, her being an object of "social scorn" for "her intellectual aspirations" perhaps resulted in "her incipient feminism" [Smith 86].

Applying the term "feminism" to periods prior to 1850 is inadequate on both historical and ideological grounds. Kinnaird's definition will be adopted: prefeminists "preached only equality of 'souls' and [...] of the

1. Lisa T. Sarasohn, "A Science Turned Upside Down: Feminism and the Natural Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 47 (1984): 292.

2. Hilda L. Smith, *Reason's Disciples: Seventeenth-Century English Feminists* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982) 78. See the expression "to raise me to Fame's tower." In Cavendish, "A True Relation of My Birth, Breeding and Life," *Nature's Picture Drawn by Fancies Pencil to the Life, 1656, The Life of William Cavendish, Duke of Newcastle, to Which Is Added The True Relation of My Birth, Breeding and Life.* [...], ed. Charles H. Firth (London: Routledge, 1906), 177; it is paralleled in Sanspareille's words in *Youths Glory and Deaths Banquet, Playes Written by the Thrice Noble, Illustrious and Excellent Princess, the Lady Marchioness of Newcastle* (London, 1662) P1. 2.5.130 [for Part 1, act 2, scene 5, page 130].

3. Kathleen Jones, *A Glorious Fame: The Life of Margaret Cavendish Duchess of Newcastle 1623-1673* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1988), 57.

rational faculties.”⁴ The prefeminist is characterized by “a personal commitment to the advancement of women.”⁵ Given these criteria, Cavendish cannot be deemed a prefeminist: even though, in Smith’s words, she often asked for “women’s support on a basic tenet of feminism—a common sisterhood among them,”⁶ the solidarity she perhaps felt was only with women as exceptional as herself and, in any case, she clearly felt class before gender solidarity.⁷

Her concern for women, their condition, education and speech, is reflected through the numerous “independent-minded heroines”⁸ in her plays (not only those with explicit titles such as *The Female Academy* or *The Convent of Pleasure*) where there is a “high proportion of female characters to male” and where women “speak about two lines in three.”⁹ In the fantasy world of her drama, dramatic distance and “Newcastle’s acknowledged collaboration” give her great liberty to stage many extraordinary women (scholars, orators, warriors...) and to encapsulate “radical [...] ideas about them” [Williamson 50]. Hence her plays are “historically significant as early feminist statements.”¹⁰ “She certainly praises,” Pearson says, “the abilities of women and calls for greater opportunities for them in education and public life” [Pearson 125]. The twenty-one plays of the 1662 Folio, written in the Interregnum, were not intended to be acted (“To the Readers” A3^v) but to “be read as if they were spoke or Acted” [n.p.]. Thus she created a “a new genre—a kind of closet drama.”¹¹ In contrast to them, the 1668 Folio (three and a half plays), written during the Restoration, was intended for an audience.¹² Other sources dealing with women’s education are also to be taken into account since most of

4. Joan Kinnaird, “Mary Astell and the Conservative Contribution to English Feminism,” *Journal of British Studies* 19 (1979): 74.

5. Kinnaird 58. On the danger of anachronism, see Vivien Jones, ed., *Woman in the Eighteenth Century: Constructions of Femininity* (1990; London: Routledge, 1994), 192 and Susan Staves, “Eighteenth-Century Feminism,” *The Eighteenth Century* 26.2 (1985): 170-176.

6. Smith 78. See “Condemne me not as a dishonour of your Sex, for setting forth this Work, for it is harmlesse and free from all dishonesty,” “To All Noble, and Worthy Ladies,” *Poems and Fancies*, 1653, ed. George Parfitt (London: Scholar Press, 1972) n.p.

7. See Marilyn L. Williamson, *Raising Their Voices: British Women Writers, 1650-1750* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990), 38 and Sarasohn 293. The women at the Female Academy belong to the nobility [*The Female Academy* 1.1.653].

8. Moira Ferguson, ed., *First Feminists: British Women Writers 1578-1799* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 11.

9. Jacqueline Pearson, *The Prostituted Muse: Images of Women & Women Dramatists 1642-1737* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1988), 127.

10. Nancy Cotton, *Women Playwrights in England c. 1363-1750* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1980), 48.

11. Elaine Hobby, *Virtue of Necessity: English Women’s Writing, 1649-88* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988), 105.

12. *The Sociable Companions; or, The Female Wits, The Matrimonial Trouble, The Convent of Pleasure and The Presence.*

Cavendish's heroines are modelled on herself: her autobiography ("A True Relation of My Birth, Breeding and Life"), her *Orations of Divers Sorts* (1662), her *CCXI Sociable Letters* (1664), and her introductory letters, Prefaces (where she explains her practices) and other writings: *The Worlds Olio* (1655), *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* (1666), and *The Philosophical and Physical Opinion*.¹³ If the issues of representation and *mimesis* cannot be dissociated from her drama, great heed must be paid to truth and distortion in all her works for she constantly wants to present an image of herself and create a *persona* in a process of self-fashioning.

The question of women's education results in an internal debate for Cavendish, who holds contradictory positions. A first aspect concerns nature and nurture, questioning women's innate or acquired intellectual limitations and showing her ambition as a dynamic force for improvement. Then her critical opinion of women's traditional education and her proposals will be assessed. This will lead to focus on the import of women's education, and the close link she saw between mastering language and successful education as illustrated by the educational value of theatre.

Cavendish addresses the question of the innate or acquired intellectual limitations (if any) of women. Her ambivalence can only be understood if considered against the ideological background of the times. The idea of woman's natural inferiority rested on theological, philosophical, and scientific arguments. Even Makin and Anna Maria van Schurman "argued almost exclusively for equality of education for women" [Jones 106], not equality between the sexes. Thus Cavendish's ambivalence towards her sex is not extraordinary. Analyzing early Italian Renaissance, King argues that "the ambitions of the learned women [...] were thwarted in part because, being women, they were vainquished from within: by their own self-doubt, punctuated by moments of pride; and by their low evaluation of their sex."¹⁴ This could be applied to Cavendish all the more so as King stresses that numerous women responded to "fragile self-confidence," by retreating to the isolation of abbeys or "book-lined cells"; she "treasured nothing more than the solitude of her own study." [Sarasohn 303]

Her attitude "toward women's intellectual limitations [...] changed over time" [Williamson 47] and varied according to genre. She seems to argue

13. *Philosophical and Physical Opinions* (1663) was a new edition of *Philosophical Fancies* that had appeared in 1655 (the 3rd edition was entitled as the 2nd).

14. Margaret L. King, "Book-Lined Cells: Women and Humanism in the Early Italian Renaissance," *Beyond Their Sex: Learned Women of the European Past*, Patricia Labalme ed., (New York: New York University Press, 1980), 71.

both for and against the sociocultural explanation of woman's inferiority. The Preface to *The Worlds Olio* tackled the issue of equality between the sexes. It opens with recurrent apologies for her weakness ascribed to the inferiority of her sex based on the traditional conception of women's physiological inferiority [A4^r]. Further on, borrowing comparisons from nature, she continues: "there is great difference betwixt Masculine Brain and the Feminine, the Masculine Strength and the Feminine [...] as there is between the longest and strongest Willow, compared to the strongest and largest Oak" [A4^r]. Yet, between those two passages, she vindicates women's acquired inferiority; then again, arguments for innate inferiority are reintroduced with other comparisons drawn from nature: "they may be compared to the sun and moon." [A4^r]. Here the viewpoint changes, stressing that, since uneducated women cannot be good educators, then women can be correctly educated only by men (see herself and Sanspareille in *Youths' Glory and Deaths Banquet*). If men give women light, then women will diffuse their own light. Man will become the key for woman's improvement. Follows "lengthy contradiction" of her "claims for women's natural equality."¹⁵

In her epistle "To the Universities," Cavendish looks for scholarly recognition and pleaded for women's more complete education.¹⁶ She views their intellectual capacities as equal to those of men, but also shows that women internalize the pejorative judgments passed on them and concludes with a statement on women's acquired inferiority, denouncing a vicious circle; the so-called traditional physiological inferiority of women changes nature: women become stupid because of a lack of education and thus cannot be given charges of occupations; they are then accused of being stupid, hence not worth educating. A logical consequence is that a large part of women's education consists in teaching them to internalize their so-called inferiority along with the subordinate role they are expected to play. Women who accept being shut up by such piece of reasoning were to be the target of Astell's harsh criticism in her *Reflections on Marriage*.¹⁷

15. Pearson, "Women may discourse [...] as well as men': Speaking and Silent Women in the Plays of Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 4.1 (1985): 35.

16. Cavendish, "To the Two Universities," *The Philosophical and Physical Opinions, Written by Her Excellency, the Lady Marchioness of Newcastle* (London, 1655), B2^v: "lest in time we should grow irrational as idiots, by the dejectednesse of our spirits, through the carelesse neglects, and despisements of the masculine sex to the effeminate, thinking it impossible we should have either learning and understanding, wit or judgement, as if we had not rational souls as men."

17. See Mary Astell, "The Preface," *Some Reflections on Marriage, Occasion'd by the Duke & Dutchess of Mazarine's Case; Which Is Also Consider'd, 1700*, Astell: *Political Writings*, Patricia Springborg ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 30.

In *Orations* her hesitation between “the defense and condemnation of women” [Sarasohn 298] is reflected in the “Female Orations” section, a juxtaposition of seven short essays spoken by female *personae* which express all possible viewpoints on the issue. The third orator refers to innate female inferiority and the fourth to acquired inferiority, adding that the only solution is then for women to try to improve themselves.¹⁸ Smith suggests that “the opponents represent some of her own divided consciousness” [Smith 81]; the section can also be read in the light Cavendish shines on herself in *Sociable Letters*,¹⁹ that is, they belong to a rhetorical tradition, as Battigelli stresses: “orations as mere exercises of fancy [were] exercises central to Renaissance theories of eloquence and designed more to sharpen one’s skill at oratory than to arrive at truth.”²⁰ If so, no definitive conclusion can be drawn as to Cavendish’s standpoint.

In her *Sociable Letters*, mentioning the origin of *Orations*,²¹ she highlights the link between her sex and her defective education: “Orations for the most part, are concerning War, Peace, and Matters of State [...] all of which I am not Capable of, as being a Woman, who hath neither Knowledge, Ability, nor Capacity in State Affairs, and to Speak in Writing of that I Understand not, will not be Acceptable to my Reading Auditors” [*Letters* 187]. This duplicates the dedication to “All Professors of Learning and Art.”²² Her poor breeding is due to a vicious circle and not to innate limitations.

Williamson suggests that the author’s views about women’s inferiority change according to the nature of her works, drawing a distinction, on the one hand, between her “more transgressive works” (*Orations* and *Observations*) where Newcastle’s laudatory verses diminish the so-called radicality of her ideas and her “more private books, such as *Sociable Letters*, [where she] did not need to undo as much social transgression” [Williamson 50]. In *Observations* her “frustration at her own lack of [...] acceptance by the scientific community results in anger at all women to whom nature has given inferior minds and

18. “We are Ignorant of our Selves, as Men are of us. And how should we Know our Selves, when as we never make a Trial of our Selves?”, *Orations of Divers Sorts, Accommodated to Divers Places* (London, 1662), 228.

19. “[I wrote] only to Exercise my Fancy, for surely the Wisest, and Eloquentest Orators, have not been Ashamed to Defend Vices upon such Accounts, and Why may not I do the like? for my Orations for the most part are Declamations, wherein I speak *Pro* and *Con*, and Determine nothing.” CCXI *Sociable Letters* (London, 1664) sig. C4^v.

20. Anna Battigelli, “Political Thought/Political Action: Margaret Cavendish’s Hobbesian Dilemma,” *Women Writers and the Early Modern British Political Tradition*, Smith ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 51-52.

21. See *Letters* 367. The End of the “Preface” to *Letters* echoes the beginning of *Orations*: “for I Write to Please my Self, rather than to Please such Crabbed Readers” [sig. A2^r].

22. *Letters* n.p.: “I pray Consider my Sex and Breeding, and they will fully Excuse those Faults which must Unavoidably be found in my Works.”

bodies. So it is on natural differences that Cavendish's advocacy of women founders" [Williamson 50]. Her attitude towards women is ambivalent; yet the "limitation on women's abilities" appear constructed more often than natural [Williamson 47].

Her plays dramatize these ambivalences with more liberty. The traditionally static conception of woman's natural inferiority is voiced in the background by conventionally minded characters. In *The Female Academy*, "one of the ladies speaks negatively of the intellectual powers of women, concluding that they are temperamentally unfit for the 'Society of Wisdome'" [1.2.656].²³ The argument is enlarged to the fact that nature cannot be changed by nurture in *Youths Glory* with Mother Love's argument [1.1.24].

Protagonists in the foreground promote natural abilities but denounce the lack of training in *The Unnatural Tragedy* where the Sociable Virgins discuss the problem of the women's capabilities [1.10.332]. They say they could be involved in affairs of state whereas the Matron holds that they should be left to old court ladies [1.10.332]. In *Bell in Campo* Lady Victoria rejects this conventional opinion: women are not "too limited in intellect, judgement and courage to hold positions of authority and trust" [Gagen 38], adding that they can become "as learned scholars both in Arts and Sciences as men are" [2.9.588]: "Had our education been answerable to theirs we might have proved as good soldiers and Privy Councillors, Rulers and Commanders as men are" [2.9.588]. The idea that acquired habits become second nature is suggested [588, P2.1.3.609]. However, in her plays, as in the Preface to the *World Olio*, the key to the improvement of women's lot is man's allowance. In *Bell Campo* "the main plot stresses the strengths of women, the subplot their weaknesses" [Pearson (1985) 35]. Cavendish "dramatizes her own ambivalence. At one moment she praises the woman who takes control of her own life, at the next she demonstrates the impossibility of such control," to quote Pearson [Pearson (1985) 36].

If Cavendish laments the lack of opportunity available to women due to ideological circumstances, she also scatters numerous harsh criticisms of her sex originating in her own indignation at their lot. In her *Sociable Letters* she castigates them for the foolishness of their conversation and for not achieving more than they do.²⁴ Likewise, in *Poems and Fancies*, she addresses "all Writing Ladies": "There will be many Heroick Women in some Ages. [...] But

23. Jean E. Gagen, "A Champion of the Learned Lady," *The New Woman: Her Emergence in English Drama 1600-1730* (New York: Twayne, 1954), 38.

24. "Our Sex is more apt to Read than to Write, and most commonly when any of our Sex doth write they write some Devotion, or Romances, or Receipts of Medicines, for Cookery or Confectioners, or Complemental Letters, or a copy or two of Verses" [Letters 225-226]. She is critical of women's lives in *Letters* (21, 36, 50, 51, 62, 112, 150). See Williamson 50.

this Age hath produced many effeminate Writers, as well as Preachers, and many effeminate Rulers, as well as Actors. [...] anything that may bring honour to our Sex: for they are poore, dejected spirits, that are not ambitious of Fame" ("To All Writing Ladies" [162]). In the main plots of her plays, she idealizes some women and contrasts them with upper-class vices whereas the subplots stage vicious stupid women, "fit only as stock figures for low comedy."²⁵

Her anger is attributed by Williamson to "anger at women, which from the perspective of centuries seems rage at her own failure and limitations displaced on other women" [Williamson 38]. Or, to go beyond narcissism, Cavendish decries a general lack of ambition because she is ambitious for the women resembling her [*Letters* 14-15, 225-26]. In *Poems and Fancies* she clearly wants to provoke her female contemporaries' reaction by using an imperative: "though we be inferior to Men, let us shew our selves a degree above Beasts; and not eat and drink, and sleep away out time as they doe" ["To all Writing Ladies," 162].²⁶ Ambition is thus a driving force towards improvement.

Most of her writings are pervaded by her critical opinion of the state of women's education. Because of the change of attitude towards the latter after the accession of King James, the only opportunity for an education was to be found in the home. Cavendish received the usual education of a daughter of the gentry, that is "very little in the way of serious intellectual instruction" [Smith 87],²⁷ quite different from that of her brothers.²⁸ The nature of her early education can be inferred from a description in her "True Relation" [157-58];²⁹ stress is laid on feminine virtues rather than on accomplishments and

25. Sara Heller Mendelson, *The Mental World of Stuart Women: Three Studies* (Brighton: Harvester, 1987), 54.

26. Forty years later Astell was to exhort all the women of her class to improve themselves: "Let us [...] not entertain such a degrading thought of our own worth. [...] We value *them* [men] too much, and our *selves* too little [...] and do not think our selves capable of Nobler Things that the pitiful Conquest of some worthless heart." Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies. Parts I and II*, 1694, 1697, Springborg ed. (London: Pickering, 1997), 8.

27. For her rudimentary command of English grammar and spelling, see Douglas Grant, *Margaret the First: A Biography of Margaret Cavendish Duchess of Newcastle 1623-1673* (London: Hart-Davis, 1957), 236 (letter to her stepson, Lord Ogle).

28. See "True Relation," 158: "As for my brothers [...] I know not how they were bred. [...] But this I know, that they loved virtue, endeavoured merit, practised justice, and spoke truth. . . ." As to her four sisters, three were already married when she was twelve.

29. "As for tutors, although we had for all sorts of virtues, as singing, dancing, playing on music, reading, writing, working and the like, yet we were not kept strictly thereto, they were rather for formality than benefit; for my mother cared not so much for our dancing and fiddling, singing and prating of several languages, as that we should be bred virtuously, modestly, civilly, honorably, and on honest principles" ("True Relation," 157).

conventional social graces. In the testimonies she writes in authorial voice, she laments her lack of education and complains that women cannot have access to university education, which is for her (perhaps wrongly) a condition for the development of their minds.³⁰ Mlle Ambition in *The Wits Cabal* [1.1.248] and Madamosel Solid in *The Comedy Named the Several Wits* [2.14.90] voice the same regrets. As a writer, Cavendish lays no claim to learning and is rather aware of her shortcomings, as is proved by the numerous prefatory remarks (never less than five) where she apologizes for her scant scholarship. “[L]ack of education and [...] limited field of reference” [Jones 100] are often deemed marring her writings because of her lack of discipline, in particular in revising what she wrote.

However, as an adult, she could have carried out a successful self-education and study. When she was maid of honour at the court, she was undoubtedly impressed by the *précieuses*: her oratorical ladies borrowed from them many conversational devices [see Gagen 33]. As the wife of Newcastle she found herself at the centre of a salon in France where she met the geniuses of the age.³¹ Yet, as “she could not understand either French or Latin,”³² she came to know their works with the help of her brother-in-law, Charles Cavendish, a mathematician, and her husband, who served her as her tutor [*Olio* 47]. “[She] seems to have read few” philosophical works and “never studied seriously the works of the philosophers she challenged” [Williamson 38]. As philosophy was then used to “describe any kind of intellectual enquiry, and its roots were classical” [Jones 119], she chose “a subject which did not require specific qualification: ‘natural philosophy’ or science” [Mendelson 36]. In his biography, Grant explains why her lack of education limited her “aspirations to natural philosophy” and was not mitigated by self-study [Williamson 45]: “her independence and social standing kept her from admitting when she could not comprehend the thought of another writer” [Williamson 45]. “The only option left to her, since she could not be admitted into the male preserves of learning, was to develop her own philosophy” [Sarasohn 294].

Philosophical Letters, “the product of her self-education, also reveals [her] antipathy toward the new sciences, for she insists that one discovers

30. “I will not say, but many of our sex may have as much wit, and be capable of learning as well as men; but since they want instructions, it is not possible they should attain to it” [“To the Reader,” *Observations* n.p.].

31. Descartes, Hobbes and Gassendi, though she never spoke to the former two (“An Epilogue to My Philosophical Opinions,” *Opinions* n.p.).

32. Sarasohn 290 (n. 10). Yet the French phrases which occur in her work occasionally are evidence that she eventually acquired some knowledge of the language [see *Poems and Fancies* sig. A6^r and *Opinions* sig. B3^v].

truth through reason, not through experiments.”³³ If her “scientific activity was limited by social boundaries that discouraged experimentation or dissection” [Williamson 45], such was not the case with literature: she was widely read; “she had considerable familiarity with the Greeks and Romans in translation as well as French romance and the English history.”³⁴ She finally lacked the discipline and logic necessary to self-education. “An education along the lines” advanced by Makin would probably have enabled her intelligence to concentrate on some areas “rather than dissipate it” [Jones 5]. In fact she skilfully tried to turn a disadvantage into an advantage. Rejecting scholarship, she vindicated her originality by paying heed to matter rather than to manner. Her “attitude toward the male realm of scholarship” also changed [Mendelson 43]. In her youthful works she affected contempt for learning. But her “own activities had drawn her into the orbit of learned men.”³⁵ And she “realized that her isolation hampered her efforts to disseminate her opinions. Having inferred that the obscurity of her terminology had hindered the acceptance of her theories, she began a massive reading programme so as to be able to employ conventional terms for her descriptions” [Mendelson 44].³⁶ To write *Philosophical and Physical Opinion*, she read widely in philosophy to learn “the names and terms of art” (*Opinions* n.p.) which are used in schools. So she did eventually try to educate herself.

If she harps upon the limitations of her own intellectual education, her works make it possible to investigate the causes of the failure of traditional feminine education. Its inadequacy could be due to the bad quality education or to its very absence. She herself realizes that women’s education is perverted mainly because the usual destiny of women is marriage, as is illustrated by Mother Love’s urging Sanspareille to “invite a rich, noble Husband” [*Youths Glory* 1.3.127] or in *The Presence*. Her views on the subject can appear “contradictory”;³⁷ she is aware that marriage is perverted, not so much as an institution as in its use and aim, and hence nature. Indeed, the latter most

33. Sophia B. Blaydes, “Nature is Woman: The Duchess of Newcastle and Seventeenth-Century Philosophy,” *Man, God, and Nature in the Enlightenment*, Donald C. Mell, ed., (East Lansing: Colleagues Press, 1988), 59. For Cavendish and science, see Gerald D. Meyer, “The Fantastic Duchess of Newcastle,” *The Scientific Lady in England 1650-1760: An Account of Her Rise with Emphasis on the Major Roles of the Telescope and Microscope* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1955), 81-93.

34. Margaret Cavendish: *Sociable Letters*, ed. James Fitzmaurice (New York: Garland, 1997) xvi. In a Preface to the 1662 *Plays*, she asserts, “Greek, Latin Poets, I could never read / Nor their Historians, but our English Speed . . .” (“A General Prologue to All My Playes,” n.p.).

35. She had “heard that learning spoiles the natural wit . . .” (“An Epilogue to My Philosophical Opinions,” *Opinions* sig. B2^v).

36. See too Firth xxxvi and Grant 200.

37. Pearson, *Prostituted Muse* 132 and 36: “Cavendish reveals women’s oppression within marriage, yet at the same time she seems to support the sexual double standard.”

often is mercantile as is said in *The Comedy Named the Several Wits* [2.14.90]; those elements may account for various statement in *The Religious*, in *The Convent of Pleasure* [1.2.7] or in *Orations*.³⁸ Other causes of her distate for marriage can be traced: “[She] often denounced marriage as a vehicle for male immorality, in which women lost all identity and independence” [Sarasohn 299] even if heroines eventually marry. The subplot of *The Convent of Pleasure*, a play-within-the-play, stages the usual sufferings likely to be endured in married life.³⁹ Marriage, dictates the content of female education: Mother Love wants Sanspareille to be bred “to make a good housewife” [1.1.123] and Lady Innocence’s talents consist in dancing, singing, playing an instrument [1.4.129]. The role women are expected to fill in marriage lead them to be incapable of rational thought. In *The Unnatural Tragedy* men do not wish to marry one of the Sociable Virgins [1.29.353, 2.10.333]. The failure of female education can also be attributed to the identity and incapacity of educators:⁴⁰ women who lack education are not good educators for other women as is exposed by Father Love [1.1.123-24].⁴¹ This denunciation is all the more forceful as it is articulated by a man. Such is also the case in *The Female Academy* [4.21.669]. Examples of failure serve as foils to positive heroines. To show the degraded position of uneducated women, Cavendish compares the latter to worms or to birds in *Opinions*.⁴² *Youths Glory* illustrates the power of women’s intellect but also the dangers of neglecting it.

The negative result of traditional education is evoked whatever the age and functions women have to fill. Its various manifestations are encapsulated in *Youths Glory*. Contrary to Sanspareille’s case, the influence of Innocence’s

38. “Those women are most happy that never Marry, or die whilst they be young” [“A Young Brides Funeral Oration,” *Orations* 181]; “Death is far the happier condition than Marriage” [“An Oration Which Is an Exhortation to a Pious Life,” *Orations* 168].

39. Such as ill-treatment, desertion, repeated pregnancies (see *Letters* 183-84) and the dangers of childbearing (see “A Funeral Oration for a Woman Dead in Childbed,” *Orations of Divers Sorts* 183: “[Women are] Slaves to Men’s Humours, nay, to their Vices and Wickednesses; so that they are more enslaved than any other Female Creatures”), the deaths or wickedness of children, and ruin because of the husband. However the included warnings do not prevent Lady Happy finally from marrying.

40. Their future occupations were limited: they were to spend time in a life of social frivolity in support of their husbands’ ambitions (“Masks, Plays, and Balls” [*Unnatural Tragedy* 2.10.333]) or in domestic activities or “ladies’ work” as is stressed both by Father Love [“their times spent in pins, points and laces, their study only vain fashions” *Youths Glory* 1.1.123] and in *Letters* n.p.: “I cannot work, I mean such Works as Ladies use to pass their Time withall [...] Needle-works, Spinning-works, Preserving-works, and also Baking, and Cooking-works [...] so I am ignorant in Gaming, Dancing, and Revelling.” (“To His Excellency The Lord Marquess of Newcastle”). See too “To Sir Charles Cavendish, My Noble Brother-in-Law,” *Poems and Fancies* A2^r: “Spinning with the Fingers is more proper to our Sexe, then studying or writing Poetry, which is the spinning with the braine.”

41. “That is the reason why all women are fools; for women breeding up women, one fool breeding up another, and as long as that custom lasts there is no hopes of amendment, and ancient customs being a second nature, makes folly hereditary.” [1.1.123-124].

father's is alienating since she is only brought up to become a wife.⁴³ Consequently her only ambition is to be called worthy by her fiancé (3.10.140). Her awareness of the arbitrary power of language (P2.1.2.156) testifies to her intelligence but she has not been trained to use language to her own advantage; thus she cannot present her own value herself and her innocence or guilt is determined by others; therefore she is a victim of those who can master language.⁴⁴

Moreover, her education is totally inadequate, excluding her from the role of a mother. When Lord de l'Amour accuses her of immodesty, her answer proves that she does not know of the process of reproduction [P2.1.2.157]. The situation is ironical as Lord de l'Amour would marry her to be the mother of his children, for the continuation of his family. The failure of traditional education is also demonstrated through "the Mother Lady Love" [1.1.123]. As indicated by her name, her identity is reduced to her function; she exists neither as a woman nor as a mother but only through her daughter's social (not intellectual) success.⁴⁵ Another typical product of traditional education is Lady Incontinent; after leaving her husband for Lord de l'Amour, she realizes that she has lost all control on her life.⁴⁶ In some way, she too is the victim of her inappropriate female education that did not teach her to love virtue, according to the process Astell was to expose [*Serious Proposal* 14] but that explanation cannot justify her charging Innocence with theft.

A positive view of what women's education (aims and means) should be, according to Cavendish, can be gleaned from her works [see *Letters* 317]. Genuine education aims not at knowledge or erudition but at moulding one's

42. Cavendish, "To the Two Universities," *Opinions* B2^v: "worms that only live in the dull earth of ignorance, winding our selves sometimes out by the help of some refreshing rain of good education, which seldom is given us; for we are kept like birds in cages, to hop up and down our houses, not suffered to fly abroad to see the several changes of fortune, and the various humors, ordained and created by nature. . . ." Here they are not positively connoted; it is different from *Wit's Cabal*. In "Femal [sic] Orations" [*Orations* 226] a female speaker asserts "we Live like Bats, or Owls, Labour like Beasts, and Dye like Worms"; they are negatively connoted birds, associated with witchcraft.

43. "How should I do otherwise, for my affections to you was ingrafted into the root of my infancy by my infancy by my Fathers instructions and persuasions; which hath grown up with my Age" [*Youths Glory* 3.10.140].

44. A full analysis of that point is given in Annette Kramer, "'Thus by the Musick of a Ladies Tongue': Margaret Cavendish's Dramatic Innovation in Women's Education," *Women History Review* 2.1 (1993): 63-70.

45. See "I will have you shew your self, and be known, and I known by you [...] but by that time you have gotten a sufficient stock of wit to divulge to the World, your beauty will be dead and buried, and so my ruines will have no restoration, or ressurection" [P1.1.3.127]. Yet she does not lack affection for Sanspareille [P2.3.15.170].

46. "Have I left my Husband, who was rich, and used me well? and all for love of you! and with you live as a Wanton! by which I have lost my esteem, and my own reputation, and now to be forsaken, and cast aside, despised and scorned! O, most base! for what can be more unworthy, than for a man to profess friendship to a Lady, and then forsake her?" [P1.1.2.125].

character so as to enable self-definition, as illustrated by Sanspareille who is presented as a soldier of education, as it were, fighting against sophistry and ignorance that leads to vice. Here Cavendish anticipates both Astell in *A Serious Proposal* and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu.⁴⁷

No actual proposal is presented as such anywhere in her work but clues or hints can be picked up and interpreted in her drama staging her most radical ideas. She disapproved of sending girls to boarding schools that trained in fashionable accomplishments.⁴⁸ Hence, the education she would apparently advocate is to be given at home and is extensively exemplified in *Youths Glory*. The play's narrative strategy begins by introducing the type of education that will be discarded: Mother Love pictures her daughter as an imprisoned maiden in a romance, reproaching her husband with his method [1.1.123]. Yet he straight away states the advantages [1.1.123]; Sanspareille's solitude is her choice and actually is the condition of her freedom since it frees her from the vanities of the world and makes her not a slave but a master. A celebrated orator among men, Sanspareille will deliver a whole series of orations on a wide variety of topics, ranging from "politics through marriage to the theatre."⁴⁹

She receives what is traditionally a male education in the liberal arts and sciences, conducted by a man, but without its negative features, as is demonstrated by the exchange between her mother and her father. The former asks: "[Do you want to] have women bred up to swear, swagger, gaming, drinking, whoring, as most men are" and the latter answers: "No, wife, I would have them bred in learned Schools, to noble Arts and Sciences, as wise men are" [1.1.124]. The aim is then not to model women's education on that of men but to improve female education by taking the best in their training.⁵⁰ Some hints are given about the books read by educated women. In *Wits Cabal*

47. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, *The Complete Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu 1708-1762*, Robert Halsband ed., 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965-67) (20 July 1710), 1: 45-46: "But there is a worse Effect than this [Rebels against the Law of the Creator], which follows the Careless Education given to Women of Quality, its being for any Man of Sense [...] to corrupt them. The common Method is to begin by attacking their Religion. They bring them a thousand fallacious Arguments their excessive ignorance hinders them from refuting [...] the same Ignorance that generally works out into Excesses of Superstition, exposes them to the Snares of any who have a fancy to carry them to tother extrem [sic]."

48. They should be "bred singly" ["Of Gentlewomen That Are Sent to Board Schools," *Worlds Olio* (London, 1655), 62]; those girls, like "meat dresses at a cooks' shop which smells of the dripping pan, have a smack of the board school about them" [61-62].

49. Susan Wiseman, "Gender and Status in Dramatic Discourse: Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle," *Women/Writing/History*, Isobel Grundy and Wiseman, eds., (London: Batsford, 1992), 173.

50. The reference being "wise men." Should they try to imitate men? The same topic reappears with the fourth female orator: "let us Hawk,* Hunt, Race, and do the like Exercises as Men Have, and let us Converse in Camps, Courts, and Cities, in Schools, Colleges, and Courts of Judicature, in Taverns, Brothels, and Gaming Houses." [Orations 228].

Lady Ambition makes vague references to Euripides, Homer, Ovid, Horace and Virgil [4.32.280] as she painfully attempts to define true valour, wisdom, wit, honesty and generosity. Then in *The Unnatural Tragedy* several sociable Virgins refer to Tacitus, Julius Caesar, Thucydides and Homer as they discuss various subjects [1.7.336]. All of these belong to the classics; not a word is said of science.

Adult education is evinced in two plays where Cavendish imagines communities of women: *The Female Academy*—for educational purpose—and *The Convent of Pleasure*—for retirement. The Female Academy is a cloistered school “where young girls under the guidance of grave matrons” learn “to speak wittily and rationally, and to behave themselves handsomely, and to live virtuously” [1.1.653]. They “orate eloquently” on the playwright’s “favourite topics” [Gagen 38]. Yet, even if *The Female Academy* appears as “a dramatization of the concern for women’s education expressed in *Philosophical and Physical Opinions*” [Pearson (1985) 36], it ends with marriage even if “men will have to win them through merit, not parental profit or flattering courtship” [Williamson 41]. Pearson states that “the apparent feminism of the play is not what it seems. Women’s education does not challenge but rather endorses the forms of conventional society. Even the academicians’ debates on feminist topics finally support the old orthodoxies” [Pearson (1985) 36]. *The Convent of Pleasure* dramatizes twenty women who decide to retire and live apart from men; withdrawing to a convent belongs to the tradition of pastoral retirement, which had been voiced earlier.⁵¹ After her, it was to be the staple of the projects both of Astell and Defoe in *An Essay on Projects* (1697).⁵²

As Cavendish realizes that women’s social situation cannot be changed, she wishes women, whose personalities have been formed by appropriate education, were active, that they had the right to choose to remain single or get married. Marriage “is often compared unfavourably to the pleasures of a single life, although the heroines so inevitably marry at the end of the play” [Sarasohn 307 (n. 58)]. In the case of Sanspareille celibacy seems to be the requisite of her education so as to devote herself to studying, writing, publishing and speaking in public [2.5.131-32]. The necessity of male celibacy

51. Jennifer Rowsell, ed., *The Convent of Pleasure* (Oxford: Seventeenth Century Press, 1995), 4: “The title encapsulates the pivotal paradox: a secular nunnery can be fun.” For other projects, see *Letter Touching a College of Maids or a Virgin Society* (1675) by Clement Barkdale who translated in 1652 Schurman’s 1641 work (*The Learned Maid; or, Whether a Maid May Be a Scholar. With Some Epistles to the Famous Gassendus and Others*) or the sermon delivered in 1684 by George Hickee, who translated Fénelon (*A Sermon Preached at the Church of St. Bridget, on Easter, Tuesday, Being the First of April, 1684. [...] [London, 1684]*).

52. See Bridget Hill, “A Refuge from Men: The Idea of a Protestant Nunnery,” *Past and Present* 117 (1987): 107-123.

for the sake of studies was underlined by Bacon but to remain single for a woman was hardly thinkable at the time.⁵³

If women could choose to get married, they should have, just like Cavendish (an exceptional case), the possibility to choose their husbands since parental decisions were usually negative, as evidenced in *The Religious*, where their interference almost leads Lady Perfection and Lord Melancholy to suicide [4.32.550-51], in *The Publick Wooing* where the instinct of Lady Prudence must be trusted [3.25.396], and in *The Female Wits* where the case is the same for the heroine also named Lady Prudence; in their choices, positive heroines rely on essence (moral value) and not on appearances (superficial qualities). Yet the right to choose one's husband with very great care presupposes the capacity to do so, which implies the training of one's judgement.⁵⁴

However, such opportunities were unavailable to most women of her time. Hence Cavendish's radical ideas must sometimes yield to conservatism: "the unenlightened women can only improve herself by virtuous behavior within the traditional framework of home and family" [Sarasohn 299].⁵⁵ Sarasohn puts it this way: "While [Cavendish] did not explicitly recommend the destruction of traditional social norms as the vehicle for female emancipation [...] she realized that equality could only be found when women rejected marriage as the totality of life, and sought to develop their intellectual capabilities" [Sarasohn 299].

Cavendish's remedy for the triviality of women's lives is not for them to change their status but rather to emulate men. Sanspareille advocates the "value of female education for its own sake" [Kramer 74]; her name will be remembered whereas Innocence and Incontinent provide a contrast to her in their lives and deaths.⁵⁶ A woman's education can also benefit her family: daughters can transmit their names only to intellectual posterity [*Letters* 183-84]. Sanspareille's works will be kept in libraries [*Youths Glory* P2.3.8.163]; her statue will be set up in all public places [P2.4.18.173]; therefore not only will her own fame live on but also her father's name; he accepts she will remain

53. Francis Bacon, "Of Marriage and Single Life," 1597, *Francis Bacon: A Critical Edition of the Major Works*, Brian Vickers, ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 353.

54. *Youths Glory* dramatizes the importance of that choice thanks to the structural device of the diverging reactions of Father Love (P2, 3.14.169-70, 16.170, 218.172, 20.165, 5.22.177-778) and Lord de l'Amour (P2, 3.21.176, 23.178, 23.179-80) after the parallel deaths of Sanspareille and Lady Innocence.

55. See *Letters* 12, 38, 156.

56. Falsely accused of theft by Lady Incontinent, unable to defend herself, the traditionally educated Lady Innocence chooses to kill herself and the childless Lady Incontinent's existence is totally erased from the surface of the earth. For a detailed analysis, see Kramer's article and Pearson (1985), 41.

unmarried, saying: "I had rather live in thy fame, than live or dye in an infamous and foolish succession" [2.5.131]; Lord de l'Amour holds the opposite opinion [1.2.126].

Women's education could also benefit society at large if the catalogue of activities denied to women was not so long. These are not only scholarly activities, as she put it: "I being a Woman Cannot, or if I could, it were not Fit for me Publickly to Preach, Teach, Declare or Explain them by Words of Mouth" ["An Epistle to the Reader," *Opinions*, 1663, 2nd ed]. The fourth philosopher in *Youths Glory*, converted as his peers by Sanspareille, asserts: "honour this Virgin [...] that charms our Senses and delights the Souls, and turns all passions in our hearts to love, teaches the aged, and instructs the youth" [3.9.140]; he thereby opens a perspective for learned ladies.

Cavendish repeatedly denounces women's exclusion from public office and politics.⁵⁷ She frequently insists on the topic of women's capacity to orate, "make laws and organize military campaigns" [Wiseman 173]; Sanspareille comments on political questions and *Bell in Campo* denounces the incompatibilities between power and femininity. Victoria lectures them on the fact that custom and lack of education and training only make women inferior.⁵⁸ That "the Civil War and the Commonwealth had provided opportunities for women to occupy roles normally reserved for men" [Jones 146]⁵⁹ probably encouraged Cavendish to call for women's "greater involvement "in the running of society" [Pearson (1988) 125]; her Sociable Virgins claimed a political role for women [*Unnatural Tragedy* 2.10.332]. Some heroines (Lady

57. Including government and the army, speaking in *propria persona* in *Nature's Picture*, to which her autobiography was appended—"That my ambition of extraordinary Fame, restless, and not ordinary, I cannot deny: and since all Heroick Actions, Public Employments, as well Civil as Military, and Eloquent Pleadings are deni'd my Sex in this Age, I may be excused for writing so much" (sig. C)—or indirectly in *Letters* when her *persona* writes: "And as for the matter of Government, we Women understand them not; yet if we did, we are excluded from intermeddling therewith and almost from being subject thereto. [...] we are not made Citizens of the Commonwealth, we hold no Offices, nor bear we any Authority therein; we are accounted neither Useful in Peace, nor Serviceable in War [...] we are no Subjects, unless it be to our Husbands" [27]. As Williamson says [39]: "What she could not do, she could write about."

58. "had our education been answerable to theirs, we might have proved as good Soldiers and Privy Counsellors, Rulers and Commanders [...] as men are. [...] wherefore if we would by it accustome our selves we may do such actions, as may gain us such a reputation, as men might change their opinions, insomuch as to believe we are fit to be Copartners in their Governments . . ." [2.9.588].

59. See *Letters* 9: "Women may, can, and oftimes do make wars, especially Civil wars; witness our late Civil War, wherein Women were great, although not good actors" and Sophie Tomlinson, "'My Brain the Stage': Margaret Cavendish and the Fantasy of Female Performance," *Women, Texts and Histories 1575-1760*, Clare Brant and Diane Purkiss, eds., (London: Routledge, 1992), 148: "As Ian Maclean has demonstrated, this movement was accompanied by an upsurge of feminist debate—a feminism he defines as 'a reassessment in women's favour of the relative capacities of the sexes'" [*Woman Triumphant: Feminism in French Literature 1610-1652* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), viii].

Victoria, Lady Contemplation, Lady Sanspareille and Lady Orphant) “take on male roles” (Wiseman 173), eliminating the objections to female government. In *Bell in Campo*, women refuse to remain in the safety of the garrison town; the general’s wife is elected “female general”⁶⁰ at the head of an army of women, whom she exhorts to fight: “now or never is the time to prove the courage of our Sex, to get liberty and freedom from the Female Slavery, and to make ourselves equal with men” [P2.3.609]. They train themselves as soldiers and defeat the enemy, forcing men to accept them as equals.⁶¹ However, the ambitious list of feminist reforms asked by Lady Victoria in case of victory is reduced to private domestic government [P2.5.631]. In Cavendish’s drama women long not for vain words, but for actions leading to merit and fame.

The plays voice the anxiety that the “achievements” of highly educated women with a social life will “prove destructive or self-destructive” [Pearson (1985) 40]; “Sanspareille risks losing her female identity” [Pearson (1985) 40]. Her apparently causeless death could be read as a failure, perhaps even as a punishment for her refusal to fulfil her feminine natural duty to serve a husband and God. Yet it can also be interpreted differently, her death being a condition of the tragedy and of Cavendish’s demonstration: the heroine’s death shows that her fame will live on, in contrast with Innocence and Incontinent. If most of Cavendish’s assertive women meet happy fates, destruction can raise the more fundamental issue of transgression.

To infringe upon masculine territory is deemed a transgression of sexual boundaries. Thus in *Youths Glory* Sanspareille could be charged with transgressing the very limits of human nature: when a gentleman asserts, “She hath a Monstrous wit” [4.13.145], “monstrous” literally means “against nature,” which explains the other’s retort: “No, her wit is not a Monstrosity, but a generosity of Nature, it is Natures bounty to her.” Transgressing sexual boundaries seems less formidable when the first gentleman says: “I wish, I were a Woman, but such a Woman as the Lady *Sanspareille*” [4.13.145] as she “enjoys most of the privileges and achievements of men.”⁶²

When she dares to imagine a man, who is not an actor, turning himself into a woman, and enlarging the definition of a woman as in *Natures Three Daughters*, Cavendish attenuates the relative formidableness of a masculine

60. “Generaless” [2.9.589, 3.11.590], “Instructeress” and “Commanderess” [2.9.589].

61. She and her “FemaleArmy” [3.15.595] (also called “the Heroickesses” [2.9.589] and the “Amazonian Army” [3.15.595]) are contrasted with the other war widows in the structure of the play.

62. Williamson 42. The other only retorts: “Ovid speaks of a Woman, that wisth her self a Man, and the Gods granted her wish [...] but I never heard of a Man that was changed into a Woman [...]. That is a sign they thought the change would be far the worse. . . Well, for thy sake, I wish thou hadst thy wish” [145].

woman even if she admits that “masculine women may be thought unnatural” (Williamson 50). *The World’s Olio* reads: “It is not so great a Fault in Nature for a Woman to be Masculine, as for a Man to be Effeminate: for it is a Defect in Nature to decline, as to see Men like Women; but to see a Masculine Woman, is but onely as if Nature had mistook, and had placed a Mans Spirit in a Womans Body” [*Olio* 84]. The antifeminist fifth female orator in “Female Orations” is more radical, denouncing the crossing of nature boundaries with the image of the hermaphrodite [*Orations* 229].⁶³ Wanting rather to improve women, Cavendish anticipates Wollstonecraft.⁶⁴

Transgressing social boundaries also appears dangerous. Citizen women serve as foils for noble women (*Female Academy* and *Convent of Pleasure*).⁶⁵ The threat proved by women’s social aspiration is developed in a subplot in *The Matrimoniall Trouble* [1.1.424, 1.18.434]. Wiseman points to Cavendish’s dilemma: “As a royalist woman, Cavendish [...] wishes to support the idealized class order, but to disrupt gender ideologies. [...] To suggest reform in gender hierarchy was to point, inevitably, towards the current instability of class hierarchy. Cavendish [...] only limited challenges to gender hierarchy” [Wiseman 177]. Thus ladies could be liberated from gender constraints in drama, but not always in the theatre of the world.

To emulate men, women must gain access to language with a proper education.⁶⁶ Cavendish has “to resolve this contradiction between women’s love of talk and their exclusion from meaningful language” [Pearson (1985) 38].⁶⁷ She dramatizes many uneducated women characterized by their corrupt use of words. Her explanation is that being denied education, women are

63. “To have Femal Bodies, and yet to Act Masculine Parts, will be very Preposterous and Unnatural; In truth, we shall make our Selves like the Defects of Nature, as to be Hermaphroditical, as neither to be Perfect Women nor Perfect Men, but Corrupt and Imperfect Creatures” [229]. The speaker glorifies women who are “Modest, Chast, Temperate, Humble, Patient, and Pious [...] Huswifely, Cleanly, and of few Words . . .” [229], agreeing with the end of the above-mentioned extract from *The World Olio*: “when she [Nature] works perfectly [...] To Woman she gives a chast Mind, a sober Disposition, a silent Tongue, a fair and modest Face, a neat Shape, and a graceful Motion” [84].

64. Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, 1792, Political Writings: A Vindication of the Rights of Men, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, An Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution*, Janet Todd, ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 72: “from every quarter have I heard exclamations against masculine women [...] if it be against the imitation of manly virtues, or, more properly speaking, the attainment of those talents and virtues, the exercise of which ennoble the human character, and which raise females in the scale of animal being.”

65. In the play within the play in *The Convent of Pleasure* when the citizen’s wife looks “for her husband in the tavern and stays there to drink with the men” [Wiseman 177] and in *The Female Academy* [2.11.662] that depicts citizen women “angry at being excluded from the academy orations or discourses which are held exclusively for a noble audience, their recourse is to the men’s academy” [Wiseman 175].

66. See Pearson (1985), 37: “her central theme, women’s access to language in a world dominated by man and the language of men.”

excluded from access to meaningful language; they thus sink into gossip, such as the appositely named Lady Wagtail in *Loves Adventures*, Detractor, Spightfull and Malicious in *Natures Three Daughters* or Mrs. Parle and Lady Parrot in *The Publick Wooing*.

In the 1662 Folio they serve as foils for all the educated heroines who vindicate the right to speak and be heard. Orphant in *Loves Adventures*, Sanspareille in *Youths Glory*, Bon Esprit in *Wits Cabal*, the Sociable Virgins in *The Unnatural Tragedy*, Grand Esprit in *Natures Three Daughters*, Victoria in *Bell Campo*, and the women of *The Female Academy* all insist on women's rightful powers in terms of language; they control language and deal with moral, political, scientific and literary topics. The issues of women's education and the power of language are constantly linked in Cavendish's writings. Genuine education implies becoming aware of the power of language and an apposite education aims at a right use of language. To be given access to language, women must learn to discourse. In *Divers Orations* women are urged to increase their intelligence by talking "in Camps, Courts and Cities, in Schools, Colleges and Courts of Judicature" [228]. This is put into practice in *The Female Academy* where learning is achieved through discoursing [1.1.653].

The mastery of language is often associated with a "rejection of a conventional female role" [Pearson (1985) 39]; Victoria is a woman warrior, Orphant in *Loves Adventures* and Travelia don male disguise; Grand Esprit and the She Anchoret in *Natures Three Daughters*, Lady Sanspareille in *Youths Glory*, Single in *The Matrimonial Trouble* and Ease in *Wits Cabal* want to remain single. In *Natures Three Daughters* Amor defies conventions by openly "declaring her love" for Nobilissimo [5.17.506] [Pearson (1985) 39]. The fulfilment of their abilities does not prevent each of them from remaining virtuous. This feminine feature is shared by other heroines who are, on the contrary, depicted as shy and bashful, such as Lady Bashful in *Loves Adventures*, Lady Innocence in *Youths Glory*, Lady Mute in *The Publick Wooing*, Lady Peaceable and Lady Solitary in *The Comical Hash*, Lady Ward and Lady Contemplation in *The Lady Contemplation*, and Lady Bashful in *The Presence*. Bashfulness would seem to mean here not a lack of intelligence but the awareness of the hollowness of certain aspects of social life.

There is no paradox in Cavendish's praising both types of women. The former category enables her not only to live by proxy, dramatizing what she

67. Cavendish castigates the former: "For the truth is, our sex doth nothing but jostle for pre-eminence of words (I mean not for speaking well, but speaking much) as they do for the pre-eminence of place, words rushing against words, thwarting and crossing each other, and pulling with reproaches, striving to throw each other down with disgrace, thinking to advance themselves thereby" ["A True Relation," 168].

wished she were, but also to vindicate her “right to free self-expression” [Pearson (1985) 38] as a woman, that is to claim her status as a woman writer.⁶⁸ On the other hand, the group of bashful heroines enables her to express her conviction: what counts is “wit, and not words” as expressed in *Loves Adventures* [P2.3.18.58]. “Substance is more important than style . . .” (Pearson [1985] 39), a conviction which is developed in other cues.⁶⁹ This idea echoed *Poems and Fancies*, proving her constant effort to define what meaningful language is [124].⁷⁰ This is akin to her “rejection of scholarship” in the above-mentioned Preface to *Sociable Letters* (n.p.) when she vindicates fancy and originality, paying heed to matter rather than to manner.⁷¹ It is not by chance that the mastery of language is at the core of her drama.

A means to get access to language is theatre whose educational value for the nobility is often stressed by Cavendish, in particular in the fourth introduction to the first Folio: “there is no place, wayes or means, so edifying to Youth as publick Theatres, not only to be Spectators but Actors [...] Poets teach them more in one Play [...] than they can learn in any School . . .” [A4^r]. The “value of acting and drama for educational purposes” [Kramer 72] and the link between spectators and actors are similarly defended by Sanspareille⁷² illustrating the edifying function of acting for young nobles, a theme is echoed in *The Female Academy*. Theatre has an educational value as a means to get access to language. *Youths Glory* refers explicitly to “its own power to educate” [Kramer 72]; Sanspareille asserts that theaters are a place to learn to master language [1.3.126-27]. Since the aim of education is to learn that mastery, theatre becomes a means to control discourse in its several guises, a topic dealt with twice in *The Female Academy*. For the first speaker, “there are two sorts of discourse [...] as there is discourse within the mind, and a discourse with words” [1.4.657]; the second adds a third category: “discoursing by signs, which is actions or acting” [1.16.666].⁷³

68. That is what she does in her plays and narratives and also in her prefaces whose very number epitomizes the importance of the issue: the 1662 Folio has ten prefatory addresses. See Mendelsohn 43: “By the mid-1660s the diffidence of her early prefaces had disappeared, to be replaced by a progressive certitude which is revealed by her titles.”

69. “Rhetorick is rather for sound than sense, for words than reason” [*Loves Adventures* P2.2.10.48] and “wisdom nor wit doth not live nor lye in Words” [P2.3.18.58].

70. Cavendish, *Poems and Fancies* 124: “Most of our *Moderne Writers* now a daies, / Consider not the *Fancy*, but the *Phrase*. / As if *fine words* were *Wit*.”

71. “Neither do I take it for a Disparagement of my Works, to have the Forms, Terms, Words, Numbers, or Rhymes found Fault with, so they do not find Fault with the Variety of the Subjects, or the Sense and Reason, Wit, and Fancy, for I leave the Formal, or Wordative part to Fools, and the Material or Sensitive part to Wise men” [“The Preface,” *Letters* n.p.].

72. “Theatres were not only Schools to learn or practise in, but publick patterns to take example from; Thus Theaters were profitable, both to the Actors and Spectators; for as these Theaters were publick Schools, where noble principles were taught, so it was the dressing rooms of vertue” [*Youths Glory* 1.3.126].

As the expression “actions or acting” indicates, the passage plays on the ambivalent meaning of “theatre,” the relationship between reality and representation: “the theatre of the world and the theatre of the stage [are] interchangeable” [Wiseman 166]. Her plays enable her to investigate on several levels the position of women in connection with the theatre of representation and with the public sphere (“the theatre of public affairs”). On the material stage (or on the page⁷⁴—since the performance is “simulated in the mind of the reader” [Tomlinson 140]), there is a fictive stage, a theatre within theatre, that becomes a metaphor of theatre; in *Youths Glory Sanspareille*, the woman-orator, speaks from a rostrum. Even her clothes (“*drest all in black*” [3.9.136]; “*all in white Satin, like a Bride*” [P2.2.5.158]) enhance the “showiness of her orations,” the “scopic nature of the event,” as Tomlinson puts it [Tomlinson 145].⁷⁵ Similar theatricality is to be found in *The Female Academy* where men and women stand on the other side of a grate to listen to the young ladies’ discourses; being simultaneously audience and spectators.⁷⁶ So the “theatrical metaphor” is used “to enable the performance of female identity” [Tomlinson 144].

Her plays use performance “as a metaphor of possibility for women” [Tomlinson 137] but on another level; acting serves “as a means of becoming or self-realization” [Tomlinson 137]. On the material stage, “the cultural and discursive status of female performance” changes and Cavendish draws on it “to enable fantasies of female self-representation” [Tomlinson 140]. The queen’s “practice of her native custom of performing [...] in spoken drama at the Caroline court turned female acting into a fashionable and controversial issue [...] and inspired a growth in women’s participation in private theatricals which continued into the Interregnum years” [Tomlinson 137]; “the interchangeability of acting/action [*Female Academy* 1.16.666] makes transformations of role possible for the figured female nobility” [Wiseman 164]: “acting on stage and acting in the world” [Wiseman 164].

Cavendish’s plays, in Hobby’s opinion, “consist of a series of possible roles to try out for size” [Hobby 105] for the actors and for the audience/readers. “Sanspareille can finally *have* a parallel; by implication, women offstage can mirror Sanspareille if they choose to follow her example. [...] The text offers two alternatives. Either society will be enriched through philosophy and fame from a woman’s education, or it will suffer remorse and suicide in the face of female ignorance” [Kramer 74]. Hobby adds: “Within the framework

73. The next discourse being adequately devoted to theatre [4.21.669].

74. See Tomlinson 158: “the page becoming stage. . . .”

75. For the erotic dimension of the spectacle, see Wiseman 165.

76. An identical lay out appears on the frontispiece to *Poems and Fancies* (3rd ed. 1668).

of these dramas, character types can be sketched, and the consequences of their choices explored [...] the texts can be left open-ended. [...] In the framework of her Playes, she can provide for women a function traditionally performed by drama for young men" [Hobby 110-11]. Wiseman stresses the modernity of Cavendish's dramatic strategy and refers to Brecht's theories underlining "educating an audience by forcing them to decide for themselves which options to choose at the end of a performance" [Kramer 79 (n. 65)]. Thus "the work's structure reinforces the content. Rather than simply preaching about women's education, the play enacts it" [Kramer 72].

The use of disguise in her plays, as a simple metaphor and then as theatricality, also aims at educating the audience, and thereby allows her to raise the issue of cross-gendering. One notes an evolution between her two volumes of plays: in the former (where the central motif is women's access to language), acting or disguise is mainly used as a metaphor,⁷⁷ except in *The Matrimonial Trouble* and in *Loves Adventures*.⁷⁸ In three out of the four complete plays of the second volume, "cross-dressing for both sexes" [Tomlinson 152] belongs to theatricality as sexual transformation or ambiguity is at the core. *The Sociable Companions; or, The Female Wits* is built on female-devised plots where disguise is a practical device for a woman.⁷⁹ *The Presence* contains a "variation" of *Twelfth Night* [Pearson (1988) 141].

The most elaborate form of the device is to be found in the final play, *The Convent of Pleasure* where disguise is adopted both by several women [dressed as men] and a man [dressed as a Princess], as Paloma sums up [64].⁸⁰ A girl disguised as a boy is the core of Elizabethan comedy thanks to dramatic irony; the latter is absent here: the audience (as the characters on stage) does not know about the man's disguise; suspense is all the more enhanced as the list of *dramatis personae* is placed at the end of the play. Thus the audience itself only slowly becomes aware of sexual identities though it might guess that the "great Foreign Princess" is a man in disguise, before (s)he enters since a clue is given: "She is a Princely brave Woman truly, of a Masculine Presence"

77. See Pearson, *Prostituted Muse* 140: "Sanspareille the female scholar or Lady Victoria the female warrior do not need male disguise as an image of power."

78. Except in *The Matrimonial Trouble* where Forsaken assumes male disguise and in *Loves Adventures* where the relationship between Orphant and the general she loves, whom she pursues disguised as boy becoming his page, his foster-son and finally his wife, "serves as an experimental model for a new kind of male/female relationship" (Dolores Paloma, "Margaret Cavendish: Defining the Female Self," *Women's Studies* 7 [1980]: 63).

79. Jane Fullwit becomes a lawyer's clerk and wins him as a husband; likewise Harry Sociable disguises as a chambermaid.

80. Paloma 64: "This he-as-she in a cloister of shes-as-hes [they wear men's clothes] then re-disguises as a male in the masque, in which Lady Happy, abandoning her male attire, plays the heroine."

[2.3.16].⁸¹ The Princess's gender is finally disclosed by a stage direction [5.1.34].

The "ultimate textual fantasy of female performance," as Tomlinson calls it [158], is didactic; it raises an issue Cavendish often broaches: is gender difference natural or not?⁸² Female transvestism demonstrates independence and an unconventional power for women (see *Lady Orphant*).⁸³ The plays stage clever men putting on women's clothes and proving themselves neither unmanly nor fools, implying perhaps their recognition of the "essential equality of the sexes" [Pearson (1988) 141]; the distinctions between the sexes seem "fluid" [Pearson (1988) 142]⁸⁴ though conventional sexual roles are not explicitly rejected. Order is reasserted in the end, but at least for the theatre of the world, a new, enlarged definition of woman has been given by staging a woman soldier, a woman-orator on the theatre of representation.

The year of Cavendish's death, 1673, saw the publication of Makin's *An Essay to Revive the Ancient Education of Gentlewomen* and of Poullain de la Barre's *De l'égalité des deux sexes* soon translated into English, two landmarks in the history of prefeminism.⁸⁵ Retrospectively, Smith asserts, "In defending herself and her work she was often defending [even unwillingly] all women in ways that had never been used before" [Smith 94] even if the numerous prefaces, addresses, epistles and Newcastle's tributes actually aimed at presenting her as an example of "a woman of letters [...] who does not offend male prerogatives" [Williamson 43]. She dramatized herself as original and yet "defended marriage and the status quo" [Williamson 41], which did not prevent her from denouncing men's behaviour as the cause of women's oppression.

Despite contradictions in all her works, which but mirror the complexity of real life [see "Preface," 1662 Folio, A4], her plays "anticipate a long feminist tradition of claiming more for women's education" [Kramer 77]. She

81. Besides, the convention of cross-dressing is maintained with the adjective and the personal pronoun even in the stage direction ["Enter the Princess *Sola*, and walks a turn or two in a Musing posture, then views her Self and speaks" [30]], which was not the case previously in *Loves Adventures* for the disguised Affectionata [P2.1.4.42]; then the Princess reveals "his" gender (30) in a soliloquy before reappearing "in a Man's Apparel as going to Dance" [33].

82. See "Female Orations," *Orations* 225-232, especially 229.

83. See Pearson, *Prostituted Muse* 129 and 140: "the unconventional clothing she [Cavendish] wore, which she designed herself, often suggested a blend of male and female." See too Tomlinson 158: "her rhetoric of dress and behaviour aimed at blurring boundaries between genders similar to produced by *The Convent of Pleasure*."

84. "Sexual identity is fluid. . . ."

85. The full titles are *An Essay to Revive the Ancient Education of Gentlewomen, in Religion, Manners, Arts, & Tongues, with an Answer to the Objections against This Way of Education* and *De l'égalité des deux sexes, discours physique et moral où l'on voit l'importance de se défaire des préjugés* translated as *The Woman as Good as the Man; or, The Equality of Both Sexes* (1677).

“urges that women may be allowed access to language, education and public life [...] insisting on women’s rights to choose for themselves the way they wish to live” [Pearson (1988) 133]. Smith says: “Her greatest contribution to feminist thought was the degree to which questions of sex division dominated her work” [Smith 78] but she was “Cursed with the limited education that was women’s lot and the inability of society to take seriously women’s ideas.” [Smith 94].

Yet she was “not a true champion of her sex” [Mendelson 55]; her real desire was to shine above the others. As Batigelli explains: “It is not, then, that Cavendish was unable to put forward a feminist reforming vision; rather, she seems to have been unwilling to do so” [Batigelli 55].⁸⁶ “Rather than calling for the destruction of social hierarchy and institutions, which she supported for class and personal reasons, she advocated everything that was intellectually subversive within traditional society” [Sarasohn 302].

Thirty years later, Mary Astell, also a conservative, was to appeal to women’s ambition in *A Serious Proposal*, urging them to “Exalt and Establish [their] fame” [Astell 6]. She, too, supported social hierarchy but, on other points, was nearly the exact opposite to Cavendish; more educated, less self-centered, she was to evolve an actual political thought; she was however not an artist.

86. Batigelli continues: “It is, finally, the problem of maintaining political order in the wake of the English Civil Wars that both governs her work and ultimately prevented her from presenting the kind of feminist reforming vision she was entirely capable of presenting had she cared to” (55).