

## **Performative Poetics**

Intersections of rhetoric and gender politics in

Margaret Cavendish's *Loves Adventures, Assaulted and Pursued Chastity*, and

*The Contract*

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## Introduction

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In 1918, Harvard University scholar Henry Ten Eyck Perry published a doctoral thesis entitled *The First Duchess of Newcastle and Her Husband As Figures in Literary History*. In the book's introduction, Perry states his purpose as a study of an authoress often "verbose and tiresome" but "occasion[ally] valuable" (1). In 1929, Virginia Woold's *A Room of One's Own* reacts to the same authoress, describing the event of her prolific writing "as if some giant cucumber had spread itself over all the roses and carnation in the garden and choked them to death" and proclaiming her works as a "waste" of "scribble[d] nonsense." Another study in 1957, *Margaret the First* by Douglas Grant, attempts to "do her justice" (1) but notes that relatively little had been said about her (5). Indeed, Grant remains a relative blip on the Cavendish radar for much of the twentieth century, despite traits which make her one of the most interesting English writers of the seventeenth century. All three note that she was considered largely ridiculous in her time; her plays were never performed while she lived (Romack 4).

In recent years, however, there has been a veritable explosion of positive and pervasive Cavendish criticism, recognizing her as revolutionary rather than ridiculous. For instance, in *Paper Bodies: A Margaret Cavendish Reader*, Sylvia Bowerbank and Sue Mendelson laud Cavendish as "unique for her time in the extent to which she herself transcended the rigid categories of gender and class that defined most people's lives" (45). Erika Mae Olbricht insists that "[Cavendish's] works illuminate the most significant preoccupations of her society precisely because she played with, probed, ridiculed or rejected the dominant assumptions that

structured early modern beliefs and behaviour” (27). In a 2014 review of the year’s *Studies in English Literature*, Cavendish is a decidedly hot topic (Marcus). [1] In this study, I will call Cavendish a progressive and interesting thinker in her relation of rhetoric to gender performance and the implications therein.

The fact of what one might call Cavendish’s modern literary redemption is most obviously a symptom of the increasing availability of her texts with the advance of technology, the growth of literary studies as a whole, and as an example of the power of the feminist movement on literary studies. However, Cavendish’s resurgence in the world of contemporary literary theory has a more complicated explanation. Her relative obscurity might be seen as less a result of rarity and misogyny and more a result of her own position in her time as “fantastic” (Grant 4). Cavendish’s rather unique position in her society as a wealthy aristocratic authoress wedded to a supportive author and well-recognized “insistence on originality” (Shaver 2) put her in a place of imaginative possibility that displaced her from a number of her contemporaries. As this study and others have shown, Cavendish’s works lend themselves well to a discussion of contemporary binary-bending literary theory. Her “rejection of the dominant assumptions that structured early modern beliefs” that Olbricht cites as her point of interest is also perhaps what kept her from being considered anything more than a “fantastic figure flitting” around the writings of the Early Modern period (Grant 13). The progressive nature of the authoresses’ contemplations of things like gender made much of her work perhaps untenable in the literary criticism climate before the rise of something like queer theory.

Cavendish’s position as “fantastic” in Early Modern times are exactly what make her fantastic now, as she imagines progressive possibilities about the social structures with which she

was familiar that anticipate modern perceptions of gender binary and rhetorical power. In the first part of this study, I discuss the implications of the intersections of performative gender as described by Judith Butler and performative speech as described by J.L. Austin in her drama *Loves Adventures*. In the second, I explore the possibilities of comparing rhetorical styles as they relate to women's virtue in Cavendish's novel *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity*. In the third, I develop the connections and empowerment of the first two works to think about a more real-world possibility of rhetorical influence on gender dynamics as they relate to marriage contract in her novella *The Contract*. In crafting these arguments, I found that each necessitates to some degree the vocabulary inherent in more contemporary theorists. A re-examination of Cavendish's work in this light then gives us a greater sense of the continuum of progressive imagination than previously thought. Instead of a fantastic figure recently re-discovered, this study allows us to think about Cavendish's work as a prefiguring of more recently recognized connections between representations in rhetoric and the possibilities of social progress, especially as they relate to gender politics.

## SECTION I

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### **“Literature as an act”**

#### *Performing the dissolution of constative structures in Loves Adventures*

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It is no secret that the author who has come to be known as “Mad Madge” wrote subversive work. The Duchess of Newcastle, Lady Margaret Cavendish, a self-proclaimed authority on matters of government, philosophy, and religion, was the first woman to join the prestigious Royal Society and a prolific writer of drama and fiction (Shaver 3). Drawing from works by her canonical predecessor, William Shakespeare, and an esteemed recipient of her artistic patronage, Ben Jonson, Cavendish consistently imbues her writings with an original and transgressive social commentary, especially in relation to social structures such as gender and class politics.

One such work, *Loves Adventures*, will be the primary focus of this section, as its representation of gender, class, and language does much to elucidate her writing’s discordance with convention. The play questions the lines of gender binary in a way that arguably goes beyond such blurring present on Shakespeare’s stage and anticipates ideas present in contemporary queer theory somewhat anachronistically in the Early Modern period. More important, however, is the overlay of blurred gender binary with an implicit conversation about class formations through the lens of rhetoric at work throughout the text. While the dominant

cross-dressing narrative of *Loves Adventures* grapples most obviously with the question of performative gender identity, Cavendish also blurs the idea of binaries in general to great effect.

In looking at Cavendish's printed plays, it is important to recognize the comparative differences in authorial control between this self-published author and her more middle class contemporaries. Shakespeare's printed works, for example, are often an amalgam of different manuscripts, and it is sometimes uncertain whether stage directions are in fact his words or simply an addition by a publisher. By comparison, Cavendish had full control over the printing of her works, as they were entirely funded at the Duke of Newcastle's expense and printed solely for distribution among her friends and acquaintances. Knowing this, this study makes the assumption that the subtle elements of representation in details like stage directions can, in fact, be attributed to authorial choice. This assumption is important in that these choices guide this exploration to the issues of performative representation in which Cavendish was interested.

For example, in the twelfth scene of the first act, the protagonist, Lady Orphant, and her chaperone, Foster Trusty, enter the stage "*as two Pilgrims,*" a stage direction which begins to draw into question the supposed juxtaposition of performative disguise versus genuine identity. Literally this can be taken to mean that the two are now dressed as Pilgrims, but the lack of specificity in the direction itself leaves a reader to question whether or not some actual change has occurred. Cavendish chooses to represent this disguise as a simile, in direct contrast with later events in the play to be discussed below. This blurring is intensified later in the scene as Foster Trusty begs that they "change these Pilgrims weeds" as their continued disguise will obligate them to "travel as Pilgrims do to *Jerusalem*" (I.xii.8-10). Here begins the questionable interplay of performed disguise and genuine identity that permeates the rest of the play. While

Foster Trusty makes it clear that their disguise is transitive in asking that the clothing be removed and changed to “Beggars garments” (I.xii.11), he indicates the consequences performed disguise can have upon the reality of the person performing them. There is some indication that the outward disguise may soon influence the reality of the character’s actions, shifting the transformation to one that can be more easily characterized as performative.

The effective muddying of the lines between not only travelers and religious pilgrims in this example, but aristocrat and beggar, and men and women, is a dominant dynamic throughout *Loves Adventures*. This opening up of binaries serves as a deep interrogation of the effects of dramatic complicity with the idea of performative identity on rigid gendered institutions, on the implications of cultural interpretations of relative rhetoric, and on the performative power of language on would-be constative structures.

Cavendish’s contextual position in a society in which class hierarchy was jeopardized by both the emerging idea of a mobile middle class and a fluctuating relationship with monarchy marks a crux at which we can begin to look for an interrogation of supposedly standard binaries suggested in her writing. Cavendish’s heroine cross-dresses into a successful hero, enacting a progressive questioning of the gender binary in her time similar to Judith Butler’s recent arguments on gender as culturally mediated rather than empirically predetermined. While this binary is suggested in the works of her predecessors, it must be acknowledged that Cavendish often takes this questionable blurring one step further. In relation to the representation of gender as a performative interpretation of biological sex, *Loves Adventures* seems to propose class as a culturally-mediated performative interpretation of the physical fact of wealth. However, this suggested parallelism has its faults. Butler tells us that “one does one’s gender,” which is not



altogether different from the idea that one might “say one’s gender,” a specific possibility explored thoroughly in the play. However, the characters of *Loves Adventures* also exist in a world of performative class, where one both says and does one’s class despite caveats to be explored later. Just as gender and rhetoric are intermingled, so too are class and rhetoric. Cavendish posits social class as something more than a construct built on property, and instead a construct built on prose.

Upon deeper inspection of Cavendish’s representation of both class and gender throughout this play, we see that she instead posits one as a subsection of the other. In a series of rhetorical and plot moves, Cavendish figures gender as just one consequential by-product of the overarching binary of performed rhetorical prowess. In other words, the dichotomy far more telling is that between effective linguistic expression and the effective silence of poor wordsmanship. Cavendish not only anticipates aspects of Butler’s theory, but overlays the idea of performative gender identity with performed class identity, delineating that while “one can take gender to be the cultural interpretation of biological difference,” one can take class as the cultural interpretation of rhetorical difference, rather than the physicality of wealth or some biological sense of nobility. Furthermore, the importance of language hinted at in the performance of gender and implicated in the performance of class bring us to a discussion on the effect performative language, as described by J.L. Austin, can have on constative structures in language and, consequently, in society. In making this move of privileging relative rhetoric over the space of the social constructs of gender and class, Cavendish not only does the proto-feminist work of exploring possibilities for women within social structures but makes the personal leap of simultaneously inserting herself into a literary hierarchy through a literary performative act.

Cavendish's elucidation of these dynamics and subversive plot work in relation to structures which she would dissolve. *Loves Adventures*, then, serves as an example both implicitly and explicitly of how literature can, in fact, be an act.

### **The Success of the Gendered Performative**

The dominant plot in *Loves Adventures* follows the "adventure" of the factually-named Lady Orphant as she travels from her home in England to a Turkish war in Italy and back again in the hopes of obtaining the object of her affection, the General Lord Singularity. Lady Orphant attempts this feat by disguising herself as a man, dubbed Affectionata, and entering Lord Singularity's service as his page. This idea of cross-dressing for the eventual effective end of a marriage plot comes to us from Cavendish's predecessors, most obviously from Viola in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night's*. Affectionata displays an important difference, however, that elucidates a more subversive construction: Cavendish's heroine spends most of the play not as a heroine in disguise, but as a hero, a role reminiscent of Viola but with a gender switch substantiated in structural plot moves. Affectionata is not just a woman disguised as a man but effectively *is* a man for a great portion of the play, as he is, for example, legally adopted as a son [2].

Affectionata's performative success as a man recalls Judith Butler's theory of gender performance in her influential essay, "*Performative Acts and Gender Constitution.*" Butler suggests we "consider gender as performative, in the sense that it is not what one is *but what one does*" (513, emphasis mine). Lady Orphant effectively stops performing the woman and opts for performing the man. This seems as good an explanation as any for Affectionata's great success

as a man, especially given his context as a character within a play, as Butler suggests that “the acts by which gender is constituted bear similarities to performative acts within theatrical contexts” (901). It is not simply that Lady Orphant is disguised, but that some self that exists prior to a gendered identity has chosen to begin performing the opposite gender. As this section will show, through manipulation of both social and grammatical structures, Cavendish offers a reading of the idea of performative identities which would later be codified by Butler.

Furthermore, Cavendish simultaneously hints at a grander performative scheme to be discussed in the next section.

In a review of Butler’s theories, Jonathan Culler highlights her idea that “there is not a subject, already constituted, prior to gender, who chooses. When one is constituted as a subject one is already constituted as a boy or a girl” (513). This seems to run counter to the idea that the individual who performs as Lady Orphant for the introduction and conclusion of the play can effectively choose to perform male as Affectionata. Cavendish’s subtle agreement with the idea of a self pre-existent to gender comes to us, however, with the mixture of simile, metaphor, and certainty in the stage directions that describe Lady Orphant’s transition from Lady to Pilgrim to Beggar and, finally, to a man.

A number of other critics of Cavendish, from Mihoko Suzuki to Anne Shaver, have characterized her work as highly subversive when it comes to gender. Sylvia Bowerbank and Sue Mendelson remark that she was indeed “probably unique for her time in the extent to which she....transcended the rigid categories of gender” (193). This idea becomes clear through the application of literary theory as Butler’s theory of gender performance is applicable in *Loves Adventures*, both fundamentally and theoretically. Fundamentally, it is a work of drama and the

idea of performative gender is “fundamentally dramatic.” More important however is the theoretical application, as Cavendish does much to explicitly question the performative implicit in gendered structures and stereotypes. Yet, it is important to recognize that Butler’s explanation is insufficient to explain all of the dynamics in *Loves Adventures*. In actuality, Cavendish’s relationship to Butler is more nuanced and, ultimately, incomplete, leaving room for a more complicated and important reading of performance that goes beyond the social binary of gender to include the binary of class status and differing structures of language.

In her theory of gender, Butler tells us that “one is not simply a body, but, in some very key, sense, one does one’s body” (902). In *Loves Adventures*, the performative disguise of the man Affectionata by Lady Orphant proves such a successful doing of the opposite gender that he is not only described as, and believed to be, a man but allowed to enter the patriarchal structure. one which Eve Sedgwick might describe as “homosocial” (1) [3]. Sedgwick’s homosociality allows us to define the patriarchal structure at work in the Early Modern period, as the commodification of women was a direct requirement of the solidification of bonds between men. While some of Shakespeare’s cross-dressing women - like *The Merchant of Venice*’s Portia or *As You like It*’s Rosalind - often flirt with the idea of entrance into this structure, Suzuki argues that Cavendish’s example of Affectionata penetrates it thoroughly (114). In comparison to Portia and Rosalind, Affectionata’s success as a male is hyperbolic: He finds himself adopted as a Lord and Generals’ son, a rapidly promoted Lieutenant General of a vast army, and a candidate for both Sainthood and Cardinal-ship by offer of the Pope. Admittedly, at the end of the play Affectionata does find his way back to the position of Lady Orphant and a marital structure reminiscent of Shakespeare’s heroines. However, Cavendish advances the idea of a successful performance of

gender further than Shakespeare does by allowing Affectionata to gain homosocial ground in not only the somewhat expected familial realm as an adopted son but also those of the military, politics and religion. Affectionata performs as a man in a domestic structure as an adopted son, but, more importantly, in other characteristically manly spheres as well, moving beyond the feminine arena to which his literary cross-dressing predecessors are relegated. While the dramatic heroines of previous decades were able to cross-dress into these spheres for a brief period of time, the opportunities and realities with which Affectionata is presented mark an important difference. As Butler reminds us that the construct of gender is one which is entirely dependent upon social constructs: Affectionata gives an example of a gendered performance that is accepted into almost all recognizable male-dominated power structures.

The first clue to a truly successful non-normative gender performance [4] comes with a reaffirmation of both a patriarchal structure of economics and the side on which Lady Orphant falls once she is performing as Affectionata. Affectionata's first lines in his new role blur the boundary of gender that should be impenetrable to the Lady Orphant, as he orders his foster Father to return home to his wife with the reason that she:

hath not skill to manage the fortune [Affectionata's] father left [him];  
for she knows not how to let Leases, to set Lands, to receive Returns, to repair  
Ruins, to disburst Charges, and to order those affairs as they should be  
ordered (I.xviii.5-8).

In this one line, Affectionata solidifies a gendered stereotype and social necessity that women have no connection with the handling of money, yet in a patriarchal structure that relied on the explicit commodification of women (Newman 23). Affectionata simultaneously cements himself

into the role of heir which should be held for either a true male son or the would-be husband of the daughter who now appears to the audience as a man. In this moment of reversal, Affectionata begins a transitional journey into not only a performed disguise of a man but a figure sealed into a homosocial structure in which a disguised Lady Orphant should not be able to take part. By a series of performative acts, a performed disguise takes on the solidified nature of the performative. While the delineation of the previous line as belonging to Affectionata rather than Lady Orphant in the script indicates the reality of this male transformation in comparison to simple disguise, it is this first line which performs the difference. This is not a disguise but a transformation. In delineating the difference between gendered roles while performing male, Affectionata underpins his own structural relation to gender in this play, effectively placing himself on the other side of the binary.

The success of this gendered performance is further indicated only a scene later as two servants of Lord Singularity attest that Affectionata “hath got more of [the] Lords/affection, than [those] that have served him this many years” (I.xx.1-2). Although this is in some ways a nod to the original mission of Lady Orphant, it is more a gesture toward the unexpected power that the person now playing the part of the General’s page is able to wield. The intense affection which Lord Singularity begins to feel for his new servant almost immediately has real consequences on structures within the text. In the first of many loving, arguably rhetorically overwrought, exchanges between Lord Singularity and Affectionata, we see the former tell the latter that he loves him “as a Father loves a son” (IV.xxii.18), an affection which grows to a legal reality. In a turn from the mere hinting at the consequences of performed identity in Shakespeare, Cavendish jeopardizes an entire patriarchal system as Lord Singularity officially adopts Affectionata as his

son and “settle[s] all [his] Estate upon [him],” charging him to take his name. The performance as male is so believable that Affectionata is inducted into the homosocial structure in being brought into a patriarchal line, short-circuiting the intended marital structure. The fact that Lord Singularity gives Affectionata his name speaks to the irony of this improper solidification of bond between the two, as a would-be marriage is turned into a father-son relationship. It is possible that this improper bond could be seen as a placeholder for a more homoerotic desire between Lord Singularity and his page. However, Lord Singularity’s exploits with whores and his desire to find his new son a wife point to a narrative having less to do with homosexuality than the general idea of gender performance. This is not a moment of homoerotic desire but an argument about the structural implication of gender performance. The adoption is a securing of a homosocial bond by which Lord Singularity avoids the institution of marriage, to which he professes opposition in his introductory scene. However, Affectionata’s performative state directly throws the structure of marriage into question. Cavendish here juxtaposes a gendered performative with a system which inherently requires a commodification of a woman secured into a structure, making its security questionable.

Furthermore, Affectionata is victorious on the battlefield and ultimately saves the General’s life, despite his complete lack of military training due to his previous identity as a young woman. This is noteworthy when contrasted with another cross-dressed man at war who appears elsewhere in Cavendish’s works, namely Travellia from her novel *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity*. Travellia is successfully convincing in his performance as male but is checked by the reality of a previous social context when actually put into battle in his male form. Travellia is unskilled in combat and finds himself wounded and returned to female pronouns for

a short span in the text, proving an ultimately ineffective male performance. Affectionata's comparative combat success can be attributed to a more meta-textual recognition of the implications of performance. While Travellia exists in a mostly narrative world, the novel, Affectionata exists in one that is entirely performative, drama, bringing the text itself closer to the question of performativity with which Cavendish is toying. The real consequences of Affectionata's performance on his prowess as a warrior compel us to view this representation of gender in Cavendish as entirely performative.

If these performances were insufficient to demonstrate that Affectionata's gender performance is a true performative transformation, his success becomes almost exaggerated as he climbs the ranks to Lieutenant General and is tapped as a possible replacement for the position of General when Lord Singularity decides to leave the service. The climax of this exaggerated success within a patriarchal structure comes with Affectionata's entrance into a religious power structure. The Pope, having heard of Affectionata's graces and great power of speech, asks to meet him and Lord Singularity during their travels back from battling the Turks in Italy. Transcending any cross-dressing plot we might see in Shakespeare, Affectionata is offered first a "living sainthood" (2.III.xxiv.7) and then a position as Cardinal after denying the former. This possibility of entrance into the highest religious leadership is a humorous exaggeration of the potentially subversive opportunities afforded a cross-dressing woman in other plays. While Affectionata leaves both the army and the Vatican having foregone these entrances into male-centric power structures, the possibilities are opened explicitly. It is the gender Affectionata is performing at the time which regulates his entrance into power structures, indicating real



consequences to the performance, the idea of performed gender as a whole, and the power of performative speech.

The final confirmation of the representation of gender as performative in the text comes, rather ironically, with the reappearance of Lady Orphant toward the play's close. When it is discovered that Nurse Fondly and Foster Trusty's ward, Lady Orphant, has gone missing, they become the prime suspects in her murder. Affectionata is therefore forced to relinquish his power and return to his position as female ward to spare their execution. In stark contrast with Shakespeare's Viola, who characterizes her disguise as "wickedness" (II.ii.25) and herself as a "poor monster" (II.ii.32), Lady Orphant admits in her initial returning lines that she has positive associations with her gendered transformation (Suzuki 111). Instead of a problematic cross-dressing disguise, Lady Orphant views her stint as Affectionata as "acting a masculine part upon the Worlds great Stage," indicating the same sense of gender as connected with theatrical performance elucidated in Butler's theory. Lady Orphant acknowledges that this altered performance has "given the World cause to censure" her, but admits that personally if she "could....live thus concealed, [she] should be happy" (Part II. V.xxxiv, 26). Lady Orphant here delineates the success of her own gendered performance. This admission is distinct from those less subversive cross-dressing plots in Shakespeare in its recognition of gender as entirely performative.

However, there is something further to be said for the plot device which Cavendish employs to bring about this speech regarding performance. It is a desired marriage between Lord Singularity's son, Affectionata, and a woman to whom he was once betrothed, Lady Orphant, which causes the discovery of Lady Orphant's absence and the collapse of the performative

narrative. In this rather amusing paradox of being offered a betrothal to himself, it is clear Affectionata has short-circuited the gendered patriarchal system. This mirroring of Affectionata onto Lady Orphant through the lens of a patriarchal marriage brings to light a slight discordance in Cavendish's dynamic with a performative theory of gender and hints at the possibility of marriage contract at the center of these dynamics.

### **The Grammar of Performance**

Butler's discussion of the relation of the individual subject to the idea of gender recognizes that there is a grammatical requirement inherent in language structure, which she would rather ignore, that implies a self pre-existent to the choice of gender. While Butler acknowledges gender as performance, she does not explicitly acknowledge it as a performative choice. However, in Cavendish's play, while Lady Orphant is at one point dressed "like a pilgrim" and "as a beggar," she simply becomes "Affectionata" and denies the grammatical leap of connecting her genuine identity with her performed gender. While Butler grapples with the grammatical requirement inherent in the English language for a self pre-existent to the gendered performance, Cavendish circumvents this issue by contrasting performative gender to choice through a series of disguises. The stage directions describing Lady Orphant's transient performances as both a religious pilgrim and a beggar of the lowest class insert the idea of simile into the disguise, which is markedly different from the way in which Cavendish represents gendered performance. There is a recognition in the representative grammar that gendered performance has a more permanent and ultimately more subversive effect than a transient mask.

The first meeting of the disguised Lady Orphant and the General, Lord Singularity, still presents by way of script a dialogue between “Lady Orphant” and “General.” While the text tells us that readers and audience are meant to believe on some level that the Lady Orphant is still identifiable as “Lady,” the General’s addressing her as “boy” eight times in twice as many lines signals that she has successfully achieved at least a superficial change. However, the characterization of “boy” rather than “man” suggests a change only partially convincing, reminiscent of the gendered confusion of the boy Adonis in Shakespeare’s epic poem *Venus and Adonis*, to which *Loves Adventures* later makes reference (II.V.xxxvii.8). This marks the transition of Lady Orphant’s changing her “habits,” as Butler would call them, and entering a liminal space before becoming a fully performed male. While this liminal space marks a point at which we can identify a gendered transition, we are left with some question as to why it is allowed to exist. If gender performance is to be accepted as entirely effective, there should be no scene in which Lady Orphant appears in the script alongside her male speech. As will be discussed in the third part of this section, it is the fact that this scene contains the initial acceptance of her own representation with her words which marks this scene as a necessary transitional state.

The next stage direction brings Foster Trusty and Affectionata onto the stage with the line “*Enter AFFECTIONATA, and FOSTER TRUSTY*” rather than “LADY ORPHANT *as* AFFECTIONATA” or “LADY ORPHANT *like* AFFECTIONATA”. While the performance of a religious identity and a class identity, to be discussed elsewhere, are presented by simile in stage direction, the successful performance of a gendered identity is presented as direct, unaffected by the “genuine” identity of Lady Orphant [4]. This shift is a signal that

Affectionata's representation of himself, specifically regarding his gender, with his words as well as his representation within the text has shifted in contrast with an expected binary. Instead of "as" or "like" there is just a change of pronoun. It is a change in the way Affectionata is represented in words and the way in which he represents himself which creates the gendered switch. While this change denies distance between an original un-gendered identity and its gendered one, it simultaneously accepts the possibility of maneuvering between the two, leaving us the question of what creates this ability to maneuver.

Despite this grammatical pre-figuring of the idea of gender as performative, the full application of Butler in a linguistic sense shows itself as flawed, creating gaps which compel us to look for a more nuanced explanation. While Butler questions the grammatical requirement for a pre-gendered self, Cavendish seems to rely on it as fundamental to her narrative. Even at the end of the play when Affectionata must become Lady Orphant once again, the conversion is clearly incomplete; Lady Orphant/Affectionata has been permanently changed in relation to the gender binary in this text. There is a new uneasiness in the final scenes with the idea of performative gender, subtly resultant from Lady Orphant's subversive transgression. First, there is a confusion of the gender pronouns and gendered name when Lady Orphant reappears, as stage directions indicate the entrance of "AFFECTIONATA, drest very fine in *her* own Sexes habit" (Part II, V.xxxvi.8). Second, Lady Orphant reveals her previous disguise to Lord Singularity with the assertion that, having been discovered, she "will otherwise conceal [her]self, and live as *Anchoret* from/the view of the world" (Part II, V.xxxvi.18-19). While this line contains traces of performative recognition, it is linguistically telling in that Lady Orphant refers to herself as *Anchoret*, rather than the female *Anchoress*, imbuing her own

representation with a continued masculine language. Third, she is referred to by others as both a “She page” and a “female son” at the close of the play, a confused rhetoric which Suzuki describes as not only linguistically but structurally interesting in relation to Affectionata’s homosocial gains as Lord Singularity’s page and heir (104). The confusion of gendered language at the end of the play is clear.

There is another problem with a simple mapping of Butler gender performance on Cavendish: Butler writes that “gender is a project which has cultural survival as its end, the term ‘strategy’ better suggests the *situation of duress* under which gender performance *always and variously occurs*” (903, emphasis mine). However, Suzuki makes the following observation about Affectionata in relation to her Shakespearean counterpart, Viola:

...unlike the Shakespearean heroine whose assumption of male clothing is motivated by self-protection, Cavendish’s Orphant *actively and strategically chooses* her disguise to pursue her love for Lord Singularity. As Jacqueline Pearson says of Cavendish’s heroines, they “do not simply talk about their lack of opportunities: they make opportunities for themselves ... Orphant [is] an independent and enterprising woman who travels the world to win the man she loves (111).

Inherent in Butler’s performative gender is societal duress which forces it upon a subject. Cavendish’s heroine has a remarkably different experience in relation to her own gender identity, especially in comparison to Shakespeare’s heroine. While perhaps not entirely incongruous with Butler’s explanation of performance as coerced by circumstances, the active strategy of Orphant’s performance complicates the stakes. There is here a decisive action for individual gain of a beneficial structure - a desired marriage - that supersedes the requirements of society.

While Butler does not specifically argue that performative gender cannot be a strategic choice, Cavendish pushes this possibility to the forefront.

In one way Cavendish's text and Butler's theory seem to align, especially if we understand *Affectionata's* relatively unhindered success in the homosocial sphere and close-read her rhetorical representation. However, both of these explanation show gaps. Furthermore, it is important to note that the "under duress" dynamic which Suzuki highlights is eschewed by Cavendish to allow some performative distance, making it more of a choice than Butler would allow. We are compelled to search for a deeper explanation for Cavendish's focus on the performative and its relative success in relation to gender in the play.

### **The Rhetoric of Class**

With the inclusion of ideas about class structures as well as gendered ones, we can see that while Cavendish is showing that gender is entirely performed well before it was codified in modern queer theory, her writing has greater implications. If we accept the blurring of binary as successful, the question arises of why she adheres so closely to the notion of nobility, "leaving in place the often stringent requirements of class" (Olbricht 78). This idea of class permanence is one which those familiar with the plot of William Shakespeare's *A Winter's Tale* and similar texts from the time will accept as somewhat ubiquitous in the Early Modern era. Olbricht says that "at the same time that scholars celebrate Cavendish's subversive (or transcendent) writing about gender boundaries, they admit - sometimes reluctantly, or in a dependent clause - that her work does not seriously challenge her society's understanding of the class structure" (77). While offering an understanding of patriarchal society and the possible beginnings of its dissolution

through the idea of performative gender, she appears to hold to the idea of class permanence and nobility of birth. This suggests that, for Cavendish, while patriarchal systems which rely on distinct gendered identities and commodification of women may actually be fluid, the same cannot be said of class.

We might attempt to explain this difference by turning again to Butler, who locates causality in that “one can take gender to be the cultural interpretation of biological difference” (Culler 512). As there seems to be no easy biological comparison, the obvious parallel one might draw is that class is the cultural interpretation of differing physicality of wealth. This explanation seems too easy, however, and is in fact fundamentally flawed given Cavendish’s context in a time which saw both the beginning of a mobile middle class and the confusion of class structures and hierarchies with the beheading of Charles I by his subjects. Furthermore, the dissolution of gender binary throughout the text prompts us to consider if the answer is as simple as accepting the finite distinction of status differences as an underlying theme. It is not an argument against the existence of class status with which we are presented, but rather a re-imagination of its codification.

Olbricht outlines three dynamics as essential to Cavendish’s class-rigid mentality: (1) virtuous chastity, (2) class reversal only to rediscover nobility, and (3) ending in a noble marriage (8). There are markers of these paradigms in *Loves Adventures*. First, it is true that the idea of a virtuous chastity on the part of Lady Orphant and Affectionata is upheld. For example, Lady Orphant admonishes her companion for “mistak[ing] lust for love” (Part I, I.viii.22) and Affectionata refuses to facilitate Lord Singularity’s sinful connection with unmarried women. However, (1) Lady Orphant’s disguise as a beggar is short and ultimately unbelievable - she

spends essentially no time as a member of the lower class and (2) we do not actually see a “noble marriage,” and the circumstances of the marital scene are questionable. Instead, further exploration reveals that it is the elevated diction often attributed to the upper class, rather than class itself, which Cavendish allows to hold a finite position of superiority. It is the signification of class, or rather a degree of status performance, which holds the place of importance.

Olbricht asserts that in “Cavendish's drama, class standing is intimately linked with marriage: a character's class is finally determined through her marriage...., the activity that guarantees the class order” (79). Contextually, Cavendish would have agreed with this point, knowing her own marriage to be the fortuitous one which secured her the title of Duchess. The ending of *Loves Adventures*, however, leaves this structure open, compelling us to desire a different explanation of class standing. Lady Orphant’s class seems only tangentially linked to her eventual marriage to Lord Singularity, especially given the questionable state of their matrimony at the play’s close. While Cavendish does show us Lady Orphant’s acceptance of Lord Singularity’s proposal, the final scene represents only a precursor to their actual wedding. We never see the vows and are left instead with the unsavory feeling that all has not been entirely resolved.

Lord Singularity and Lady Orphant enter the final scene “*as Bride and Bride-groom,*” a way of describing dress that reminds of Lady Orphant’s transient permutations as a pilgrim and a beggar. Cavendish does not represent simply the entrance of a bride and bridegroom, but uses them as stage direction descriptions for which she created mistrust throughout the text. Upon their entrance, “musicioners” ask that they be allowed to present “a Song written” in honor of the marriage (Part II, Act V, Scene xxxix). Lord Singularity reluctantly agrees to hear it but, rather uncharacteristically, expresses impatience by asserting that the musicioners’ present “could



never have been less acceptable, by reason it will retard [his] marriage” (Part II, Act V, Scene xxxix). Lady Orphant begs to hear the song, and then another, while Lord Singularity begrudgingly allows it and eventually hastens his betrothed off-stage. The marriage itself is never presented and instead the play closes with an impatient bride-groom at odds with his bride, opening up the possibility that a resolving marriage does not, in fact, occur. Lord Singularity’s hastiness is decidedly unsettling, throwing Olbricht’s class-defining structure of marriage into question. Olbricht suggests a noble marriage as a defining characteristic of the solidification of class in Cavendish’s drama, yet this representation of the structure in flux leads to some disagreement. Rather than deny the importance of class status altogether, which is perhaps more than we can expect from an English Duchess in the seventeenth century, this ending points to a different explanation.

What can we make of Cavendish denying this guarantee of class structure? By bringing the idea of an incomplete performance to the forefront throughout the development of the main plot of the play, Cavendish makes it difficult not to notice the questionable close. In only showing a couple dressed as if they are to be married rather than an actual marriage, class order is not quite solidified in the conventional sense. This leads to a troubling counterpoint to the bulk of criticism which has successfully argued Cavendish’s rigidity when it comes to class structures. If, indeed, Cavendish deviates from her subversive take on gendered power dynamics by adhering strictly to those having to do with class, why does the end of this play - the one that appears first in her self-published volume - leave the convention of marriage in such a tenuous place, similar to the “identity tenuously constituted in time” Butler calls gender? Cavendish

might instead be making room for a marker of difference more important than traditional notions of class.

In an early scene in the play, Foster Trusty and Lady Orphant enter the stage “*like two poor Beggars*” moving interestingly into another form of simile “like” beggars as before they appeared “as” pilgrims. This suggests that there is something required more immediate than clothes to confirm their identity, as Foster Trusty’s opening line reads “Childe, you must beg of every one that comes by, otherwise we shall/not seem right Beggars” (I.xiv. 1-2). Here Cavendish brings in the idea of speech as necessary to confirm a performed class identity into the forefront. Lady Orphant makes this distinction even clearer when she explains that despite her dress, she has never “learn’d the tone” of a beggar in order to “move pity or charity” (I.xiv.6). While in the previous scene dressing as a pilgrim might require a pilgrimage, this scene shows that dressing as a beggar does require a degree of begging in order to authenticate the disguise. Essentially, it is speech which is required to authenticate class status just as speech is required to authenticate gender.

This exchange is followed by the Lady Orphant making use of an assumed begging rhetoric in an attempt to move first a gentlemen and then a lady to pity in order to prove herself a right beggar. Her actions of begging are dictated both by stage direction, “*She goeth to them and begs,*” and by dialogue in which she asks of a gentleman, “what compassionate charity will bestow” (Part I, I.xiv.9), a diction perhaps inappropriate for a beggar. Furthermore, the gentleman from whom she begs “perceive[s that she has] learn’d to beg well” (Part 1, I.xiv.13), highlighting the unexpected tone of her solicitation. Interestingly, Lady Orphant is successful in multiple instances of begging only to return a coin back to the poor man who gave her a penny

earlier in the scene. This act of charity serves to de-authenticate the performance that Lady Orphant has put on throughout the scene as a beggar. It is no surprise that this act of charity is placed directly after Lady Orphant's request that another Lady "let the mouth of necessity suck the breast of [her] charity" (Part 1, i.xiv.22), demonstrating a rhetorical move that reminds more of poetry than begging. Her elevated prose and final act of charity perform her out of her disguise as beggar and back into her genuine identity as an upper class lady of charitable virtue. It is not so much that any person might perform any class, but that class is substantiated by or founded upon rhetorical skill, which for Cavendish is a more tangible and permanent delineation. The power of rhetoric then works at the higher social level of which Lady Orphant is a part, but is subtly unsuccessful in the realm of beggars. This performance seems less intentional and more a comment on Lady Orphant's excellent skill in speech, which carries in to her performance as *Affectionata*.

A specific focus on her speech reveals the false dichotomy of class which Cavendish elucidates. Despite Lady Orphant's attempts to perform a certain class identity, there is a break in the performance when mapped on to the reality of her rhetorical status, codified in her skillful manipulation of persuasive diction. While initial investigation seems to corroborate the critical opinion that Cavendish allows for a traditional representation of class, Lady Orphant's journey is imbued with a performative recognition that it is elevated speech which speaks to the true dichotomy. It must be recognized, therefore, that Cavendish's attempts to rework class structure around rhetoric as she does with gender are in keeping with her own biases about class status, even as they redefine it.

### **Performative and Constative Language**

From the early scenes of Lady Orphant's disguise as both a pilgrim and a beggar, Cavendish is clearly interested in performative effects on identity and the structuring power of language. Looking closer, we see that it is not necessarily class, but rhetoric, that is permanent and powerful. The power of language is praised throughout the play and is closely linked with social utility thought to be connected with social constructions like class and gender. While an essential component of Butler's argument is the idea that "one does one's gender," Cavendish advances that one step further to tell us that "one says one's gender" as part of a larger performative speech that defines one's entire identity. Gender is more closely linked with performative speech in relation to social constructs than biological sex. Further, class status is more closely linked with rhetorical prowess than some finite sense of nobility.

In the initial meeting of Lady Orphant and Lord Singularity and, hence, the beginning of the identity of Affectionata, there is evidence that speech is of the utmost importance. While Orphant's outward appearance is marked as convincing, the Captain's questioning of her truthfulness in wanting to serve as the Governor's page is met with the assertion that she can represent herself "but [with her] own words" (III.xvi.49). The General's response that her "tongue sounds so sweetly as [he] cannot but take, and trust [her]" (III.xvi.51) marks Cavendish's recognition of the influence of speech on the nature of performative identities. This exchange closes the scene and marks the suspension of "Lady Orphant" until the final scenes of the play, ending the aforementioned liminal space. Once the performance of speech is accepted as having switched genders, or, once the power of the speech to change Lady Orphant's relation to the gendered binary has been recognized, the identifier of Lady Orphant drops from the text.

Entrenched in Lord Singularity's service, Affectionata is accused of being a "spie" due to the jealousy of other servants who lack his rhetorical skill and consequent affection from the general. Despite an intense trial, Affectionata is able to argue his own innocence and speak "so eloquently" that his innocence is undeniable. While in some ways this simply marks a continuation of Cavendish's assertions that both Lady Orphant and her counterpart Affectionata speak well, the context of successful speaking in a public trial lends even more significance. Mihoko Suzuki elucidates an excellent comparative example in an earlier drama on which this play draws, Shakespeare's *Othello*. Recognizing that Desdemona is not allowed to defend her innocence, we are made aware of the transition through which Affectionata has gone. Suzuki reminds us that, despite Desdemona's blamelessness, she suffers a "summary justice at the hands of her husband" and is only allowed to say her innocence "after she has been smothered by Othello" (110). When we compare Affectionata's rhetorical success in his trial to the way in which a woman might argue her own innocence or chastity in the time, as represented in previous literature, there is a clear implication that Affectionata's political power of speech has superseded the bounds to which it would have been confined had it been connected with the gender of woman.

Successful gender performance and the appearance of static class, then, are connected with relative representations in language. Why, even outside of Cavendish context, can we make this connection between the idea of gender as a performance and the idea of a hierarchy of language to explain class? We might accept that Cavendish represents gender as performed, yet there are distinct deviations from Butler's performative gender theory and moments of imperfect fit, as previously elucidated. We might also accept that Cavendish represents class in a similarly

performative way, linking class binary with an implicit binary of skilled speech and the lack thereof, though this reading seems to move the commentary outside of the realm of class dynamics and into a larger space of general rhetorical hierarchy. How are the two, then, linked? The answer comes in J.L. Austin's philosophy-turned-literary theory book, "How to do things with words," with his discussion of the idea of performative utterances. Austin writes that performative quality belongs to speech specifically. While "this point of performative arrival, with talk of a performative concept of gender, is very different from the point of departure, Austin's conception of performative utterances" (Culler 504), it is not only a reasonable theoretical leap elucidated throughout Culler's essay but an unequivocally textual one in the dramatic renderings of *Loves Adventures*.

Culler definitively corroborates this idea that J.L. Austin's performative is linked with Butler's performative, giving us a key lens through which to look at *Loves Adventures*. Indeed, Cavendish's play centers on the idea of gender performance as a part of a larger performative mode of speech. Butler tells us to "consider gender, for instance, as *a corporeal style*, an "act," as it were, which is both intentional and performative" (902). Similarly, Austin defines the performative as when "the uttering of the words is, indeed, usually a, or even *the*, leading incident in the performance of the act, the performance of which is also the object of the utterance" (8) or, more simply, "the uttering of the sentence is, or is a part of, the doing of an action" (9). The two are then clearly intimately connected. Gender is an act authenticated through a performance of speech, and speech can have a performative quality. Furthermore, Culler locates an irony in that "for Austin the notion of the performative situates language in *concrete social contexts and functions*" (508, emphasis mine), which relates directly to Butler's

notion that the body is always an “embodying *of* possibilities both conditioned and *circumscribed by historical convention*” (902, emphasis mine). Butler argues that gender is a performance tied to social contexts and functions, and Austin argues that performative speech is similarly intertwined. Looking at Cavendish’s performative notions of the social structures of gender and class, Austin’s connection to language itself becomes important.

We have seen that Cavendish represents both gender and class as performative in relation to accepted binaries in moves that have been characterized as subversive since the publishing of *Loves Adventures* three centuries ago. In linking the ideas of Butler and Austin, Culler applies the writings of Paul De Man on the subject of the linguistic performative. De Man compares the performative state of language to its logical opposite, the constative, telling us that “the constative is the inescapable claim of language to transparency, to represent things as they are, to name things that are already there; and the performative...is the rhetorical operations, the acts of language, that undermine this claim by imposing linguistic categories, organizing the world rather than simply representing what it is” (511). This understanding of the relation of language structures is key to understanding the implicit function of Cavendish’s rhetorical representation of gender and class.

By connecting class and gender with empowered language and performance, through speech, Cavendish links the idea of linguistic hierarchy of power with the social structures she chooses to represent. The appearance of the constative is not a linguistic feature but one of social structures. Gender and class are binaries which we may view as constative, but the underlying theme of performative represents the idea that “the acts of language [can] undermine this claim [of constative structure] by imposing linguistic categories, organizing the world [around

assumed binaries] rather than simply representing what it is” (511). Therefore, what Cavendish really does when undermining gender structures and connecting class with the idea of speech rather than some physical and unshakeable rigidity is to deny social structures as parallel with constative language by applying the performative. This move not only subtly indicates an impermanence to those oppressive structures held as absolute in Cavendish’s context but suggests language and literature as agents for change.

We allow for this theoretical and philosophical move in *Loves Adventures* because “literature is perhaps more likely than philosophy to be alert to the undecidable relation between performative and constative that undermines philosophical statement” (Culler 512). In this particular piece of literature, Cavendish preemptively begins a decision about the “undecidable relation” between the linguistic structures of performative and constative and the social structures they come to represent, suggesting an original kind of subversiveness in her writing.

Paul De Man characterizes Austin’s performative utterances as “the moments that show us language at its most characteristic....that exhibit a paradoxical or self-undermining relationship between performative and constative, between what they do and what they say” (510). During the time in which Affectionata serves Lord Singularity in the play, he makes the telling statement: “I have no will.” This statement is marked with De Man’s sense of the paradoxical performative and constative in that it represents the fusion of gender performative and performative language, which I will go on to describe. The scene containing the performative statement in question opens with a recognition of performative utterance when Lord Singularity says “Affectionata, you have promised me to be ruled by me in everything so that you may not part from me,” (Part II, II.ix.1) bringing attention to a performative statement



that Affectionata has given and imbuing the scene with a sense of performative oath.

Affectionata responds, “I have my lord and will obey all your commands” (Part II, II.ix.1) which is another performative oath, saying into existence the reality of his own obedience. The final two lines of the scene are as follows:

Lord Singularity: I will perceive I have adopted a very *wilfull* boy

Affectionata: Indeed my lord *I have no will* but what doth follow you.

(Part II, II.ix.12-13)

Lord Singularity’s line is an interesting play on the word “will” by which Cavendish’s intended audience would not have been surprised. We can take as a contextual example of this double entendre Shakespeare’s sonnets 135 and 136. The word “will” was not only the first name of the poet and playwright named Shakespeare, a legal document, or an expression of intent. It also represented a slang word for sexual organs, though not in a gender-specific way. The play on words of “willful boy” might not only mean a desirous one but one who is well-endowed, opening up the doubled meanings of the word “will” for greater exploration in Affectionata’s response. When Affectionata replies that he has “no will,” the statement appears constative but is actually performative. It is the marker of his saying into existence that he has changed gender. It is for this reason that we can make this connection between performative utterances and performative gender in Cavendish’s play, elevating the rhetoric of her works to a specific place of power in relation to her represented social dynamics.

In a scene directly following this performative statement, Affectionata’s aforementioned prowess on the battlefield is first introduced. It is no coincidence that this happens right after he says “I have no will.” It is this line which marks the change which fundamentally alters

Affectionata's status and creates the real consequences of his battle success. We may be left with the question of why Affectionata says "I have no will" rather than something which would indicate that he has a will which has simply changed sex. It is because the performative nature of gender is here being separated from the biological certainty of sex, allowing language to be that which influences structures rather than a predetermined anatomy which it cannot change.

Affectionata's movement into the male homosocial structure is clear, but his eventual resistance to the idea of marriage suggested by Lord Singularity means that he is never placed back into the binary by which he could compare his "will" to its opposite. This means that we can take his statement of "I have no will," which appears to be a simple description of his desires, as a paradoxically performative utterance which creates the act that divests the character from his previous gendered existence.

This move is in fact pre-figured in the name Affectionata, which in Latin can either indicate a feminine quality or one without gender. Affectionata's success as a man points in a direction that allows us to accept the latter quality as being attached with the name. In attempting to describe a constative state, Affectionata enacts a truly performative utterance which greatly influences his relation to the structure of gender within the play. It is this performative speech act which is most closely linked with the real consequences of Lady Orphant's effective change of gender. The performative dissolution of the idea of "will" is what allows Affectionata to have real success on the battlefield typically allowed only to masculine figures both in the grander literary scheme and in Cavendish's other works. Affectionata is here altering a structure which should be entirely constative through use of the performative.

Culler writes that “for Austin, the concept for the performative, by helping us to think about an aspect of language neglected by prior philosophers, starts a process . . . of rethinking what language is and how it should be studied.” By comparison, “for Butler, it is a model for thinking about crucial social processes where a number of matters are at stake.” In linking the two concepts of performativity, Cavendish helps to answer the questions elucidated by Culler of “(1) the nature of identity and how it is produced; (2) the functioning of social norms; (3) the fundamental problem of what today we call “agency” in English: how far and under what conditions can I be a responsible subject who chooses my acts; and (4) the relationship between the individual and social change” (516).

Cavendish’s work here elucidates the relationship between the individual and social change, as she represents possibilities for the dissolution of constative and oppressive binaries of gender and class through the use of the performative, not coincidentally in her own language. Cavendish explores the production of both gendered identities and class identities through performative speech and positions them in relation to her own society’s norms. In allowing for a clear choice of performative gender where Butler finds a gray area, she begins to complicate a traditional sense of agency, lending a greater deal of agency to her heroine-turned-hero than allowed by her literary peers. Finally, and perhaps most transgressively, her elevation of performative speech in relation to performed identities serves as a commentary on the possible relationship between individuals and social change, indicating that while performative speech affects constative language, a recognition of performative identities might affect seemingly permanent social structures, such as marriage, to be discussed in Section III.

Margaret Cavendish was a prolific writer and, as a woman in seventeenth century England, crossed many boundaries which had before divided the sphere of literary men from the sphere of domestic women. Taking into account both what *Loves Adventures* says about the idea of gender performance and the power of language to affect societal structures, we can view Cavendish's performance and speech as a macrocosmic recognition of what is being argued in her play. While *Loves Adventures* is often seen as simply a re-working of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, Suzuki shows us that:

The "difference" that Cavendish makes in translating, appropriating, and revising the Shakespearean text is most obviously that of gender, [and, as I have shown, that of class] but also as importantly, one of historical situation. As a woman writer, Cavendish imagines a greater range of political possibilities for female subjects than Shakespeare did. In *Loves Adventures*. *Cavendish's conception of Affectionata indicates the difference history makes to gender relations and the political status of women.* ”  
(114, emphasis mine)

It is exactly the "conception of Affectionata" as a successfully-performed man which advances Cavendish's literature to the level of her peers. In showing the reality of gender performance, she asserts her place in a literary society, as her writing functions as the performative speech that allows her a position in the literary conversation usually reserved for men. Her literature can be taken as a male performance with the power to affect constative social structures which should relegate her to a place of silent domesticity, making an effective argument regarding "gender relations and the political status of women."

In writing as much as she did and with the veracity that she did, Cavendish “chose her own literary heritage across gender lines” (Suzuki 114). When we compare this to Butler’s conversation about whether or not there is someone who makes a choice about gender and performed identity, Cavendish seems to be working outside of Butler’s confines. Sophie Tomlinson tells us that in her plays, Cavendish “use[s]....performance as a metaphor for possibility for women” (112), indicating the connection between performative gender within *Loves Adventures* and the author’s larger performances in the form of her own literature. It is Cavendish’s speech which performs her into a man’s position, and its elevated diction which gives her the power of entering it at as a member of the upper class. Culler, and, now we can see, Cavendish, recognizes that “the shifts in this concept [of performative and constative] pose questions about how to think about the constitutive force of language, the nature of discursive events, and *literature as an act*” (503). In showing the connection of performative language with not only gender but with class, Cavendish elucidates a dynamic that permanent, constative social structures should not allow. She imbues language with the performative power to alter the constative structures which it describes, and in so doing subtly imbues her own literature with a performative power to alter the structures she describes by elevating it not only to the height of her class position as Duchess but to the height of a gendered position on par with the male literary sphere of her time. Despite the fact that she was often mocked by her peers, Cavendish projected herself into the published conversation, and it is this structural fact which marks the performatively interesting move.

In the epilogue of *Loves Adventures*, Cavendish addresses her audience with the following lines:

*Noble Spectators, you have spent this day;  
Not only for to see, but judge our Play:  
Out Authoress sayes, she thinks her Play is good,  
If not, 'tis none of her fault, for she writ  
The Acts, the Scenes, the Language, and the Wit;  
Wherefore she sayes, that she is not your Debtor;  
But you are hers, until you write a better;  
Of even terms to be she understands  
Impossible, except you clap your hands.*

She inserts herself strongly not only into a literary culture but into a culture of exchange in making her audience in her debt. That her language is the thing which has done this is clear, for she “writ/The Acts, the Scenes, the Language, and the Wit.” In using language to make her heroine into a hero and her Lady a master of rhetoric, Cavendish herself becomes not only a “Heroine, whose Pen is as glorious as [the duke’s] sword” (Joseph Glanvill, Shaver 5), but, in an important way, a hero.

## SECTION II

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### **Petrarchan/Performative**

#### Rhetorical Representations of Chastity in *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity*

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One of the many things which makes Cavendish a writer of interest is her prolific nature and experimentation with genre, working on everything from closet dramas like *Loves Adventures*, to short fiction like *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity* and *The Contract*, to be discussed in this and the following section, to natural philosophy. Cavendish's plays were never performed, but her fiction was read, published and distributed by her personally to friends and acquaintances and spread from there. While study of her drama is important in that it is the form that brings closest the idea of performative, impinging upon understandings of class and gender as previously elucidated, a further look at fiction can also be beneficial. The insertion of narratorial commentary and preference can shed light on the way in which performative identity and language functions in Cavendish's fiction and in her authorial ethos.

More specifically, the transition to romantic genre for the two novels of interest is intriguing. In a departure from the more typical passionate Early Modern romantic novel, Cavendish sets up the goal of "redirecting erotic passion to political obligation" (Kahn 547), thus using her own language to make something she deems politically useful out of a set form, not unlike the dynamic described in the first section of this study. Indeed, Cavendish's liberty with the genre has been deemed "radical" (Weitz 144). Although *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity*

draws on a number of romantic tropes with a besotted prince, a beautiful lady, and a final marriage, this section will elucidate a number of lapses from this genre, including the unexpected introduction of a firearm and a lengthy digression into a narrative that reminds of science fiction. Thinking about this use of a genre one might term constative as a moldable form serves as a microcosm for thinking about the contextual societal structures of interest in the novel itself.

Not unlike *Loves Adventures, Assaulted and Pursued Chastity* is replete with questions of gender performativity, as the protagonist, named Miseria, Affectionata, or Travellia depending on the location within the text, swings between genders a number of times, disrupting the patriarchal homosocial system. However, as the title of the novel implies, this sense of performance is used to focus on another identity which Cavendish construes as entangled with the performative, that of chastity. Indeed, Kathryn Schwarz argues that while the protagonist's "name changes with her conditions of experience, her gender with her need for evasion, her pronouns with the narrator's whim. . . ., she insists throughout on a condition of reference" as it relates to chastity (280). It is the language with which the protagonist is represented and with which she represents herself which is the primary focus of her performativity in terms of gender. Cavendish's own relative lack of involvement with organized religion and representation of chastity as in the hands of entities like a personified fate instead of a Christian God, is one of many clues that chastity is here viewed through a lens of social construction rather than concrete religious imperative.

Although Cavendish was notably "not exempt from social and historical pressures to promote virtue and castigate vice in her writings" (Weitz 145), the idea of *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity* as simple conduct manual leaves much to be desired. To simplify the novel to



the point of moralizing story would be to ignore a number of the more subtle re-workings of cultural rhetorical dynamics throughout the text. The protagonist breaks the mold of the chaste maid trope in a variety of ways, from her refusal to leave her virtue in the hands of a higher power to her crossing of nearly every societally drawn line through her more literal cross-dressing. The intriguing subversiveness of the figure of Travellia pushes us to look closer at this novel as saying something about the language surrounding the pursuit of chastity rather than a reiteration of its social and ethical importance. The real work of the novel comes in the negotiations of the rhetorical approaches to chastity and the implications of a possible powerful female performance of its protection.

Weitz argues that the choice of chastity as subject matter is not only a moralization but a subject that “impinges crucially on Cavendish’s authorial ethos” (146). Instead of purely reproducing a cultural rhetoric, Cavendish’s novel “negotiate[s] with the representations and ideological encodings that [she] had received from male writers” (146). These ideological encodings come in the form of an accepted rhetoric and representation of the virtue of chastity and its assault, from the oxymoronic Petrarchan rhetorical paradigm to the mislabelling of chastity as religious imperative rather than social construct. The rhetorical ripples of Petrarch, a fourteenth century Italian poet, are rampant in Early Modern literature, as his *Canzoniere* “is said to have fixed for subsequent generations a set of poetic and descriptive norms for the love lyric” (Freccero 20). This authoritative Petrarchan influence set up a number of dynamics which Cavendish’s predecessors reproduced and with which she herself contended. Weitz locates the first issue, this negotiation of Petrarchan ideals with cultural sensibilities, in Cavendish’s representation of women’s innocence at odds with the “traditionally male Petrarchan rhetoric that

inherently blames women for seducing men into desiring them (151). For Weitz, Cavendish's central exploration of the Petrarchan rhetorical style comes in the representation of the conflict between a society that values virtue and female innocence and yet accepts a rhetorical paradigm which represents women as culpable for men's desire of them and incapable of defending themselves against it.

While Weitz's recognition of the novel's work in representing the flaws of this Petrarchan paradox is an important intervention, the impetus Weitz gives for looking at the negotiation of Petrarchan dynamics can be refined to a more specific examination. Looking closer, we see that Cavendish's specific rhetorical choices in *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity* represent competing rhetorical forms at work in the protection of chastity, rather than a flawed reproduction of solely the dominant Petrarchan one. In the place of an ineffectual and contradictory rhetorical norm, Cavendish posits the protective possibilities for women of an empowered Austinian performative language. Furthermore, the reiteration of the rhetorically performative nature of gender elucidated in *Loves Adventures* and the representation of an altered marital structure at the novel's close underpin the conceivable effects of this powerful lingual contention for women.

### **Understanding Petrarchan and Persuasive Modes**

In discussing the issue of rhetorical representation, it is first necessary to define exactly what is meant by the idea of Petrarchan rhetoric and the ideology of virtue it represents. The "general rule" of understanding Petrarchan tendencies is the recognition of an "essentially masculine tradition....featur[ing] a [male] Lover....[that] will speak in the first person of his

amorous condition...[to] a Lady who constitutes the object of his desire” (Rigolot, Freccero 21). This dynamic was rather ubiquitous by Cavendish’s time and she is not the first to have represented it satirically, as Weitz notes [6]. While an understanding of this formation in the time and in Cavendish’s work particularly is decidedly important, the use of a finer lens on the implications of Petrarchan style opens a line of exploration which is our primary focus.

Richard Roberts’ essay on Petrarch in *The Recovery of Rhetoric* provides the foundation for this aforementioned lens, explaining the nature of the connection between virtue and rhetoric found in Petrarch. He elucidates the idea that Petrarchan structures rely on the importance of the rhetorically persuasive in engendering virtue, citing the everyday occurrences in which people are “suddenly turned from a most wicked way of life to the greatest modesty through the spoken words of others!” (37). Petrarchan rhetoric then refuses a distinct difference between words and actions and instead dissolves this dichotomy into the idea that words evoke virtuous action through elevated persuasion. While the Petrarchan approach implies that simply behaving and speaking virtuously is an impetus for further virtuous behavior, it relies on the powerful effects of persuasion in order to create virtuous behavior, chastity for instance. There is a reliance on the efficacy of beautiful persuasive language to create real effects on those who would be virtuous. However, in the context of the male Lover in conversation about his female object rather than with it, the efficacy of persuasion is perhaps doomed to failure.

I contend that while Cavendish does represent the conflict between this Petrarchan persuasive and the opposing societal view that virtue comes by virtuous example, Cavendish deliberately portrays a failed Petrarchan persuasive in order to make room for a more direct form of rhetoric, closer to the form of J.L. Austin’s performative language introduced in the previous

section. In *Loves Adventures*, Cavendish's interest in the relation of rhetoric to societal structure is clear, and her fiction further explores the possibilities inherent in these relations.

Recall that Austin defines the performative such that "the uttering of the words is, indeed, usually a, or even *the*, leading incident in the performance of the act, the performance of which is also the object of the utterance" (8) or "the uttering of the sentence is, or is a part of, the doing of an action" (9). Essentially, the idea of the performative eliminates the dichotomy between rhetoric and action, avoiding the language of persuasion in favor of a more direct mode of literally saying something into existence. Petrarchan persuasion relies on the rhetorical exchange between two people in which one has to persuade the other to virtue, often problematic when chastity is the virtue at stake and when, supposedly, only one person has access to powerful speech. Austin's performative removes this reliance by connecting words with the action desired by that same statement. While the moments in the text which place rhetorical forms in contention do not always entirely reach the state of Austin's definition of performative, the idea of the performative as opposed to the persuasive is pervasive in this novel. There is a performative connection between direct speech and action in which the gap between words and action is closed. These imaginations lend real power to the woman subject of Cavendish's novel to protect her own chastity and, furthermore, to find a decidedly empowered performative space.

### **Chastity Protected: Performative Acts**

The evaluation of competing rhetorical forms requires us to look more closely at specific textual examples of dialogue and narrative voice. Interestingly, the moments at which these forms are in flux often coincide with the recurring moments of a more literal flux between life

and death in the plot. Throughout the text, we are continually presented with the scene of one character in the liminal space between life and death, from near-mortally wounded, to poisoned, to mysteriously yet deathly ill. It is at these moments in which a shift from one literal state to another is at hand presents the best snapshots of shifting states of speech in relation to chastity. While there are a number of other examples of powerful female speech and speech dynamics throughout the novel, the more literal dynamic represented in these life and death scenes seems appropriately metaphorical for the representation of the rhetorical dynamics being explored.

The opening up and differentiation between these two rhetorical forms, Petrarchan persuasive and Austinian performative, in relation to chastity in the novel comes in the initial interactions between the chaste maiden, in this moment Miseria, and the Prince who would compromise her chastity. While these dynamics expand throughout the novel as these characters travel and come in and out of contact with each other, their initial interactions provide key insights into what Cavendish does in relating different rhetorical forms to the protection of chastity.

The first example comes in the introductory pages of the text, when, upon seeing Miseria, the Prince is overcome with a dishonorable lust. Miseria's initial attempt to protect her chastity comes in the form of a Petrarchan persuasion, as she begs the Prince to "show [himself] a master of passion, a king of clemency, a god of pity and compassion, and prove not [himself] a beast to appetite, a tyrant to innocence, a devil to chastity virtue and piety" (52). This elevated language in defense of chaste relations reminds readers of the culturally relevant narrative poem, Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece*, in which, to no avail, Lucrece employs a similar form of persuasive language, one which we might codify as Petrarchan, in order to dissuade her rapist.

The reiteration of this cultural trope reminds of the failure of the ideal Petrarchan persuasive in the protection of chastity in Lucrece's case. Furthermore, the implication that Miseria lacks the capability to persuade to virtue is cemented when the Prince responds to her protestations that "no rhetoric could alter his affections" (52). His use of the word "rhetoric" is unsubtle on Cavendish's part. Miseria's persuasions are an almost hyperbolic re-representation of Lucrece's Petrarchan lamentations, and the Prince explicitly declares their ineffectiveness. Unexpectedly, Miseria's response to this is to remove a pistol she had earlier concealed and point it at the Prince, elevating her language once again and claiming that "whilst [she] lives [she] will live in honour, or when [she] kill[s] or be killed [she] will kill or die for security." (52). The introduction of a pistol into this scene of romantic passion in a supposed romantic novel is unexpected for the time, marking an obvious break from the accepted cultural norm of womanly behavior.

Miseria makes it clear that life hangs in the balance of these interactions, intensifying the stakes of the scene and placing it in a liminal context ripe for changing rhetorical form, even as she clings to a Petrarchan persuasion for virtue. Her words, however, still lack efficacy in that the Prince believes that they "might be more than her intentions" (53) and therefore discredits the possibility of any action in connection with her threats. As he comes toward her again, Miseria makes one final plea for the virtue of virgins and then "*in the midst of these words* shot him" (53), blurring the action and words into one clause. This is a subversive moment for a number of reasons, perhaps most obviously in that the use of a firearm represents a complete break from the romantic tradition of the time. The more important thing to notice, however, is that in the wake of a failed Petrarchan persuasion, Cavendish closes the gap between words and action in order to

preserve chastity. Herein is the first example of the efficacy of the performative: Miseria makes a statement about the virtue of virginity while simultaneously taking the direct action of protecting that virginity. The performative nature of this moment is subtle in that while it is not her speech which directly saves her, Austin might recognize this shift as a speech that is the “leading utterance of the performance of the act” and therefore characteristically performative. While her words are an abstract discussion of chastity, her actions are in direct protection of her person.

The protection of Miseria’s virtue is short-lived, however, and this same dynamic is echoed less than ten pages later in the novel when the Prince again approaches Miseria in the hopes of satisfying his lust. This time, Cavendish reiterates the failure of the accepted Petrarchan rhetoric in favor of a more literal performative. In response to the Prince’s advances, Miseria once again cites the importance of “virtue, innocence, . . . religion” in the name of the protection of her chastity. Again, her language is overpowered by the Prince’s affection, “grow[n] to an intemperate heat” (59). Miseria’s reproduction of the Petrarchan persuasive meets again with failure, and this time, instead of pulling out a pistol, the chaste maiden produces a vial of poison and sets it in her mouth, threatening to break it and bring about her own death if the Prince will not let her be. Cavendish continues to show the inefficacy of Miseria’s language relative to the Prince as he “would not believe her” and again approaches (60). It is in this moment that Miseria is forced to break the vial “betwixt her teeth” and fall to the floor rather than be raped by the Prince. While in this instance no actual speech has saved Miseria, there is again a move toward the direct connection of action and speech in a performative way in that it is quite distinctly Miseria’s mouth which saves her from ravishment. When the Lucrece-like appeals to moral

values in the Petrarchan style fail to engender virtue, the lady must instead move to distinct actions to protect her chastity.

This literal representation of the workings of a woman's mouth to perform her chastity's preservation is perhaps too subtle except for its divergence from the Lucretian trope and its effect on the power dynamics of speech in the pages directly following. To address the former, it is important to recognize that, despite Miseria's suicidal move of protection, she is allowed to live and continue in the text, whereas Lucrece's suicide occurs after she has been successfully raped and effectively removes her voice from the text. Lucrece's dagger is not connected to the action of the mouth in the same vein as Miseria's poison, and it is in this subtle difference that Cavendish alters the claims being made.

To address the latter, Miseria is healed by a "lady having skill in physic" (60), and Cavendish thereby brings in a representation of a culturally accepted form of female efficacy. Here again life hangs in the balance as Miseria is "almost cut off all hopes of keeping...life" (60). In this transitional moment we are presented with the Prince ineffectively lamenting her would-be loss, "tearing his hair, beating his breast, cursing himself, praying and imploring his pardon and her forgiveness," exhibiting outward weakness in language and behavior. Cavendish makes it clear that Miseria does not respond to him in her illness and, upon recovery finally takes the action necessary to remove herself from the context in which her chastity is in peril. Miseria makes another transgressive move in dressing herself as a man and escaping the house in which she had been confined, cutting off the Prince's access. In some sense, this first move toward an eventual transition away from a woman's identity is another direct action in protection of her chastity. Chastity as a virtue is entirely connected with a woman's identity, and Miseria here



begins to remove that possibility. The idea of taking direct action with words is further echoed in Miseria penning two letters before leaving, stowing away on a ship. She therein connects her action of protection with her own language.

### **Chastity Protected: Performative Gender**

Interestingly, when Miseria has removed herself from the context of the bawd's house in which, as the title suggests, her chastity is assaulted, her persuasive language begins to gain efficacy and the nature of the performative gains even greater ground in the protection of chastity. This is perhaps due to the changing stakes surrounding her language in the wake of the previous scenes, but is more likely a commentary on how a persuasive rhetoric gains functionality in a homosocial male setting. Cavendish's protagonist is now dressed in men's garb. She is not yet described with male pronouns, but the transitional moment marks the transition in the effectiveness of her speech. It is perhaps this fact of the lack of endangered virtue that allows for the actual functionality of the Petrarchan paradigm. Travellia, as she is now called, is able to move the ship master "to pity" with her words as she begs her passage, showing the first instance of her effective employment of persuasive rhetoric. Petrarchan persuasion has proved ineffective against an assault to chastity, but persuasive language between two supposed men has a greater force.

More importantly, there is again almost immediately a moment of life and death, as the master becomes ill and Travellia is moved to the position of caring for him. This is the moment when the reader sees the first of a series of shifts in gendered pronouns describing Travellia which make up one of the most intriguing dynamics in the novel: "After some weeks, the master

fell very sick; in which sickness *she* was so industrious to recover his health by *her* diligent attendance and care, as begot such affection in the old man, that he adopted *him* his son” (61, emphasis added). It is in this moment that we get the first instance of what I would like to term the narratorial performative. Separate from her actual description of the act of cross-dressing, Cavendish here rhetorically alters the proverbial playing field in that she not only changes Travellia’s representation from a “she” to a “he” but also the stakes of her chastity. It is a direct narratorial choice to alter Travellia’s pronoun representation in the text. Travellia’s chastity is no longer in danger when “her” becomes “him” and in this form he is able to travel with the ship’s captain who becomes her father and exhibit powerful rhetoric in a number of contexts. Furthermore, it is important to notice that the transition to an authenticated gender performance through the text occurs the moment Travellia is accepted into a homosocial societal structure, being actually adopted as a son as opposed to simply believed as a boy.

It is at this point in the novel when Cavendish makes her greatest departure from the romantic genre on which the introductory section draws. Now that Travellia is a man without endangered chastity, Cavendish turns to an adventurous narrative which serves to underpin the importance of lingual power. However, this section is sprinkled with subtle reminders of the previous scenes of would-be rape, connecting the idea of rhetorical dominance and religious control back to the idea of chastity while representing an entirely male homosocial section within the larger work.

Travellia and his new father find themselves thrown into a narrative resembling scientific fiction when they are held hostage on an island peopled by strange humanoid creatures, with skin tones and hair of varying bright hues, strange language and religious beliefs, and an alien system

of cannibalistic agriculture. Travellia and his father soon discover that they are going to be sacrificed to the gods of these creatures, the father realizing that “there is no way to escape, unless [they] had their language and could make them believe we came from the gods” (69). The father here underlines the importance of language to affect change on a situation in which life is at risk. In response to this assertion, Travellia “[gets] in that twelve month their language, so perfect as he understood, and could speak most of it, in which time he understood all that I have delivered to the reader” (70). This moment of narrative interjection is rare, as it occurs only twice in the entire text. Cavendish reminds that the narrator is the deliverer of the reality of the text in the same moment in which she shows Travellia’s rhetorical ability, subtly connecting the two.

While there is no chastity directly at stake in this scene, Cavendish shows a permutation of the scene in which we did see it threatened to underpin the arguments being made. When the captured men discover the nature of their would-be sacrifice, they begin to make preparations. The father makes two things “like pistols” using the few materials at his disposal, recalling the pistol the chaste maiden is able to pull on the Prince. The son, Travellia, makes and wears “a garment of grass which was like to green silk” and “a garland of flowers on his head,” evoking a feminine appearance that reminds of the maiden at the opening of the novel. The sacrifices are brought to the king and the crowd of creatures, seeing that Travellia appeared “most beautiful,” make “great shouts and noises of joy” (71). The description of Travellia as “beautiful” even as he is still represented with male pronouns brings the connection of this scene with its predecessor further into focus. The “great shouts” and “noises of joy” of the crowd remind us of an earlier stage in which language was ineffective, harkening back to Miseria’s language which the Prince would not understand.

However, it is at this moment that Travellia calls out to them “in their own language, at which they grew mute with wonder” (71). There is here a juxtaposition of powerful language to relative muteness which is familiar to those having read the previous scene. Here begins the first of many speeches set aside in italics, entitled “The Speech” that sprinkle the rest of the text. At the conclusion of this speech, condemning the people for attempting to sacrifice their God’s messengers “which come to bring you life,” Travellia shoots “off his pistol into the breast of the chief priest, wherewith he straight fell down dead” (71). The connection of words with unexpected action is clear. The implications of this moment are vast, moving past simply reminding of the earlier scene and impinging on the understanding of the efficacy of language between men and women even as only men are here represented. Cavendish has shown chastity as a social construct concealed in religious virtue - the symbolism of Travellia’s shooting the priest representing the religion that would have him sacrificed is clear. Furthermore, the priest dies immediately from his gun wound, while the Prince miraculously recovers. While the dynamic of competing rhetoric, performative connection of action with words, and diversion from the expected is repeated, there is an elevated sense of efficacy. This can be attributed to the entirely homosocial setting in which Travellia now finds himself - there is no chastity at stake, and this not a struggle between men and women. This fantastic island with a fantastic society is therefore figured as some sort of desirable ideal recognizable in its relative unattainability. Cavendish hints at both a solution to the current women’s problem of perilous chastity and a homosocial ideal in which language about the virtue could be exchanged on a plane of equality.

However, Cavendish’s novel is not a representation of Travellia’s climb to a place of powerful rhetoric, but rather a negotiation of competing ideological and rhetorical forms, and so

Travellia's rhetorical state fluctuates again after escaping the island with the introduction of pirates and the reintroduction of the Prince. Travellia and his father are overcome by pirates and Travellia is put in the position of begging for his father's life. With tears in his eyes, Travellia is pushed into the Petrarchan persuasive mode, "begging" ineffectively, acknowledging that "no pity can move [their] hearts" (81). Travellia is powerless in this situation in which he has been captured by men, and his persuasions are ineffective. Unsurprisingly, just as Travellia is again beginning to look a bit like Lucrece, the Prince, mysteriously in command of the pirates, enters the scene. Just as the lives of Travellia and his adoptive father are in flux in this moment, the rhetorical contention is made clear with the Prince's opening line of "may you never part from that you most do love" (81), dissipating the fear of the father's death. This statement is purely performative in that the Prince is able to say the man's rescue into existence. This seems a suggestion that the performative is easily accessible to men, not a last-minute requirement of a life-or-death situation. Within the very same sentence, Cavendish gives us another pronoun change, the Prince's control of the performative plane causing the narratorial performative to lose ground and shifting the status of Travellia's chastity: "looking up to view that man, from whom *his* obligation came, no sooner saw his face, but terror struck *his* heart, and trembling seized *her* limbs, as if *she* had seen some hideous and prodigious things." (81, emphasis added). The loss of the protection of pronoun means that Travellia's chastity is once again at stake, and it is only a matter of a page before the Prince discovers her and again attempts to enforce his lust upon her.

The final moment of fluctuation I would like to explore in terms of rhetorical contention comes later in the text when Travellia again finds herself a "him" in Cavendish's narrative. As

Travellia swordfights with the Prince, however, the power of the narratorial performative falters in that despite the performative statement of Travellia's gender as male, the situational reality of his inexperience, "having no skill in the art and use of the sword, nor strength of the assault" (99) overpowers the performative, and Travellia is wounded. In due form, the same sentence brings the final return to the original gender pronoun, as the Prince "viewing *his* face straight knew *her*" (100). The idea of rhetorical struggle is sealed into this scene when Cavendish notes that, due to her wounds, Travellia "could not speak" (100), and therefore loses the rhetorical power she had gained by previous performatives.

Yet, Travellia's earlier negotiation from the Petrarchan persuasive to the performative and the power afforded to her by the narratorial performative gender switch leave marks of rhetorical power on her speech in the reconciliation of the two. Upon recovery, Travellia, still dressed as a man, is able to give a series of speeches and effective commands to her army. Even when she later reveals herself as a woman, she is greeted with the response "Heaven bless you, of what sex soever you be" (115) and allowed to continue to speak "in the same place" (115) as when she was thought of as a man. The power of the performative has been lost a bit in this speech, however, as Travellia admits that her words "are only words, not acts" (116) and, more literally, in that she then agrees to marry the Prince and therefore succumb to his pursuit of her chastity. In placing the two rhetorical forms in contention throughout the novel, Cavendish is able to present a more empowered female speech at the end of Travellia's travels.

### **Chastity Protected: In Conclusion**

As shown in Section I, this empowered female rhetoric is one imbued with a performative capacity to alter the constative social structures it inhabits at the end of the novel. Unlike *Loves Adventures*, *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity* ends in a certain marriage. While Cavendish has previously chosen to represent marriage as untenable, with her dramatic character switching through the liminal spaces of gender, the Prince pursuing Travellia succeeds in his goal, gaining a wife and her codified chastity. There is something somewhat insidious, however, about the way in which this marriage is represented and the way in which it acts as a final resolution, pointing toward the subversive possibilities of altered marital relations to be discussed in the final section.

After a series of battles between the King of Amors, for whom the Prince fights, and the Queen of Amity, for whom Travellia fights, there is resolution through marriage. Upon discovering Travellia's true sex, the Queen discontinues her love for him/her and agrees to marry the King, the two of them ruling over the Kingdom of Amors. The Prince is at long last betrothed to Travellia and named Viceroy of the Kingdom of Amity. The soldiers, having fought under Travellia, are unhappy with this arrangement and, in order to "pacify them," Travellia is named Viceregent to the Prince's Viceroy.

In typical Early Modern fashion, a comparison is made between the marital state and the state of the government, as patriarchal marriage was often set up as a microcosmic representation of the monarchic macrocosm. However, the parallel usually drawn, that of monarch to husband and kingdom to wife, is inverted. The Prince tells his Viceregent wife that "she should also govern him," and her response is "that he should govern her, and that she would govern the kingdom" (116). The line that one would usually trace between gender relations and government

relations is therefore greatly confused. While there is still a sense of male power of Travellia and an establishment of marriage roles, the wife is clearly given a degree of power as the primary governor of the Kingdom of Amity, the one actually desired by the populus, no less. While there is still a husband that governs a wife, it is the wife that governs the kingdom, indicating that something is structurally amiss.

This conclusion advances that questioning of the appropriate power dynamic of marriage in *Loves Adventures* one step further. At the conclusion of Travellia's narrative in which empowered performative language has been key, Cavendish presents a marital resolution, a societal surety, that skews the power balance even as the gender placement is resolved. It is this interest in the changing power dynamic around the solidifying marriage, specifically with the interest in its political connection, that is expanded upon in Cavendish's shorter novella, *The Contract*, to be discussed in Section III. Indeed, it is with this ending of *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity* that Cavendish re-opens through language the possibility of the connection between a political contract and a marital one, making room a for a more egalitarian notion of marriage contract.



### SECTION III

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#### “She Is My Wife”

#### The Language of Contract in Margaret Cavendish’s *The Contract*

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Of Cavendish’s fiction, *The Contract* is often disregarded as an inconsequential novella in comparison to the recently much-discussed *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity* and the natural philosophy of *The World’s Olio*. It is this short fiction, however, which brings sharply into focus a number of the dynamics with which Cavendish toyed, as highlighted in earlier sections of the present study. *The Contract* brings together plot elements from both of the previous works discussed, yet adds in elements of political allegory that lend a contextual importance to the plot at hand, specifically renegotiating the relationship of the marriage contract to political and legal obligation and positioning women as empowered agents rather than passive subjects.

While *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity* opens the connection between monarchy and marriage, *The Contract* manipulates this political parallel to consider another possibility: that the inherently unequal marriage contract look more like a legal contract, or one requiring two equal agents. In a re-negotiation of a discarded Parliamentarian argument for political obligation, Cavendish posits the marriage contract as a useful social tool for a woman as agent rather than an oppressive one. Our focus in *The Contract*, then, is the way in which Cavendish employs a number of dynamics to move away from the “silent image of woman still tied to her place as

bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning” (Enterline 36). Namely, dynamics in *The Contract* build upon those discussed in earlier sections through (1) the emptying of homosocial relations, (2) the self-creation of female subject as spectacle and subsequent closing of the gap between agent and subject, (3) reversal in the form of the effective silencing of the male agents in favor of a rhetorical power of the female agent, and (4) the positioning of the romantic genre as frame narrative for contractual agreement.

To understand the primary subversiveness of Cavendish’s *The Contract*, it is important to recognize its historical context in a larger conversation about contract - political, marital, and legal - in the time. Victoria Kahn writes that “in...early political thought, the rise of theories of contractual obligation has always played an important role” (524). Privy to the Royalist “intellectual inner circle, Cavendish was exposed to a number of these theories, and even cites her interactions with Hobbes as impetus for thinking about her own contractual treatise. The result, however, departs a great deal from contractual thinkers she read. Kahn describes the contractual theory of Hobbes and Locke as that “in which contract is imagined as a social and political agreement between equal parties to set up a sovereign” (526). As this section will show, Cavendish re-thinks the political possibility of equal parties in relation to an entirely separate contract, that of marriage.

Reviewing the individual experience as having possible implications on a greater societal structures as *The Contract* does was in keeping with a theoretical logic typical of the Early Modern era. In the book *Queer/Early/Modern*, Carla Freccero writes that “in the Early Modern period...the individual was seen as constituted by and in relation to - even the effect of - a pre-existing order” (2). Freccero here touches on the notion of metaphorical structural

connections typifying the time. Early Modern writers and thinkers often drew parallels between the internal governing structure of the individual, to the governing structure of household, to the structure of government itself. While an individual might have a higher level of thinking governing his or her passions, a household comprised a husband governing a wife, and England a monarch governing a people.

This Early Modern connection of marriage to monarchy, specifically, was often played upon in the contractual political argument for the preservation of monarchy, especially in its precarious state during the mid-seventeenth century. In positing the allegorical connection between the husband-wife relationship and the monarch-people relationship, Royalists posited a “model of contract that preserved an older sense of status and natural hierarchy while simultaneously addressing contemporary arguments for the voluntary nature of political obligation” ( Kahn 531). Royalists attempted to make the argument that the consent of the people to be governed by the monarch was entirely connected to the consent of a wife to be governed by a husband. However, this argument quickly proved flawed. In the reality of seventeenth-century England, the governmental system of one-time consent by a people to be governed directly by a monarch did not map onto the societal structure of marriage.

Karen Newman’s essay, *Unruly Women and Structures of Exchange in The Merchant of Venice* provides the key to this mis-mapping: the fact that the Early Modern marital system centered around exchange rather than consent. Newman’s essay is useful in this instance in that it gives an insightful explanation of the homosocial exchange system functioning in Renaissance England, specifically in reference to the exchange of commodified women. She posits marriage as the most fundamental means of “establish[ing] social bonds,” a contract that is “exercised by

and forged between and among men by means of the exchange of women” (21). The prize of winning a woman, then, is securing a male bond rather than forming a relationship between sexes. Essentially, the commodification of women and their exchange is critical to male homosocial relational structures. Indeed, the “seeming centrality of the woman as desired object is a mystification: she is a pseudo-center, a prize the winning of which, instead of forging a male/female relation, serves rather to secure male bonds” (21). Furthermore, by entering into a marriage contract, the woman became legally one with her husband, rather than simply legally bound, effectively eliminating her legal status and metaphorical voice. This is an unsatisfying structure of obligation for a people questioning the legitimacy of a monarchic government in that it implies the elimination of a voice upon validation. While a political allegory posits a body with the ability to consent to be governed, the commodified woman of homosocial exchange was barred from the agency of consent and effectively silenced.

It is for this reason that “parliamentarians eventually abandoned the metaphor of the marriage contract altogether, correctly perceiving that it was deleterious to their argument for contractual obligation predicated not only on consent but also on equality” (Kahn 533). In attempting to appeal to male subjects on a sense of contractual obligation, Royalists needed to argue for a look at political contract through a legal lens rather than a marital one. Corbin describes this legal kind of contract as one that “requires that there be a meeting of the minds” or “an agreement of intention, properly expressed” (156-7). In the homosocial structure of marriage described by Newman, women were incapable of the proper expression of intent this kind of contract necessitates. This misalignment of structures caused the abandonment of the allegory of marriage contract to government by political minds of the time.

As a woman who spent years both in the royal court as a lady-in-waiting and in exile as a Royalist's wife, these questions are clearly ones with which she would have toyed. Yet, her own novel diverges greatly from this overarching historical narrative of contract theory. Cavendish revives the notion of a political contract connected to a marital one, exploring an iteration of the egalitarian marriage the parallel requires. While underlying Royalist sentiments are arguable in all of Cavendish's work given her historical context, *The Contract* is not another Royalist treatise on political obligation as we might expect, but a proto-feminist re-working of the idea of the translation of contractual obligation from the macrocosm to the microcosm.

In a discussion of Cavendish's contextual relation to marriage, it is important to consider the aspects of the author's own marriage contract and the ensuing relationship. The Newcastle marriage was a peculiar one for the time, as writers have recognized the Duke's "accomplishments in authorship" as entirely connected to "the encouragement of authorship" as regards his wife (Perry 4). Despite her own relatively noble lineage, the maiden Margaret Lucas' marriage to a Duke has been recognized as "giv[ing] her access to a heroic line of great men" which put her in a position to become a published author (Lilley 19). The two regularly commented on and edited each others' works, and the Duke's biography was for many years Cavendish's most famous publication. She regularly credited him with additions of sonnets to the ends of her plays, and he regularly credited her support and advice in his prefaces. The marriage was thus highly socially advantageous for Margaret yet in some ways anachronistically egalitarian, given its seventeenth century context. It is no wonder that *The Contract's* argument for an altered view of marital contract as a force for Early Modern gender equality traces on the author's autobiography.

Moving to *The Contract*'s refiguration of a marriage contract as metaphorically translatable into a political or legal contract, the question must be answered of how the text represents the idea of a woman becoming an agent rather than passive subject, therefore able to enter into a contract as an equal. Again, for Cavendish, the answer comes in the disintegration and perversion of the underlying homosocial structure, the self-production of woman as spectacle, the relative silencing of the male agent, the emphasis on the performative requirement of language, and attention given to the requirements of the romantic genre.

The first structural change presented is the perversion and dissolving of the initial homosocial structure. The triangular structure described by Newman which interferes with the parallel between political and marriage contract is removed, allowing for a straight line to be drawn between the two consenting entities, husband and wife, rather than between two men. In a move to create this kind of space, the text of *The Contract* opens as follows:

A noble gentleman that had been married many years, but his wife being barren, did bear him not children; at last she died, and his friends did advise him to marry again, because his brother's children were dead, and his wife was likely to have no more: so he took to wife a virtuous young Lady, and after one year she conceived with child, and great joy there was of all sides: but in her child-bed she died, leaving only one daughter to her sorrowful husband, who in a short time, oppressed with melancholy, died, and left his young daughter, who was not a year old, to the care and breeding of his brother, and withal left her a great estate, for he was very rich" (3).

This opening represents an exaggerated emptying out of homosocial marriage possibilities even in the introduction of the text. There is a failure of the continuance of the required structure by way of a barren wife, a removal of the possibility of continuation with the brother's children

being dead, and the meager fix of one female child, whose ability to create a bond between the father and any heir is eliminated with the father's death and the transition of her care as potential commodity to the childless brother. Essentially, Cavendish opens with a long, run on breath of emptying out the homosocial possibilities and establishing a misshapen foundation of inheritance. We are told that a marriage contract is formed between this daughter and a Duke, but he ignored the contract and marries another after his own father's death. These events position our heroine, the young daughter to which the opening refers, in a unique place. As she no longer fits into the space of potentially traded woman, a gift to form a bond between men, she has the ability to make decisions outside of this structure, setting up the narrative for an external commentary.

The uncle's inability to use his niece in the formation of a bond is highlighted with his improper creation of an invalid marriage contract for his niece, to the Viceroy. Cavendish presents a subplot in which "Against the wishes of his niece, the uncle verbally accepts the Viceroy's proposal of marriage, while the Duke and the still unnamed young lady exchange letters declaring their love" (Lilley xix). This sets up a certain hierarchy between the male and female rhetorical agreements in terms of marriage. The failure of the usual structure is highlighted in that "in trying to persuade his niece to marry the Viceroy, the uncle resorts to persuasion rather than coercion" (Kahn 550). The usual language is ignored and transmuted into something that affords the heroine some power in its requirement of her consent. Even when the uncle argues for his niece's dismissal of her first marriage contract in favor of the Viceroy, he advises her "not to use rhetoric against [her]self, and overthrow a good fortune in refusing such a husband as shall advance [her] place about that false Dukes' Duchess." This admits her

rhetorical power to influence the contract. The niece's decision to engage in communication through letters with her chosen prospective husband underlines her rhetorical dominance in relation to her uncle's regarding marriage, specifically.

As previously stated, the Early Modern marriage contract silenced a woman as she became a legal non-entity upon the completion of the contract. Cavendish inverts this dynamic however, representing the effective silencing of the husband figure, the male agent in the would-be marriage, in this case the Duke. When the lady presents herself at a mask, her beauty overwhelms the Duke, and Cavendish describes him as "not recovered as yet from love's shaking fit" and therefore unable to ask the lady to dance (16). The Duke is silenced into an inability to stake any sort of claim on the lady he desires, made even more clear when Cavendish tells us that "all the while the Duke stood as a statue, only his eyes were fixed upon her, nor had he *power to speak*" (17, emphasis mine). There is an obvious emphasis on his lack of speech, inverting the usual power dynamic of the marriage contract. When the Duke learns the identity of the beautiful lady as none other than she whom he had previously spurned, he decides to write her a letter, asking "pray let your charity give me a line or two of *your own writing*, though they strangle me with death, then will my soul lie quiet in the grave, because I died *by your hand*" (23, emphasis mine). There is a further privileging of her words over his, inverting the usual power relationship we would expect. Her words, rather than being something to be ignored or contractually eliminated, have the power to change the balance between life and death.

From historical descriptions of her highly performative style of dress and presentation, it is known that "Cavendish self-consciously produced herself as a fantastic and singular woman" (Lilley xvii), making a point of creating herself as a spectacle and taking ownership of her



performative position. So it follows that in her novella, the heroine's removal from the silencing triangular relationship imposed by homosocial marriage contract comes with attention given to a self-created performative entity. Cavendish gives the heroine agency over her own identification, and allows her to live entirely within a performative space of her own creation. She is the designator of herself as spectacle and in fact outwardly rejects the Petrarchan Blazon which would hold her objectified beauty in a place of primary importance. Lilley remarks that, in *The Contract*, "clearly Margaret Cavendish was rewriting the narrative of her own history as romance, focusing her main attention and admiration on the advantageous production of woman as spectacle." Therefore, the niece "effortlessly and instantaneously seduces all who encounter her, and is able to profit by the recognition of her own status as fetish" (xvii). The niece creates herself as a spectacle instead of being used by an outside entity. Existing in the homosocially emptied space described above, the niece is able to create her own identity and take ownership over her presentation, designing her own clothes for the masks she attends. She is "thus partly the orchestrator of, and commentator on, her own spectacular singularity" (xvi). The niece comments on her own position as performing her identity through clothes when she tells her uncle that she "may be taken notice of for [her] clothes, and so be deceived, thinking it was for [her] person" (11). She here indicates the false dichotomy between the identity she is performing and some sort of authentic self, giving herself a power over herself as subject and spectacle and moving into the space of agent.

Also, the heroine exists outside of having a name for the majority of the text. She is somehow placeless in society yet controls her own space. Even when she is given a name, Delitia, in the moment of the Duke's confirmation of her status as his wife, it is a placeholder for

her would-be deletion by the contract. It still rejects any identity given to her that might infringe upon her autonomy, allowing her to continue in a liminal state and thus affording her agency. Furthermore, in gaining an identity in the moment of confirmed marriage, she is repositioning herself in the power structure relating to the marriage contract. While in the usual structure her marriage would mean her effective elimination, marriage here symbolizes the introduction of a proper signifier. She is now the arbiter of the contract rather than merely the subject.

Moving outward, it is important to recognize language of a performative nature permeates the text in more subtle ways, creating a backdrop of performative language, recalling Cavendish's other work, to set up language as contextually powerful. For example, the words of both men and women are given a certain degree of violent power, with descriptions like "his words were like so many daggers" (28) and "the ladies...shooting forth words like bullets" (18). Furthermore, in a fight scene between the Duke and the Viceroy, the Duke promises that he will beat the Viceroy with one hand, and, when this does indeed happen later in the scene, the Viceroy tells him that he is "a just performer of [his] word" (27). This recognition makes the connection between intent and action, demonstrating that words can be performative, especially as the context of the fight centers around he who has the just claim to the lady as wife.

Moving inward, there is also an insistence on performative language in relation to marriage. For example, when the niece discovers that she has been spurned by the man to whom she was betrothed, she tells her uncle "I mourn like a young widow, for I have lost my husband" (12). Despite the lack of an actual marriage, she performs the role of wife in her mourning, acting herself into a position likened to marriage through her own agency. More important, however, is the performative statement uttered by the Duke which confirms his recognition of his

betrothal and marriage. It is his recognition and performative statement that finally validates the initial contract he ignored at the opening of the text when he says to the Viceroy who would exact a claim “Because....she is my wife, and I have been married to her almost nine years” (42). This is the performative statement which makes the contract valid. It is his consent that was required, making the link between intent and words meant to be performative clear from the masculine viewpoint, and, implicitly, the feminine one.

The niece takes this performative vow one step further, impinging on its binding nature during a trial scene. In one of the final scenes, Delitia must make the case for her claim over the Duke in relation to the elderly woman he marries in the beginning of the novella, despite already being engaged to the former lady. In an address to the court, she remarks

I am not only bound, most pious Judges, to keep my vow, in being chastely his, as long as he shall live, but to require him by the law, as a right of inheritance belonging to me, and only me, so long as I shall live, without a sharer or co-partner: so that this lady, which lays a claim, and challenges him as being hers, can have no right to him (38).

While there is a recognition of the marriage vow, she uses the performative vow’s validity to claim her husband as a right, an unexpected and subversive power move. The judges recognize the power of her words in arguing for this binding vow when they comment on their decision to uphold her claim: “And truly, Madam, it is happy for us that sit upon the bench, that your cause is so clear and good, otherwise your beauty and your wit might have proved bribes to our vote” (42). While they recognize that her beauty is a possible factor in her persuasiveness, so too do they recognize her wit.

The most important move in lending the heroine agency comes with the codification of the dynamic outlined in the judges' remarks. The beauty of a woman moving men to decisions is a romantic trope, rather than an allegorical one. *The Contract* is decidedly a romance rather than an allegorical narrative like that used by arguing Royalists. This decision to use the genre of romance is vastly important to Cavendish's proto-feminist work, in that the romantic genre requires matching of wits and satisfaction of desires predicated on an agent's consent, much like a legal contract. The romantic genre does not allow for an entirely objectified and subjectified feminine entity. Indeed, Kahn remarks that "the contingency of the romance plot is thus the narrative equivalent of the ideological message that we consent, of our own free will, to be coerced" (541). This is the structure of the legal and political structure for which some in Cavendish's time might argue, that a governed people consent to be governed. Victoria Kahn argues that "Cavendish seems to be suggesting that conscientious consent is required for a contract or any other "law" (including the moral law) to be binding. And that consent is figured as love (551). While here the former clause is, as I have shown, a correct assessment, the latter clause it is not comprehensive. Figuring consent as romantic love fails to recognize the exact nature of Cavendish's represented love. Cavendish's romance plots in all three texts discussed here have to do with falling in love with someone's words less than his or her person. While, in keeping with romantic tropes, beauty is figured as important for garnering affection, there is a greater insistence on the attraction of wit, or, more specifically rhetoric. Cavendish's romantic protagonists are such because of their rhetorical power, as evidenced in the rhetoric of the lovers in *Loves Adventures* and to some degree in *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity*. *The Contract* is no different in that the Duke is introduced as "very handsome, and of a ready wit," (5) making his

wit out to be just as important as the romantic trope of aesthetic beauty. Similarly, the heroine is described as having a “beauty increased according to her breeding,” directly connecting her attractiveness to her mind in a passage entirely about Delitia’s extensive early education (8). In placing beauty as equal and perhaps secondary to rhetorical wit in creating the requisite love for the solidification of a marriage contract, Cavendish moves the woman out of a space of aesthetic subjectivity and into a place of fundamental agency. In Cavendish’s construction, it is not only desirable but necessary that the woman have the same level of rhetorical agency as her intended husband.

Even in the sealing of marriage, Lilley comments that Delitia’s “years as an obscure courtroom observer have prepared her to act confidently and argue eloquently as her own advocate but, in fact, such a demonstration is legally superfluous.... Though the mutual desire of the Duke and Delitia may be legally beside the point, it is narratively and generically essential to the satisfactory conclusion of the romance” (xix). There is a connection here between the rhetorical dominance this study has elucidated and the specific choice of genre. It is precisely the fact that the satiation of Delitia’s desire is the satisfactory conclusion of the plot that makes this subversive. By changing the frame narrative to a romance which privileges the “meeting of the minds” by the exchange of an equal rhetoric, Cavendish changes the position of the contract at hand. While the social structure of patriarchal marriage is entirely upheld, it is the changing framework rendered rhetorically by the female voice which engages a certain degree of female empowerment.

We can best understand this empowering move by returning back to where we started when it comes to understanding performative speech. J.L. Austin’s quintessential example of the

performative vow is the “I do” of the marriage ceremony, or more likely “I will” in an English context. By elevating the stakes of a woman’s performative power to the same plane as that of her intended husband’s through successful performative gender and performative power of protection, Cavendish substantiates women’s performative statement of “I do.” In Cavendish’s figuration, a woman has agency over her own speech and actually creates an act with her rhetoric in the solidification of the marriage contract which would eliminate it. While, in true romantic form, Cavendish neglects to show us the events after the solidification of the marriage in the concluding trial scene, the extent of the power dynamic inversion in the trial serves as evidence that the performative power wielded by Delitia will continue into their marriage. It is also reasonable to conclude that Cavendish imagined this possibility within the context of her inflated autonomy after the solidification of her own marriage.

Cavendish represents the possibilities of an empowered performance in the context of gender and through the lens of an elevated rhetoric of class that allow for a greater degree of female agency than her contemporaries. She elucidates the power of rhetoric to alter societal structures through the performative rhetorical form and foregrounds it as a potential solution to the problem of protecting one’s own chastity. Taking this empowered women’s rhetoric into the legal realm, Cavendish illuminates the real-world possibilities of her stakes, imagining a more egalitarian form of marriage contract in which a woman breaks with her position as silenced subject and enters the realm of rhetorical agent.

## Notes

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[1] (Page 5) There is one book entirely on Cavendish, Laura Dodd's *The Literary Invention on Margaret Cavendish*, and two others cited as having extensive sections devoted to her works.

[2] (Page 11) In recognition of this as well as in keeping with Cavendish's choices in stage directions and script, *Affectionata* will be referred to using male pronouns throughout this essay, while *Lady Orphant* will receive female pronouns.

[3] (Pg. 13) Defined as "social bonds between persons of the same sex"

[4] (Pg. 14) Non-normative gender performance here can be taken to mean a performance disparate from the typical parallel drawn to the individual's biological sex. In this instance, a person of the female sex performing the gender of man rather than woman.

[5] (Pg. 20) While this may seem a simple stage direction, its contrasting format to stage directions in one of the play's base texts, Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, gives reason for pause. When *Lady Orphant*'s literary ancestor, *Viola*, takes the stage disguised as male, Shakespeare simply tells us that she enters "in man's attire" (I.iv.s.d) and *Viola*'s name continues to mark her spoken lines throughout her appearance as *Cesario*.

[6] (Pg. 44) Shakespeare, for example, famously poked fun at the trope in *Sonnet 130*.

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