

“If it be naught”: Margaret Cavendish and the Performance of Transcendence

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I had rather die in the adventure of noble achievements than live in obscure and sluggish security, since by the one I may live in a glorious fame and by the other I am buried in oblivion. *Blazing World*, p. 96

In the second half of the seventeenth century Margaret Cavendish offers one of the most fascinating constructions of identity articulated by an unstable and problematic discourse of the self. Such a discourse has both been inscribed by critics as an aesthetics of ambitious retreat and isolation which renders the speaking subject an autonomous and assertive being, and as the expression of a submissive voice that cries for recognition and praise. This interpretive burden imposed by Cavendish’s writings is one of the starting points of the bulk of criticism on her, which insists on noting the ambivalence and irreconciliation of these two polar drives. Irreconcilable though these leanings may be they become the best expression of her singularity as an authoress, and as such, ask to be construed.

I- “LIKE TO A FEAVERS PULSE”

Pivotal to Cavendish’s concept of herself as a “Poetress” is an image of intense suffering inflicted by an all-pervasive fear that she might not succeed in the reception of her work. The usefulness of this realization lies in the light it sheds on her own conception as a woman writer and her stance in relation to the outside world embodied by the readers. Because writing with a view to publication was deemed unseemly and censored in a woman by the patriarchal tenets of seventeenth-century England, defamatory voices are feared through Cavendish’s poetry dealing with literary creation. This fear is evoked by her first quivering and then mournful voice in “The Poetresses Petition” included in her book *Poems and Fancies* (1653). The poem rehearses her excruciating position between a private selfhood and a desire for public acclaim, and solves the conflict interestingly for the object of this paper. Cavendish writes:

The *Poetresses* Petition

Like to a *Feavers pulse* my *heart* doth beat,
For fear my *Book* some great repulse should meet.
If it be naught, let her in silence lye,
Disturbe her not, let her in quiet dye;
Let not the *Bells* of your *dispraise* ring loud, 5
But wrap her up in *silence* as a *Shrowd*;

Cause *black oblivion* on her *Hearse* to hang,
 Instead of *Tapers*, let darke night there stand;
 Instead of *Flowers* to the grave her strow
 Before her *Hearse*, sleepy, dull *Poppy* throw; 10
 Instead of *Scutcheons*, let my *Teares* be hung,
 Which *greife* and *sorrow* from my eyes out wrung:
 Let those that beare her *Corps*, no *Jesters* be,
 But sad, and sober, grave *Mortality*:
 No *Satyr* Poets to her *Funerall* come; 15
 No *Altars* rays'd to write *Inscriptions* on:
 Let dust of all *forgetfulness* be cast
 Upon her *Corps*, there let them lye and waste:
 Nor let her rise againe: unlesse some know,
 At *Judgements* some good *Merits* shee can shew; 20
 Then shee shall live in *Heavens* of high *praise*:
 And for her glory, *Garlands* of fresh *Bayes*.¹

Within the brief space of twenty-two lines Margaret Cavendish enacts the process whereby the pathos of the *Poetress* at the thought that her poetry might be regarded worthless is finally rewarded with triumph. The poem opens to show her frantic crisis -expressed as a feverish state of poignant agitation- caused by her apprehension that her book of poems might find repulse. The ensuing lines account for the title as Cavendish entreats the reader who finds her poetry good for nothing, to let it die peacefully.² At this point she stages the death of the very poetry that we are reading in a requiem-like, solemn tone and a narrative sequence ranging from death knell, which Cavendish envisages as bells of dispraise, to dusty burial in oblivion. No sooner has the funeral scene ended in the conclusive note "Nor let her rise again" than a volte-face provides resurrection, through a conditional redolent of the former that led her to deadly thoughts ("If it be naught") and that again involves the reader's appreciation ("Unless some know"). The possibility then exists, Cavendish's poem seems to convey, that her suffering may be turned into victory after all, death to eternal life, to such an extent that this prospect ends up in the materialization of triumph and therefore exultantly (lines 21-22). The *iter ad gloriam* dramatized by Cavendish in this poem can be read as an epiphany of her aesthetics of creation while at the same time containing the opposite elements that render her and her work contentious, namely, self-effacement leading to solitude and confinement coexisting with outspoken, rampant ambition that will only be appeased with public recognition and praise.

II. "IN SILENCE AS A SHROUD"

The self-referential nature of the poem under consideration confers on it a special quality that makes it disturbingly unsettling and is perhaps the key to construe Cavendish's creative process. "The Poetresses Petition" is about itself, about its own death, but this amounts to an aporia because death involves disappearance, total absence.³ For a start, it is impossible for a writer to write about his/her death, because not only will he/she be present as spectator-describer, but what is more, the

¹*Poems, and Fancies*, 1st ed. (London: 1653), Sig.[A8]. Subsequent quotations from Cavendish's works cited parenthetically are from *The Description of a New World, called the Blazing World* (London: 1668, appended to *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* [London: 1667]); *Orations of Divers Sorts, Accommodated to Divers Places* (London: 1668); *Philosophical and Physical Opinions, written by her Excellency the Lady Marchioness of Newcastle* (London: 1655); *Playes* (London: 1662); *Plays, Never Before Printed* (London: 1668); *Poems, and Fancies*, 1st ed. (London: 1653); *Sociable Letters* (London: 1664); *A True Relation of my Birth, Breeding and Life* (London: 1667, appended to *The Life of the First Duke of Newcastle*).

²The *OED* defines "naught" (B.1.) as "of no worth or value; good for nothing; worthless, useless, bad, poor."

³This is what Freud states about it: "It is indeed impossible to imagine our own death; and whenever we attempt to do so we can perceive that we are in fact still present as spectators" (1985: 77).

living actuality of the text will always bear witness to the impossibility of death which, as noted above, implies complete absence. In this light Cavendish's text undoes or "denies [its] own content" to use Jay Stevenson's words about her writing (1996: 527): it is poetry whose "silence" (explicitly alluded to in lines 3 and 6) speaks, whose oblivion makes presence, whose death makes its living possible. Paradoxically enough it is Cavendish's living text about its death that "makes" her a poetess and itself a poem, by oximoronically denying the capacity of its verbal essence for survival. Cavendish's poem is about undoing while doing the very thing it denies.

In articulating a discourse that both describes and "does" something, Cavendish's poem is particularly interesting in the context of the performative. The poem is performative in that it is a petition and entices the reader to read on while, so to speak, taking her from death to life, from "forgetfulness" to "glory"; in that it creates the haunting sense that the "you" reading the poem is one of those "some" who can testify to her good merits at her judgement enacted by all readers through their readings. Thereby it performs the very purpose that rests at the heart of its creation. This process serves to explain the self-generative quality of her work (which creates the poetess; see Sherman 1994: 190) while admitting to the need for the outer world, that which she could not create, that which created her and turned her autonomy to subservience, but the only that could satisfy her thirst for fame.

A tension is at stake here: a discrepancy, not to speak of an abyss-like distance, between Cavendish's self creation as active and independent subject within the privacy of her mental world, and her self creation as passive, dependent object contingent on the outside world of (male) readers. This segregation may be the result of the enforcement of seventeenth-century patriarchal constraints which pulled the feminine being in two opposite directions by forcing her to accommodate opposite desires -those of creating and publishing- and proper feminine behaviour as decreed by the restrictions of the masculine code -that confined her to the private realm. Hence, as Catherine Belsey has noted (1985: 160), discontinuity becomes one of the marks of feminine discourse in this period.⁴

It is our contention that Margaret Cavendish expresses in this poem and elsewhere an awareness that these two worlds are mutually exclusive, and that their conciliation has to be achieved at the cost of personal loss. She seems to suggest that it is highly traumatic for her thoughts (continuous with their source) to emerge from the secure womb in the confinement of her mind, into the public realm. To such an extent is this so that to submit her poetry to public assessment may result in the killing of authoress/work through dreaded critical invective (which she avoids by rather letting "her" die), in any case in a falling down from her lofty throne of fancies where she reigns sole empress.⁵ To abandon security for a hostile world necessarily causes deep trouble, and is not done without tragic results for the poetess/poem. Thus "The Poetesses Petition" asks for a quiet death for her poetry, though, as we shall later consider, death turns out to be rather a kind of lethargy. Unavoidably then Cavendish's public being is only born as the private dies; the death of the independent empress (and this is necessary, given her ambition to be acknowledged everywhere) is the birth of the slave. To put it in terms of the natural philosophy she so much esteemed, it is as if the metamorphosis by means of which a butterfly emerges from the worm, had been inverted in her case: herself a butterfly free to dash here and there among her corporeal thoughts and creations, her ambition compels her to leave

⁴The feminine plight in seventeenth-century England may account for the various contradictory voices in Cavendish's literary production: she may either take delight in her departure from tradition, current fashion, and the like (ironically without ever being able to free herself from the world she so much dislikes, from an intertextual perspective); other times she is no more than a wifely, devoted hand picking "Flowers of Fancies" in her husband's "Garden" (*Poems, and Fancies*, 214). To Mary B. Rose her "disjointed" language is a clear sign that Cavendish "cannot begin to formulate a desired identity: she simply cannot decide how she 'wishes [herself] to have been'" (1986: 254).

⁵Quite revealingly, in her fanciful *Blazing World* (p.96) some spirits speaking to the Duchess, Margaret Cavendish herself in her work, reflect on the perils attending her undertaking. Thus, in response to the Duchess's "can any mortal be a creator?", the spirits answer: "Yes, . . . for every human Creature can create an Immaterial World fully inhabited by Immaterial Creatures, and populous Immaterial subjects, such as we are, and all this within the compass of the head or skull; . . . And since it is in your power to create such a World, What need you to venture life, reputation and tranquility to conquer a gross material World?". Later, continuing with the same reasoning, the spirits give voice to Cavendish's thought about the dangers attending literary creation: "[...] glory, delight and pleasure lives but in other men's opinions [...]"

the mental enclosure of “sluggish security” (*Blazing World*, p.96) for another kind of confinement in the literary cocoon that metamorphoses her into a greyish, workaday worm condemned to take nourishment and enter the intertextual discursive world which her original and unruly spirit shunned.⁶ This natural conceit sheds light on Cavendish’s view of creation, which is coupled with pain, breakaway and death. Quite revealingly she says about her book of poems:

When I did write this Booke, I took great paines,
For I did walke, and thinke, and Breake my Braines,
My Thoughts run out of Breath, then down would lye,
And panting with short wind, like those that dye. (*Poems, and Fancies*, p.47)

Cavendish’s reflection bespeaks that the creative process is first reductive and fragmenting, and then life-consuming; writing for the public is lethal for her subjectivity which though strong and foremost in her world will not survive, she dreads, contact with the world that might accord her repulse and dispraise. Understandably avoidance of this situation calls for self-effacement, a kind of parenthesis or transitory obliteration that grants her existence without compromising it. This logic is fully articulated in “The Poetresses Petition” which attests to Cavendish’s realization or her inability to “possess” her contemporary readers with her fancies. In keeping with this the poem may be read as the expression of what she has it to be an authoress in her own time: it not only involves getting around obstacles, but judging by her views on the question, a contingent self who must somewhat obliterate itself during a lapse of culture until the time comes for it to rise from that contingency and be rendered the true artist her own time denied her.⁷ As a poetess, Cavendish’s task entails the burdensome sacrifice of not having her authorial endeavours deservedly valued, and of being aware that high regard lives in after-life. Like Kent, impeded by Lear’s patriarchal constraints, Cavendish comes to the realization that “[F]reedom lives hence, and banishment is here” (I.1.180) and consistently flees towards the margins of seclusion to create her own centre. Hers is a forced solipsism that shows her as a monarch but that also bears witness to a terrible sense of loneliness and fear of failure. Seen from this angle, her closed territory ostensibly becomes a kind of cross for the martyr-like authoress, a kind of endogenic recluse that is preserved from the outside and the “other” against whom she could create a public identity. The idea of alterity is explored by Mason who holds that a “lived and recorded pattern of relationship to others [...] allowed [...] women to discover and delineate a self” (1980: 231). The same need for “relationship to others” is acknowledged in Cavendish’s poem, as the reading public becomes the *raison d’être* underlying her creative process. She is seeking “the other” who will validate her and proclaim her an authoress. As it stood, Margaret Cavendish only had iterations of her own self to whom speak and address.⁸ But “this audience of one” (Sherman 1994: 188) did not grant Cavendish empowerment as woman writer but caused

⁶Here we need to make a relevant difference. The silkworm, like the spider, are much favoured images in Cavendish’s writings on the grounds that “they will work of themselves”, “out of their own bowels” (*A True Relation*, p.208) and are therefore solitary - like her- and original -which was something “imposed” on her, given her acknowledged lack of a good literary education-. For the meaning of such images of originality see Bowerbank 1984: 392-408. There is, however, another sense in which the image of the worm is used by Cavendish, and is the one chosen for our analogy, such as when she says speaking about women in her time: “we live like Batts, or Owls, labour like Beasts, and dye like Worms” (*Orations of Divers Sorts*, p.240). And again: “[...] we are become like Worms, that only Live in the Dull Earth of Ignorance, Winding our Selves sometimes out by the Help of some Refreshing Rain of good Education, which seldome is given us, [...]” (“To the Two Most Famous Universities of England,” Preface to *Philosophical and Physical Opinions*). For a study of Cavendish’s self-creation that allows for the relevance of intertextuality see Sandra Sherman’s article (1994). Sherman shows the tension between her wish to remain “impregnable”, and her ambition to receive showers of praise which can only be achieved through intertextual contamination, because as she says “[A]ll we can ever ‘know’ of Margaret Cavendish is a text” (203-4). Hence “[D]iscourse threatens the self with dissolution in intertextual noise, and preserves the self as it becomes part of that noise in the memory of culture” (203).

⁷In this she is quite different from her male counterparts who also wrote about the monumentalizing power of their writing (see for example Shakespeare’s sonnet 55). The difference lies in the fact that, besides wishing and foreseeing future praise, they enjoyed public recognition while still alive. Margaret Cavendish could only wish and wait, all the while venturing “life, reputation and tranquility” (*Blazing World*, p. 96).

⁸See her *Sociable Letters* (1664) where Cavendish says: “This Lady only to her self she Writes,/ And all her Letters to her self Indites;” (page unnumbered).

frustration instead and thus, seeking acknowledgment, she fearfully surrenders her writing for appraisal.

III. "LET HER IN QUIET DYE"

We have come full circle in this process and are now in a better position to appreciate her poem. Whether used intentionally as a strategy or not, the intense emotional feminine appeal contained in these lines, as elsewhere, seems to give voice to Cavendish's sense of how much is at stake in appearing in public.⁹ Over and over again painful emotions and deep suffering lead the reader into pitying the authoress who portrays herself as a weak and helpless being. "The Poetresses Petition" shows her as the dead being to be cried over and resurrected by the sensitive reader. As noted above, her private selfhood is displaced and seriously undermined by the public nature of the poem; against this setting it can be speculated that the opening sense of sickness soon gives way to death, in any case a fall down from the preeminent position that the speaker loses just on pursuing publication. Such a loss forces the poetess to relinquish autonomy and accept dependence which is envisaged as death; but whose death?. This consideration leads us to questions of gender difference where pronominal references become crucial: in the poem the bizarre substitution of the indefinite "it" in "if it be naught", to refer to her book, for the feminine "her" in "let her in silence lye", has a disquieting effect and confirms the precarious self obtaining in Cavendish's writing. Dolores Paloma holds that "she personifies most concepts as feminine" out of personal affinity as a woman writer (1980: 58), and notes an acceptance of tradition of gender ascriptions in her work. But Paloma also traces an enlightening change in her poetry from masculine anthropomorphism to feminine whenever the object of personification undergoes ruin, destruction, fall, depredation, or such a transformation as comes from male abuse and results in open female victimization (58-9). In the present case, it may be argued that repulse of her book is coterminous with a change towards the feminine, perhaps suggesting the nature of the process at work here: as a product worthlessly dismissed by the reader, Cavendish's poem takes on the hue of other feminine personifications in her poetry such as the feminine castle ravaged by war embodied by a knight, or of the feminine wood as the material from the oak cut down by man, both explained by Paloma in her study (58-9). Thus starts the poem's descent into the recessive rooms of oblivion on earth as represented by death -suggested by the ordered sequence "Shroud" (6), "Hearse" (7), "Tapers" (8), "Scutcheons" (11), "dust of all forgetfulness" (17)-, that so much resembles the nesting boxes within her mind which in Sherman's view correspond "to the regress of thoughts bounding a universe in the poet's mind" (190). In fact both images amount to the same thing: they threaten with disappearance of identity while offering a world of security, evidencing that this idea, as many others in Cavendish's works, may be double-valenced. They also show confinement as the context of creation causing unavoidable contradiction between private expression and the need for public praise. The poem, however, in its very essence, contains a potential for survival that contradicts its deadly message (most certainly Cavendish is aware of this fact), apart from enclosing a final explicit statement that she will be outlived by her work or rather that she will outlive her time into transcendence. This brings us back to Cavendish's use of feminine pronouns and to the sense of uncertainty as to whose death and eventual rise are being enacted in the poem: her book's, her poem's or hers?. The answer seems to be: ultimately all three are risid because they are one and the same; the former two are inescapably bound up with their creatrix eschewing the possibility of a life without hers. In this regard Cavendish succeeds, in that she swings open the doors of her enclosed creative space to interact with the reader, thereby undertaking what she considers a masculine venture. In *Bell in Campo (Playes)* Lady Victoria asks: "Shall only men live by Fame, and women dy in Oblivion?" (p. 609). The question shows that Cavendish was against pairing Fame with man and life, and Oblivion with woman and death, and has deep

⁹For Cavendish's deployment of strategies that would grant her security as a woman writer in her time, see, for example, Fitzmaurice's article in which he argues that her eccentricity and solitary character are to be understood as public postures (1990: 198-209). Similarly, but speaking about the women warriors of her plays, Elaine Hobby shows how by offering different feminine characterizations without endorsing any, Cavendish eschews risks (1988: 110-111).

consequences for our reading of her poem: at the end Cavendish is admitted to male territory which implies assuming authority. But this in turn cannot be done without previous sanction.

As there is a change from “it” to “her” in line 3 (“If it be naught, let her in silence lye”), that evinces the beginning of descent, there is correspondingly a change from feminine object to subject within the same line almost at the end (19-20: “Nor let her rise againe: unlesse some know, / At Judgements some good Merits shee can shew;”), which is revealing of the rise and new status that Cavendish envisages for her glorious self. Through this sudden twist, Cavendish seems to convey how arbitrary and volatile questions of reception may be, wholly dependent upon men’s opinions. Notwithstanding we cannot overlook that it continues to be “she”, that is, feminine and dependent upon those “some” who “know / At Judgements some good Merits shee can shew”, which, following Paloma’s contention, would be similar to saying either that her virtues have elevated her to that position or that Cavendish continues to acknowledge the power of male readership as a path to sanctioned authorship, and her poetry as the reading material. Although we could go on to argue negatively from this, it goes without saying that male legitimation to write and publish coupled with glory was the greatest victory she and any woman of her time could ever dream of.¹⁰ And if this is still an endorsement of the code that made seventeenth-century woman decentred, it must also be acknowledged that it is a shift necessary for revolution.

IV. “UNLESSE SOME KNOW”

Cavendish’s poem enacts a fall and a rise that renegotiate her position, that are her own making and that have effects on us. Her descent into nothingness has a dramatic quality that is only lessened by our awareness that it is after all a “voluntary” act, if forced by circumstances that escape her -and that she wishes she could control-. The sudden rise that follows is conceived as the reward of the suffering wait. All the way through, however, the poem/poetess is constructed as we read. Two processes of creation are at work here: Cavendish’s and our re-creation; of the two the latter is foremost to her but obviously enough, their interdependence subsumes both into one. In this light “The Poetresses Petition” becomes the integrating ground for the feminine fragmentary identity; but it also becomes the social site that provides for the encounter of a lonely agonizing being with the life-giving public sphere.

We might therefore speculate on Cavendish’s use of her poem as a means of interaction that, she fears, will not take place straightway as it may be found worthless and hence non-existent, dead. But, as noted elsewhere, for obvious reasons related to the essence of writing, the death of her poetry cannot be taken at face value; what is more, from another subtle level intrinsic to the text, this poem suggests only partial obliteration through the image of the “sleepy, dull Poppy” (10). Since Cavendish is aware that her poems will only receive due response in a yet-to-come time, when readers become attuned to the aesthetics of her discourse, fairy-like she charms her poetry slept only to be woken up by princely reading. This analogy may well serve to further unravel the issues raised by the poem; “Jesters” (13) and “Satyr Poets” (15), like evil familiars, appear to be the worst threat as they are shown directly involved in this “death” which the poem itself proves to be a dream. The reader is an agent in this process and is raised to a stature of authority. Finally, in pursuing this image it must be noted that the poem’s exalted and euphoric end is reminiscent of fairytale conclusions: interestingly for our analysis the end announces the conciliatory moment when the subjective, ideal, and closed world will merge into that beyond the battlements of her fortress, achieving consistency of being and transcendence, her “heroic ideal”, honour and fame (see Blaydes 1981).

The poem is informed by a quasi-mystical relation whose setting is writing; from such a stance Cavendish’s poetry emerges as the site of socialization between two worlds, and of their enabling union. This mystical union between creatrix/creation and reader is further enhanced by a discursive practice that articulates a religion of her own by deploying a sequence of topoi traceable to religion,

¹⁰Sophie Tomlinson speaking about Cavendish’s “fantasies of women’s public speaking” provides an interesting observation concerning this issue. She notes that in Cavendish’s *Youths Glory and Deaths Banquet (Plays)* the protagonist, Lady Sanspareille, speaks to an audience that is “wholly male” (145).

such as those of pathos, death, “Judgements” (20), resurrection or “Heavens” (21). This again shapes the way to self-glorification, transcendence of the temporal, through coalescence with a quasi-divine reader who delivers a verdict. As Stevenson suggests, Cavendish acknowledges the human need for spiritual ideas (1996: 539); as an authoress the spiritual idea of a future resurrection is comforting and brings relief, helping her to overcome failure and neglect. This discloses a double bias, one pragmatic, close to dusty death, that recognizes her precarious situation as woman writer in the period, and one idealistic, reaching up as high as Heaven, that looks forward to future glory. Meanwhile her project is made feasible in the architecture of her poem and her emotional appeals which no merciful, equally mortal reader can resist. It should not be overlooked, however, that Cavendish is at the same time suspicious of the marriage of author and reader. When inhibiting, this marriage is set out in terms of death, which again shows Cavendish’s mistrust of interpersonal relationships and need for independence to protect her self from harm.¹¹ But this is left behind when Cavendish considers the enthralling vision of triumphant victory.

V. “AND FOR HER GLORY, *GARLANDS OF FRESH BAYES*”

“The Poetresses Petition” invites a reading as a trope that accurately illustrates Cavendish’s identity as authoress. It provides for an even ground of creation and centred identity by showing how to get it while performing it. As a decentred being, her quest for the stable and fixed centre that will grant her personal satisfaction and fame only takes her to extreme forms of solitude and withdrawal thus every time becoming more marginal: either enclosed in her world of fanciful creations where she counts for nothing, or in death, if she ventures into publication since it will most probably kill her through “dispraise”.

The final apotheosis shows Cavendish and her work at the centre of a pedestal of “noble achievements” -which is no other but that built by the very body of the poem- whose foundations are made of suffering, humiliation, risk of “life, reputation and tranquility” (*Blazing World*, p. 96); in this she is sister to other women. And yet unabashed ambition singles her out as a fighter against self-extinction through her profuse writing, becoming disarmingly powerful. And here it is without effort now. I hereby ask you to behold glorious Margaret Cavendish crowned with *Garlands of fresh Bayes*.

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¹¹In the play cited above, Lady Sanspareille decides to remain single to avoid the problems of married life; it is the same with Lady Happy in another play, *The Convent of Pleasure (Plays, Never Before Printed)*. As Dolores Paloma argues in her article “[M]arriage is several times presented as a symbol of infertility or death and the single life becomes a symbol of fruitfulness” (64).

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