Wicked words, virtuous voices
Corporaal, Marguérie Christina Maria

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2003

Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database

Citation for published version (APA):

Copyright
Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Take-down policy
If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): http://www.rug.nl/research/portal. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.
Figure 2: *A Girl Writing*. Netherlandish, around 1520 (National Gallery London).
them by God, as well as images of influential women prophets. On the whole, however, these discourses confirmed the dominant desire for woman's silence.

Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Englishwomen were denied self-expression in particular by the Protestant religious discourses which circulated at that time. When Elizabeth I reinstated Protestantism as the national religion, the Protestants' fear that Catholicism might retain power was bound up with the dominant cultural belief that women were wanton snares. The statues of the female saints and the Virgin Mary that occupied a central place in Catholic veneration came to be regarded as "dangerous precisely because they [were] inherently so alluring and appealing" (Diehl, 1995, 114). The Catholic devotional statues of women saints and the holy Virgin were looked upon almost as living, attractive women, who were able to stir the hearts of men, and had the power to ensnare the souls of those who glanced at them. As a result, the images were eventually declared "whores". This desecration of female images led to the "defacing and destruction of statues and altar screens depicting the virgin and female saints" by Protestants, and "the reformers removed a female presence from the churches, leaving a masculine Trinity and an all-male ministry" (Clarke, 1998, 37). This translation of "woman" into the image of the whore in many Protestant discourses obviously contributed to the culturally condemnation of woman's speech.

Whereas on the one hand Protestant discourses and practices contributed to the cultural silencing of women, on the other hand the rise of Protestantism granted women more access to language. Because of the introduction of the Protestant faith, reading the Bible was no longer the privilege of priests. In due course, women were also allowed to read the Scriptures at home:

Legal limitations placed on the reading of the bible by women in the mid-sixteenth century, were soon removed, and by the early seventeenth century, when bibles began to be common household possessions, women as well as men expected to read the so-called holy word. (Hull, 1982, 100)

Due to their access to the word of the Scriptures, women gained further access to language as such, and faced the opportunity to develop their own linguistic skills. This opportunity increased with the arrival of the philosophy of the new Mother, based on ideas launched by Erasmus in his Puerpera (published in English translation in 1606). This philosophy was introduced by sixteenth-century humanists in England and emphasised a woman's major responsibility in the religious upbringing of her children. Mothers came to be seen as "a maine cause of the piety, or impiety" (1976, 513) of their offspring, as William Gouge argued in Of Domesticall Duties

---

3 See Crawford, 1985, 221.
4 As Linda Woodbridge maintains, the stress on woman's inferiority and need for submission and silence that one finds in several books of the Bible, even prompted a few Renaissance and early Restoration women to discard their faith. See Woodbridge, 1987, 130.
Therefore, they had to read the Bible to their children, and they had to be morally equipped to guide their children's education. Consequently, literacy came to be seen as one of the qualities required to make a good mother, and women were increasingly instructed in reading or writing.

Moreover, the Protestant church attached importance to the believer's personal religious experience, and emphasised the need for congregation members to confess their faith publicly. This opened up possibilities for women to break their silence, speaking up in public as believers in God, and writing down their religious confessions. Yet, women did not generally enjoy any freedom of speech in the Church of England: "the principle that women as much as men should be allowed to discourse in public... had always been opposed by Catholic and Protestant alike" (Margaret King, 1992, 140). In fact, it was only in the radical religious sects, particularly those which evolved during the Civil War, that women's public confessions, preachings and prayers were condoned. Even greater freedom of speech was granted to women in Quaker congregations: woman's public preaching was central to the Quaker philosophy, and the recorded number of Quaker women visionaries that operated at that time is relatively high: 220 out of a total number of 300.

While Christianity, and Protestantism in particular, partly increased women's opportunities for self-expression, many women perceived their religion as a resource of self-justification. They presented devotional motivations as the underlying reason for the

---

5 See also Wayne, 1996, 63
6 As Pamela Benson emphasises, mothers needed the ability to "judge right and wrong" (1992, 163).
7 See Travitsky, 1980, 33-34. See also Crawford, 1993, 127. David Cressy expresses a completely different view, arguing that woman's literacy was not so much stimulated by Protestantism, as the man was still held mainly responsible for the children's education. See Cressy, 1980, 128.
8 When religion became a highly political matter at the time of the Civil War, women increasingly testified to their religious conviction in public, often cloaking radical political statements as religious confessions: "...the breakdown of ecclesiastical control led to female participation in public religious and political life on an unprecedented scale" (Crawford, 1993, 130). See also Rowlands, 1985, 171-74.
9 For these statistics, see Margaret King, 1992, 140. It is important to place a few critical notes here. For one thing, although the Quakers apparently encouraged women to speak up in public, Quaker philosophies in general included an overall distrust of language, and a vision of rhetoric and speech as impure. Silence was very close to the center of seventeenth-century Quaker doctrine and practice in the sense of the refraining from outward speaking. The congregationalists were often urged to "cease from a multitude of words" (Bauman, 1983, 21), and only allowed themselves to express words that God's spirit had "poured" into their souls. This general taboo laid on language produced by the human will may have curbed women in the personal expression of their voices. However, the supposed freedom of speech for women within Quaker circles was not always realised: women congregationalists who expressed views which were too radical or not in line with the politics of the congregation had their mouths stopped. In Susanna's Apology Against the Elders (1659), her relation of her own role in an Independent church in Exeter, Susanna Parr attests how she was implicitly demanded to retreat in silence. Mr Stuckley, the leader of the congregation, claims that her public speaking "was disrelished by some". He convinces her that he would have her speak: "but it must be by a brother" (1989, 109). Thus, Parr reveals that she was denied "not only the liberty of speaking, but of dissenting" (1989, 101), because her views discorded with the philosophy invented by the male leaders of this congregation. For further details about the position of Quaker women, see Hilary Hinds. God's Englishwomen: Seventeenth-Century Radical Sectarian Writing and Feminist Criticism.
assertion of their voices, and appropriated diverse Christian discourses as a means of legitimising their speech or writing. For example, in "The Discourse" in her *Divine Songs and Meditations* (1653) An Collins argues that the second reason why she has written her poems is not to waste the little "ability" that God had bestowed upon her (A2v). Collins thus alludes to the biblical parable of the talents in order to justify her expression of her writing skills. However, in Collins's view, the chief objective for publishing her poetic voice is her desire to glorify God:

> Then know, I chiefly aim that this should be
> Unto the praise of God's most blessed name. (A2v)

Collins is by no means the only woman writer who adopted the mode of emphasising her faith and honouring God as a legitimising strategy. In *Esther Hath Hanged Haman* (1617) her reply to Swetnam's misogynist tract *The Arraignment of Women*, the presumably female author Ester Sowernam inserts devotional discourses in a secular context and as part of a secular argument. She claims: "the ends for which I [she] undertooke this enterprise are these...to set out the glory of Almighty God in so blessed a work of his Creation" (A3r). Sowernam further specifies the purpose of her writing as not merely a celebration of God's glory, but also as a female defence of God's creation against the blasphemous words of male "irreligious" (B1v) authors like Swetnam:

> I am not onely prouoked by this Authour to defend women, but I am more violently vrged to defend diuine Maiestie in the worke of his Creation. (B1v)

By thus equating man's words with blasphemy, and representing it as the opposite of her own vindicating, purifying words, Sowernam implicitly condones the female voice.

Another legitimising strategy women writers employed is again derived from the discourses of the Scriptures. The Bible abounds with examples of God using men and women as passive vessels through which he transmitted his word to the world as, for instance, in the description of the apostles' reception and expression of the Holy Spirit's voice. This trope of God's discursive vessel is evoked by many late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century women as a means of making their voices socially acceptable. Women were believed to lack personal will, and their presumably weaker physical constitution was thought to make them "the passive prey" and mouthpiece of "external forces" (Purkiss, 1992, 144). These views generated the fear that women in particular were in danger of becoming possessed by Satan and created the association of woman's speech with demonisation. In *A Strange and True Relation of a Young Woman*

---

10As Ester Sowernam is clearly a pseudonym which wittily plays upon the name Swetnam, the identity of this author is not fully known. It is generally assumed that Ester Sowernam is a woman rather than a male author ventriloquising a female voice. Josephine Roberts discusses this phenomenon of *prosopopeia*– the impersonation of an imaginary person's voice–in relation to female authorship. See Roberts, 1998, 39.
Women's Legitimisation of their Speech and Writing

*Possest with the Devil* (1647) by James Dalton, a young woman who discourses in an uncontrollable way is described as being the passive victim of the devil, Satan making "the woman's tongue and organs instruments of speech" (1997, 163). However, as receptive, passive vessels, women were also often regarded as "an authentic site of divine intervention" (Purkiss, 1992, 144), the female sex being held "more receptive to God's word" (Chedgzoy, 1996, 43), and, as his mouthpiece, apt to reproduce his holy utterances.\textsuperscript{11}

Therefore, the trope of God's passive vessel was particularly available to women. Women writers represented themselves as discursive objects rather than subjects: as empty bodily frames that are filled with God's voice and serve as mouthpieces for his words instead of producing language of their own. Claiming that the words that they uttered came to them instead of being produced by them, women writers could evade responsibility for their utterances. By intimating that their voices came from outside their bodies, these women could dissociate their speeches and writings from their sexuality and, consequently, dismantle the cultural association of the female discursive subject with wantonness. By suggesting that the phrases they express are sent by God, female writers and speakers could create the impression that their words deserved further attention.

Anne Askew Kyme, who was imprisoned at the Tower and subsequently sentenced to death in 1546 for her adherence to Protestantism during Mary I's Catholic regime, frequently depicted herself as a passive frame filled with God's voice. In the accounts of her sufferings and confessions of her belief, Askew argues that the words that she utters are not her own, but are the result of what God "hath layed unto [her] with hys owne mouthe" (1986, 184). By thus shifting the authority of her speeches and writings to God, Askew not only tries to justify her persistence in the Protestant faith, but also appears to make her transgressive voice socially acceptable by suggesting that she is reproducing God's sacred words. Elizabeth I, finding herself in the exceptional position of the female ruler in a culture which demanded woman's submission and silence,\textsuperscript{12} often contrived to justify both her public role as a monarch as well as her public voice by picturing herself as God's discursive instrument.\textsuperscript{13} For example, in a prayer given in Parliament in 1576 Queen Elizabeth attributes her happy reign to God, counting herself "no

\textsuperscript{11} Dagmar Freist also discusses sixteenth- and seventeenth- century women’s use of the trope of “empty vessels” (1995, 461).

\textsuperscript{12} Because of her exceptional position Elizabeth I was subject to hostility. See Hansen, Melanie, 1998,12-13.

\textsuperscript{13} John King points out that Elizabeth I created the impression that she was appointed by God to become Queen of England, as the instrument of his holy providence (1990, 32). Of course, it must be noted that in late sixteenth-century England all humans were considered to be instruments of God, and subject to his will. The poet John Donne, for instance, expresses the belief that, being sick and thus reaching the portals of death, "I shall be made thy music" ("Hymn to God my God in my Sickness", 1.3). In other words, he will be shaped by God into the instrument of his praise, as a singer of God's choir.
better than His handmaid" (2000, 169).14

Representing themselves as God's passive vessels was a strategy chiefly adopted by women who belonged to the radical religious sects that operated in the period of the Civil War and the early Restoration. For instance, in her *Report and Plea* (1654) the Quaker prophetess Anna Trapnel claims that she cannot be held responsible for the words that she has uttered or written, since she operated as the medium reproducing God's voice:

> For in all that was said by me, I was nothing, the Lord put all in my mouth, and told me what I should say, and that from the written word, he put it in my memory and mouth; so that I will have nothing ascribed to me. (D2v)

By thus denying authority for her utterances, Trapnel serves two ends: she can discard responsibility for the dissenting ideas that she raises in her speeches and writings, and simultaneously lend authority to them, as they are God's words. Furthermore, she can depict herself as a proper, wordless woman, as the phrases issue from God's, and not from her own mouth.

As I have pointed out, in Renaissance and early Restoration England, people often identified themselves with particular role-models as the means to fashion a self. A remarkable feature of many speeches and writings by Renaissance and early Restoration women in England is that these women identify themselves with Jesus Christ. Casting the self in the role of Christ, and imagining the self in his position, was common practice in the Middle Ages, when people tried to model their lives on Christ's according to the principle of *Imitatio Christi*. 15 The association with Christ also marked writings by late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century men. For example, in John Donne's "Hymn, to God my God in his Sickness" the persona claims that both "Christ' s cross and Adam's tree met in me" (ll. 22-23): man's sinfulness and redemption are part of his being. This persona maintains that he is "in his purple wrapped" (l. 26); the "purple" of Christ's suffering is his blood, so that he appears to be transformed into Christ and be unified with him. Although a woman's similar identifying with Christ was held rather audacious, since it involved crossing the boundaries of gender, many woman presented themselves as Christ-like figures. Queen Elizabeth I often presented herself as a Messianic saviour in relation to the people of England, suggesting that, like Christ, she delivered her own people from misery. In reply to a 1563 parliamentary petition regarding the succession, she argued:

> I trust you likewise do not forget that by me you were delivered whilst you were hanging on the bough ready to fall into the mud, yea to be drowned in the dung. (2000, 72)16

---

14 For further examples of Elizabeth I's representation of herself as God's instrument, see Perry, 1990, 254.
15 The fifteenth-century treatise *De Imitatio Christi*, which has often been attributed to Thomas à Kempis, encouraged Christians to emulate Christ. See also Constable, 1995, 178.
16 The Queen's response to the petition is also discussed by Hackett: 1994, 80
Anna Trapnel and Anne Wentworth explicitly identify themselves with Christ, in particular with his suffering at the crucifixion. In the earlier quoted *Report and Plea* Trapnel compares herself, as the victim of religious persecution, to Christ. She claims that in the ordeal that she faced, she could imagine how he had suffered:

But I was never in such a blessed self-denying lamb-like frame of spirit in my life as then; I had such lively apprehensions of Christ's suffering. (D2v)

Similarly, in her *Vindication of Anne Wentworth* (1677) Anne Wentworth asserts that she would willingly undergo any humiliation and oppression that is a consequence of her religious conviction "as a further measure of my conformity to my saviour, and fellowship with him in his sufferings" (1989, 190). She thus accepts her sufferings in order to become unified with Christ.

A more implicit identification with Christ can be found in writings by female authors as diverse as Anne Wheathill and Mary Love. In *A Handfull of Holesome (though Homelie) Hearbs* (1584) Wheathill describes herself as "the woonded man" (B5v), thus drawing an analogy between the affliction of her soul and Christ's injured body. By suggesting that it would be her "resurrection from the dead" (A2v) if Parliament were to grant her husband pardon and release him from his imprisonment, Mary Love identifies herself with the risen Christ. 17

The parameters of conduct that Renaissance and early Restoration society set down for women encompassed qualities which were considered to be essentially "Christ-like", namely, the passive qualities of piety and obedience. 18 In *The Ladies' Calling* (1673) Richard Allestree states that "meekness" is "not only recommended to all as a Christian virtue, but particularly enjoined to woman as a peculiar accomplishment of their sex" (1985, 105). Thus, Christ's submissive qualities are equated with feminine virtues. Moreover, Christ was often associated with the quality that were central to the cult of femininity: chastity. For example, in her poem "Our Saviour's Passion" (ca. 1590) Mary Sidney describes Christ as "true as turtle to his love effected" (1998, 33), using the image of the turtle dove that was conventionally associated with chaste love. As society's ideal woman came to be regarded as a replica of the passive, meek, chaste Christ, real writing women cast themselves in the role of the feminine Christ, so they could break the social strictures of silence, yet keep up the appearance of remaining appropriately womanly.

Although the figure of Christ was mainly associated with feminine qualities such as passivity, chastity and submission, in late sixteenth-century England Christ also came to be

---

17 Although Renaissance and early Restoration women’s association of themselves with Christ can be explained in relation to gender issues, it must be noted that many Quaker women speakers and writers also identified with “the life of Christ” as a means to “differentiate [them]selves from secular persecutors” (Wiseman, 1998, 157).
increasingly represented as a powerful, masculine figure. For example, in her *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* (1611) Aemilia Lanyer does not merely stress Christ's suffering on the cross, but also highlights his enormous power, calling him the "conq'ring king" who "did survive that proud insulting Tyrant" called Death, and overcame 'Hell' and "Divells" (C1v). Identifying themselves with a Christ that was at once feminine as well as authoritative and defiant, Renaissance and early Restoration women could create an image of themselves as authoritative speakers and writers, who deserve respect for the ideas that they voice and for their strength to overcome the hostile world of readers and critics around them. In Renaissance and early Restoration England it was believed that the power and spirit of Christ gave a masculine identity to any believer, irrespective of sex. Consequently, by bringing forth Christ a woman could attain a masculine identity, and, thus, speak and answer as freely as a man.

Another reason why Renaissance and early Restoration writers chose to identify themselves with Christ in their texts and speeches may lie in the significance of Christ as the representative of “social and spiritual transformation” (Chedgzoy, 1996, 245). Marking a new stage in history, namely redemption, as well as a new part in the Bible, the New Testament, the figure of the Messiah may have appealed to these women who broke the old gender order as writers, and craved a new order in which women would be given more liberty of utterance. By associating themselves with Christ, these women could suggest that their transgression of the acceptable gender norms, and the "new" gender order that their acts of utterance signified, were redemptive and good. For instance, in *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* Aemilia Lanyer implicitly draws an analogy between herself as a woman writer and Christ. She compares her own "unworthy hand" with his "paths of fair humility" (C1v), and likens Christ's rejection of personal glory to the fact that she "seek[s] his glory rather than to get,/ The vulgar's breath, the seed of vanity" (C1v). She emphasises the fact that Christ will reverse all hierarchies, not just by turning from one powerless into beings "more powerful than all the kings or governors" (C2r), but also by pulling down "the proud", and making those who were oppressed and cast down more powerful. This stress on the Christian reversal of hierarchies benefits the female poet whose own status is so ambiguous: it suggests that like Christ, who changed from weak and humble into glorious, “women’s weakness will, in the new order, be transformed into extraordinary images of female power” (Pearson, 1998, 47).

In the preface to her *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* Lanyer praises queen Elizabeth I, "in whose pure thoughts all innocence rests" (A3v). In her public performances, speeches and writings, Elizabeth I helped create a cult which imitated the cult of the Virgin Mary that had been

---

18See Belin, 1987, xv.
popular during the reign of Elizabeth's sister, Mary Tudor. During her coronation Elizabeth was anointed with what was called the virgin's oil, and chose to have her long hair hanging loose as a symbol of virginity. In the course of her reign the association of herself with the Holy Virgin had become rooted in the dominant discourses, so that "emblems like the rose, the star, the moon, the pearl and the phoenix", normally occurring "in litanies and lyrics about the Virgin" (Hackett, 1994, 91), were increasingly applied to the queen. Although the use of Marian imagery in social discourses decreased after Elizabeth's death in 1603, decades later women writers still identified with the Virgin Mary. For instance, in her public pleas that King Charles I should only be put on trial, but not executed, in *A Prophesie touching the death of King Charles* (1649) Elizabeth Poole often talked about "the babe Jesus in me" (A3r), thus representing herself as pregnant with Christ.

Considering the emergence of anti-Marian views that accompanied the rise of Protestantism, it may at first seem remarkable that throughout the Renaissance and Restoration women writers and speakers found identification with the Virgin Mary attractive. The Virgin Mary signified the immaculate conception, hence, (pro)creative powers without sexual defilement. Therefore, women who associated themselves with her could depict their discursive creativity in terms of purity, and in this way, both circumvent and subvert the cultural equation of woman's voice with sexual incontinence. However, because of the Protestant fear of Catholicism, the Virgin Mary, and in particular the image of the blush that was part of Marian iconology, were increasingly envisaged as erotic; especially, because the blush could stand for both modesty or sexual awareness:

> The blush could be seen to be an attempt to resolve the problem of the Virgin's body, on display and to be worshipped for its beauty, and that of speech. Yet, the blush is also an assertion of the bodily, frequently used to signify a stage in the process of sexual conquest" (Clarke, 1998, 119).

Thus, the Marian discourses from the past were simultaneously helpful and problematic for women who transgressed the boundaries of silence. These Marian discourses bore great resemblance to the second category of discourse to which women resorted in order to justify their own voices: the discourses of virginity.

---

19 See McLure and Headlam Wells, 1990, 41. Frances Teague shows that Elizabeth I consciously manipulated the discourses that circulated about her, seeking to "shape her public image through her oratory" in order to "seem just and honourable" (1992, 63) as a female ruler.

20 In fact, in Roman Catholic medieval Europe, it was much more common for women to cast themselves in the role of the Virgin Mary. The German Nun Mechtild of Hackeboun had visionary experiences of "cradling...the infant Christ" (Barratt, 1998, 52-53).
2.2. "clean, unspotted conversation": Making a Virtue of Virginity.

In *The Ladies Calling* (1673) Richard Allestree states: "the very name of virginity imports a most critical niceness" (1985, 44). For women who overstepped the cultural boundaries of feminine silence, the strategy of presenting either themselves as virgins or their texts and speeches as sexually spotless was an effective means of dissociating themselves from the spectral image of the lascivious woman. Furthermore, the virgin body represents a self-sufficient entity and, in Renaissance and early Restoration England, was often referred to in the terms in which it was described in the Song of Songs, namely as an enclosed garden. The trope of virginity could thus be used to suggest the private and "enclosed" nature, and, hence the appropriateness, of a woman's speech or writing. In this respect, describing their words or texts as virginal must have been very appealing to Renaissance and early Restoration women writers, for many used the trope of virginity to stress the sexual innocence of their speeches and texts. In the preface to her *French Historie* (1589), Anne Dowridge claims that her writing is edifying and pure, in contrast with the "wanton vanities" (1986, 148) that can usually be found in poetry. In *A Chaine of Pearle* (1630), Diana Primrose likewise relates her writing to virginity, suggesting she has written her "Document" to "all" women, to instruct them "The Pearle of Chastity not to let fall/ Into the filthy dust of foule Desires" (B2v). In her *Divine Songs and Meditations* (1652) An Collins compares her mind, which is "apt to produce" her poetry, to "a garden...enclosed so fast" (E4v), evoking the image of the *hortus conclusus* as the symbol of virginity. In this manner, she creates the impression that her writing is pure and of a private nature. The idea of the enclosed garden reminds one not only of the Virgin Mary's immaculate conception, but also of Eden; the paradise from which mankind was expelled, due to woman's persuasive powers, according to many people in Renaissance and early Restoration England. By referring to her writing as an enclosed garden Collins may therefore have sought to dissociate her writing from Eve's sin to which woman's discourse was often related, and relate her speeches to the pure Virgin Mary. In her religious pamphlet *A Warnin to All Friends* (1679), in which she attempts to convert her readers to a more Christian way of life, Mary Waite calls her language "clean, unspotted conversation" (A2v).

21 "A garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse" (Song of Songs 4:12). The image of the woman who is likened to the enclosed garden implies an allusion to the immaculate conception of the Virgin Mary. See also Fissell, 1995, 437. It is interesting that this metaphor was taken up by English women writers in spite of the severe condemnation of Teresa d'Avila's sixteenth-century commentary on The Song of Songs. This Spanish Nun's writing of the commentary elicited critical responses of, among others, the Dominican Domingo de Yanguas. Yanguas commanded her to burn her book, arguing "No era decente que una mujer ...declarase los Cantares" (It was inappropriate for a woman...to expound the Song of Songs; quoted in Jerusalmi, 1992, xxiii).
As Phillipa Berry explains in her investigation of the role of virginity in early modern England, a woman's virginity signalled "physical autonomy", the "power over her own body" (1989, 49). Since virginity could thus signify command and self-control in general, for women writers the trope of virginity could be a means of alleviating their own anxiety about their supposed powerlessness concerning language. Although the image of virginity suggests power, it is in some ways controversial, as the virgin body can also be seen as required and controlled by men, and open to the threat of male rape.

Many women writers either explicitly or implicitly create an image of themselves as virginal, and thus attempt to distance themselves from the image of the loose woman. Apart from the recurrent identifications of herself with the virgin Mary, Elizabeth I continuously emphasised her celibacy in her speeches and writing, thus giving rise to the cult of the maiden Queen. For instance, when she visited the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, Elizabeth I highlighted her unspoilt sexuality in her public response to the address by one orator, who set out to praise Elizabeth's virginity. She is said to have been delighted with this praise, requesting the orator to continue on the subject.22 Like her queen, Anne Wheathill alludes to her virginity, possibly in order to avoid being branded a whore. In *A Handfull of Holesome (though Homelie) Hearbs* (1584), she identifies herself as: "even now in the state of my virginitie or maidenhood" (A2r). Similarly, in her *Poetical Recreations* (1688) Jane Barker called her virginity a most "lovely state" and asks God who has bestowed the "kindness for virginity" (B4v) upon her to help her preserve her spotlessness.

Early modern women writers and speakers frequently employ the well-known symbolic contrast between a chaste or virginal female character with a wanton one that marked religious and political discourses, translating political and religious institutions in terms of the immaculate woman and the harlot. Appropriating the patriarchal tool of categorising women, these women align themselves with the image of the sexually pure woman. For example, in *Women's Speaking Justified* (1666) Margaret Fell contrasts the purity of the women who preached Christ's resurrection with a set of wanton women preachers: "tattling women", who belong to the "great whore" (B2v), that is, the Roman Catholic Church. In contrast with the Catholic faith, which she thus describes as a lewd, loose woman, Fell depicts the Protestant church to which she belongs as the pure "bride" (B2v). By subsequently describing the "bride", Protestants, as "true speakers" and the Roman Catholic "whore" as the "false speaker" (B2v), Fell distinguishes between a virginal female voice and a wanton woman's voice. While she thus condemns part of her own sex, Fell shows that chaste female speech and writing is possible, and implicitly
categorises her own voice as such.

A further strategy of women writers from the Renaissance and early Restoration was to set their own sexual purity against men's wanton words, upsetting the norms by linking sexual incontinence to man's speech instead of to woman's words. For instance, in *A Letter...To her Unconstant Lover* (1567) the poet Isabella Whitney, who assumes the persona of the innocent woman, describes her grief at the fact that her lover "cannot be content to lead a single life" and did not keep the "promises that [he] so firmly made" (1986, 118-119). In her *Protection for Women* (1589), a feminist response to Swetnam's invective, the author who called herself Jane Anger uses the phrase "our virginity makes us virtuous" (1986, 103) to praise the sexual purity of her own sex. By contrast, she exposes men as lustful, loose creatures who flatter and "use... their tongues ill" (1986, 103) in order to tempt sexually innocent women with false promises and bring them to ruin:

> Though love be sure and firme: yet Lust fraught with deceit. And mens fair wordes do worke great wo, unlese they be suspected. (1986, 104)

By pointing out that in writing men "are so carried away with the manner as not care at all is had of the matter" (1986, 104), Anger suggests that men's words are related to sexual immorality: beautifying their speeches with rhetoric is more important to them than the content of their promises. Thus, it is suggested that men are more concerned with ornament than essence, more with attraction than loyalty– in other words, they are like prostitutes. Finally, she ironically subverts the dominant gender discourse that woman should be silent by arguing that every man "must strive to bridle his slanderous tongue" in order to become "modest", that is, chaste (1986, 104).

Some women speakers and writers claimed that they expressed themselves specifically to defend their virgin selves against men's slanderous tongues. Being falsely accused of having an affair with the Admiral Thomas Parry and having plans to marry him, the adolescent Elizabeth Tudor wrote letters (1549) in which she declared that she would "write...[her]self" what the truth was out of "respect to [her] own honesty" (2000, 24); in sum, she represented her need to write as a result of her desire to defend her cherished virginity and reaffirm her spotlessness. A similar view is articulated by Esther Sowernam. She alleges that, in order to defend their sexual purity against "lascivious" writings by men like Swetnam, women will either have to speak up or write, since "our silence mighte impeale us for guiltie" (F1v-2r). Contrary to the dominant gender ideas, Sowernam thus equates silence with sexual immorality and woman's discourse

---

22 See Neale, 1967, 212.
23 The letter has also been printed in Perry, 1990, 65.
with innocence.

In seventeenth-century England the term "rape" signified theft. In her thorough analysis of seventeenth-century rape narratives, Miranda Chaytor reveals that women writers never explicitly mention the sexual harm done to them in their accounts of rape. Instead of describing the cruelty with which the rapist handled their bodies, these women focus on the rape as theft, representing themselves as stolen from their proprietors, either fathers, husbands or employers. They portray the rape and the loss of their virginity as an object that they had with them, like a lantern or a robe, from which they were robbed. As Chaytor comments, this "afforded a framework which left the woman with her honour untouched and unchanged...the woman herself plays no part in the crime", being "the object of one man's plunder and another's rightful possession" (1995, 396). This idea of theft that comes up in rape narratives, was often employed by women writers to proclaim their guiltlessness with regard to the fact that their works were published. In *The Lady Falkland: Her Life* (1643-49), her biography of Elizabeth Cary, one of her daughters attempted to erase all blemish from her mother's name, arising from the fact that one of her writings was published. She asserts that her mother "writ many things for her private recreation", yet that one of the works came to be published without her mother's consent, having been "stolen out of that sister-in-law's chamber, and printed" (190).

2.3. "that loving act of a loving mother": Maternity and the Female Voice.

On February 10, 1559, Parliament expressed its desire that the queen should marry soon. Elizabeth I diplomatically replied that until God would "incline [her] harte" to a marital life, she would lead the life of a virgin and mother of the country: "for every one of you, and as many as are English, are my children..." (2000, 59). Queen Elizabeth's use of the image of the mother to represent herself is by no means singular. In fact, many Renaissance and early Restoration women who expressed themselves through speech or writing used the trope of maternity, despite the fact that maternity was sometimes associated with uncontrollable sexuality. As Christine Coch points out, "childbirth was an occasion of terrifying openness" (1996, 431), since it caused the vagina to be dilated with its mouth wide open. Thus the pregnant female body was often metaphorically identified with "dilation" (Parker, 1987, 13), that is, an overflow of words, maternity having connotations of unfeminine immoderate utterances.

---

24 See *Oxford English Dictionary*. Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* (1712-14) also foregrounds the meaning of the term "rape" as robbery: the mock-heroic poem alludes to Lord Petre's theft of a lock of Arabella Fermor's hair, which he cut off secretly.
Indeed, there are many reasons why maternity might not have had positive connotations for a woman writer. Maternity signified submission and inferiority. Woman's reproduction, and her suffering in childbirth in particular, were seen as evidence of inferiority. For instance, in *The First Blast of the Trumpet, against the monstrous Regiment of Women* (1556-59) John Knox mentions the punishment inflicted upon women since the Fall, "a dolour, anguishe and payn, as oft as she shal be mother" (1997, 36) in relation to his argument that woman has been banished from "empire and dominion above man" (1997, 36). Thus, he intimates a causal relationship between woman's maternity and her subordinate position. Maternity also came to signify female submission, in that childbirth became increasingly subject to male control. Whereas midwifery had been a predominantly female profession, towards the seventeenth century women lost ground in this area. Deliveries were increasingly carried out by male doctors, who claimed that they were better equipped with the required knowledge than the midwives. Becoming increasingly involved with childbirth, male doctors managed to further appropriate woman's sexuality.

In addition, maternity implied seclusion. As mothers, women were not only confined to the home because they had to take care of the household and the upbringing of their children. Before and after they had given birth to their infant, noble women were strictly limited to a private realm:

> Beginning about one month before their deliveries, they entered dark rooms hung with heavy tapestries, where they lay confined until their "churching" approximately ten weeks later. (Coch, 1996, 430)

This image of the mother as secluded, does not fit in with the desire and practice of women writers and speakers to move out into the open.

Maternity also had connotations of death and guilt. Women who were expecting a child often ran the risk of having miscarriages. For instance, Lady Ann Fanshawe had fourteen pregnancies, but lost most of the infants while still premature. As she writes in her *Memoirs* (1676) "My dear husband had six sons and eight daughters borne and christned, and I miscarried of 6 more, 3 at severall times and once of 3 sons when I was about half gone my time" (106). Stressing her own failure at bringing forth children, and her husband's success as a father of fourteen children, Lady Fanshawe's account reveals that women were often blamed for miscarriages. Women were held responsible for the well-being of the foetus, and frequently...

---

25 See also Laurence, 1994, chapter 5 "Women in the Family".
26 See Harvey, 1992, 93 and Hilda Smith, 1982, 92.
27 By "churching" was meant the ritual of the figurative purgation of the sexuality of a woman who had just become a mother. This took place in a service when she and her child were received by the church community, about ten weeks after delivery. See Traub, 1992, 58.
accused of adultery if they lost the child. A good example in this respect is Anne Boleyn whose miscarriages brought imputations of wantonness upon her which ultimately triggered her death.\textsuperscript{28} Since maternity was thus often bound up with failure and the risk of obtaining a bad sexual reputation, it became problematic for women writers and speakers to cast themselves in the role of the mother.

Epitomising incontinence, suppression, inferiority, seclusion, the figure of the mother was problematic for any woman who wanted to express herself. Nonetheless Renaissance and early Restoration women writers employed tropes of maternity, as the imagery of motherhood also offered outstanding opportunities for legitimising female speech and writing. Motherhood was regarded as one of the major vocations of women. In Renaissance England one of the three fundamental purposes of marriage was considered to be the propagation of children.\textsuperscript{29} Therefore, by representing themselves as figurative mothers, or by writing texts on motherhood, women writers could place themselves in the feminine domestic sphere in which society had placed them, and mask their discursive transgression. The women who wrote the \textit{Gentlewomen's Petition} (1642), a plea for peace in the country addressed to the House of Commons, used the image of the mother to veil the inappropriate nature of their participation in the public discussion on politics. They emphasise how the war affects them as mothers: "to see our children dashed against the stones, and the mother's milk mingled with the infants' blood...and little infants suffered in their father's banishment" (1992, 97). Similarly, in \textit{Love's Name Lives} (1663), her plea for her husband's release, Mary Love expresses the distress that she feels as a mother who may need to raise her children single-handedly. She appeals to the affection felt by the members of parliament for their own mothers: "by the womb that bore you and the breasts that gave you suck" (A2v). By thus referring to her status as a mother and translating her political plea into maternal terms, Mary Love cloaks her improper public assertion of voice.

Another reason why women writers and speakers adopted maternal imagery lies in the fact that motherhood gained more eminence from the Renaissance onwards. The ideological discourse of the New Mother was taken up by some women writers as a legitimising strategy. For instance, in her mother's legacy, \textit{The Mothers Blessing} (1622) Dorothy Leigh argues that it is her responsibility as a mother to write the advice book for her posterity: "I know not how to perform this \textit{duty} so well, as to leave you these few lines,...so that herein I may shew my selfe a lousing Mother and a dutifull wife" (A5v, emphasis mine). Likewise, Elizabeth Clinton considers

\textsuperscript{28}For a detailed description of Anne Boleyn's fate see Warnicke, 1983, 654.
\textsuperscript{29}The ceremony laid down for matrimony in the \textit{Book of Common Prayer} also focused on the propagation of children as the "gift" of marriage: O almighty God...bestow upon these thy servants, if it be thy will, the gift and
the book that she writes for her children "that loving act of a loving mother" (1622, A2r). As the rise of the ideological discourses of the New Mother entailed the gradual establishment of the mother as a figure of power and influence, for women motherhood could offer a position of authority from which to speak. Therefore, many women used their own maternity, and the social authority that it granted them, as a strategy for making their speeches or writings seem appropriate for a woman. For example, in *The Countesse of Lincolne's Nurserie* (1622) Elizabeth Clinton argues:

> Because it hath pleased God to blesse me with many children, and so caused me to observe many things falling out to mothers, and to their children, I thought good to open my minde concerning a speciall matter belonging to all childe-bearing women....even to write of this matter. (B1r)

By stressing her experience as a mother, Clinton creates a position of authority as a writer for herself, and justifies her outspokenness.

Due to the fact that the New Mother in the Renaissance was charged with the upbringing of her children and thus with instilling ideas into them, the family was not so private a unit as people tend to think. Mothers had a great impact on their children in that they shaped their children's minds religiously and politically as well.30 Adopting the voice of the mother or using tropes of maternity could therefore be an efficient tool for women writers and speakers in another way: they could shroud public political statements by means of motherhood imagery in the same way as the family created the illusion of being completely a-political. In *A Warning to All Friends* (1679), Mary Waite plays with maternal imagery in order to express her religious-political ideas, associating the "false church" with the "filth of the daughter of Zion, which causeth many miscarriages" (B1r).

Male authors often used the image of the pregnant male poet giving birth to voice, "being impregnated or impregnating his muse or serving as a midwife to poetic birth" (Harvey, 1992, 78-79). For instance, in the first sonnet of the *Astrophil and Stella* cycle (1591), Sir Philip Sidney adopts the persona of the suffering poet-lover who is "pregnant" with literary creativity: "great with child to speak and helpless in my throes" (Q2v).31 As male poets, consciously or unconsciously, often purloined tropes of maternity, women may have felt the desire to reappropriate the mother role. Besides, women writers may have represented themselves as

---

30 See Goldberg: "the family served to reproduce society" (1986, 9).

31 As Jeffrey Masten reveals, in sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England, it was usual for texts, both dramatic and non-dramatic, to issue from a collaboration between two male writers. These texts were represented as "a female body" (1997, 60) which was the offspring of "plural" male "parents" (1997, 21); the "fruit" of an all-male act of procreation in which the two men both performed penetrating and receptive roles. Thus, woman was denied procreative power.
mothers or translate their expressions into maternal imagery, as the frequent equation of procreation with literary creativity in several historical, religious, political and literary writings of that time offered them the potential to present their own discourses as procreated offspring, thus embedding their texts within a conventionally feminine context and casting themselves in an appropriately feminine role. In a dedicatory poem attached to her *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* (1611) Aemilia Lanyer refers to her writing as the "first fruits of a woman's wit" (B2r), that is, she represents her poetry as her own offspring. By using the image of "fruit" in relation to her poem, in contrast with the "fruit" of the "forbidden tree" (B2r) in Eden, Lanyer seems to construct her female (pro)creative powers as a redemptive atonement for Eve's transgression. Likewise, An Collins suggests that her *Divine Songs and Meditations* (1652) are like children that she has given birth to. She states that "the image of her mind" (E4v) can be traced in the poems. This idea is clearly related to the general sixteenth- and seventeenth-century belief that a mother stamped her own individual character on her children, and allows Collins to proclaim autonomy and authority as a writer, by implying that a mother is mainly responsible for shaping her progeny.

In *Poems and Fancies* (1653) Margaret Cavendish makes her transgressive intrusion into the masculine realm of writing seem more acceptable, by constructing herself as a mother in relation to her poetry, which she calls "my childe" (A8v). The risk of failure that was bound up with women's pregnancies during this period, can also be detected in these women authors' depictions of their texts as their offspring. For example, in *Poems and Fancies* Margaret Cavendish calls her writing her "Strengthlesse Childe" (A8v), thus imparting the anxiety that her text will not be acceptable according to literary standards. In a similar way, in the preface to her collection of *Several poems Compiled with great variety of Wit and Learning* (1678) Anne Bradstreet presents her text as a bastard child filled with "defects" (A3v); thus using the trope of maternity to express discomfort about her discursive transgression and her qualities as a poet. Women writers often evoked the image of maternity to reveal their uncertainty about their writing skills, and to ask for the readers' sympathy, their texts being only helpless "children".

While seventeenth-century women writers often associate themselves with the Virgin Mary in order to establish their sexual purity, they also had another motivation for turning to the her. As a mother, Mary signalled independence:

> The birth of Christ becomes the single miraculous instance when the woman's seed is the only human contribution to procreation. (Wayne, 1996, 60)

---

Embodying independent procreation, the maternal Mary may have suggested to women writers and speakers that they, too, could achieve creative independence without man's intervention. Fell's text illustrates this point: she portrays the virgin Mary, the woman who has not been impregnated by man, as someone whose mouth fills over with words after Christ's birth has been announced to her:

And then Mary said, My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my Spirit rejoiceth in God my saviour, for he hath regarded the low estate of his Hand-maid...Are you not here beholding to the Woman for her Sermon, to use her words to put into your Common Prayer? (B4v)

Another reason why women writers in particular often adopted a maternal persona is, ironically, bound up with the fact that in Renaissance and early Restoration England maternity was regarded as the equivalent of absence and death. Maternity "stood for mortality and the inevitability of death" (Harvey, 1992, 109), since many women died in labour. This death that many women found in childbirth corresponds to the form of speech conceded to women at that time which was "always in some sense connected with death" (Bronfen, 1992, 404), woman being relegated to silence, absence of voice, and often only endowed with a publicly acknowledged voice after her death. Renaissance and early Restoration women writers assumed the persona of a mother who faced death in childbirth, and who had to write out of a desire to impart her knowledge to the progeny that might survive her, thus creating the illusion that her transgressive voice may soon be properly silent again. Thus, Elizabeth Joceline, who in fact did not survive her pregnancy, just as she expected, wrote: "I could not chuse but manifest this desire in writing, lest it should please God to deprive of time to speake". She argues that she does not write "to the world, but to mine owne childe; who it may be, will more profit by a few weake instructions comming from a dead mother...than by farre better from much more learned" (1624, C3v-C4v).

Likewise, An Collins claims that her desire to extend her care beyond death prompts her to write:

Moreover this is thirdly in respect
Of some near kindred, who survive me may,
The which perhaps do better works neglect,
yet this they may be pleased to survey
Through willingness to hear what I could say. (1653, A2v)

For women writers and speakers, maternity was an appropriate trope in order to negotiate their discursive subjectivity, because of its cultural connotations with absence and death, and hence, silence.

---

33 That this was the case is illustrated by the fact that George Puttenham (1589) considered it only proper to write about women in relation to death: "to bemone their estates at large, & the perplexities of loue in a certain pitious verse called Elegie, and thence were called Eligiack (120).
2.4. "I have set downe unto you (which are of mine owne sex)": Addressing a Female Audience.

The title quotation is from Jane Anger's *Protection for Women*, and reveals that one of the strategies used by Renaissance and early Restoration women to legitimise their speech or writing was to direct their discourse to a female audience. By suggesting that her writing is exclusively confined to the female sphere, Anger created the illusion that her discourse was appropriate according to gender norms. Anger is by no means the only female author who used the mode of woman-to-woman conversation in order to legitimise her voice. For instance, Elizabeth Clinton veils her transgression of the gender norms by hinting that her writing was designed for other women. As God had blessed her with many children, she wishes to pass on her experience to other women; "thought good to open my minde concerning a speciall matter belonging to all childe-bearing women....even to write of this matter" (1622, B1r).

These frequent suggestions made by women writers that their words were exclusively intended for an all-female audience was not merely a strategy to make the assertion of their voices seem more acceptable. By constructing a female readership for their texts, women could ensure a position as discursive agents when society excluded them from this position. Moreover, the address to a female audience appears to be related to the social reality that in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England, women who desired to express their literary talents often came together in all-female circles to display their texts and ideas in front of a female audience. From Lady Ann Clifford's account of a visit to the Sidney mansion of Penshurst in August 1617, Marion Wynne-Davies infers that a female literary network existed: women from the higher circles of society would gather at the country houses in assemblies particularly and exclusively for women. There they would produce literary texts, exchange and read each other's writings and create dramatic productions in a safe and friendly environment, so that one could speak of a "female 'academy'...a companiate body of the female wits" (1998, 61).

Women writers were often supported by female friends and relatives from the upper classes who figured as their patrons, as becomes clear from the dedications to female benefactors that one finds in many texts by women authors. Thus, their texts were primarily directed to a female reader: the female patron. In her preface to *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* (1611) Aemilia

54 See Anger 1986, 103.
55 As Merry Wiesner argues, it was commonplace that women writers in particular "addressed" their writings to other women, "to their daughters or close female relatives" (Wiesner, 1986, 13).
56 Wynne-Davies's suggestion is confirmed by Aemilia Lanyer's poem "The Description of Cooke-ham". Lanyer describes her stay at the mansion of a "(great lady) Mistris of that Place" (l.11) during which she and some unnamed,
Lanyer implies that her work is directed to several ladsies, among others Mary Sidney, the Countess of Pembroke. Lanyer claims that she presents the "fruits of idel hours" as "my mirrour to her view" (B1v). The image of the mirror suggests that Sidney, as a female reader, will perfect and complete the work. By reading Lanyer's work Sidney will imprint her own virtuous image on the text, and, as a most talented poet herself, correct all the flaws that might be contained in Lanyer's writing. A similar role is reserved for the other readership that Lanyer addresses in her preface: "all virtuous ladies and Gentelwomen of this kingdome" (B3r). According to Lanyer, her female readers will protect, perfect and support her "imperfect endeavours", "knowing that according to their own excellent dispositions, they will rather, cherish, nourish, and increase the least sprak of virtue where they find it, by their favourable and best interpretations, than quench it by wrong constructions" (B3r). In other words, Lanyer suggests that she is involved in a partnership with a female audience, who will cause her text to be valued and who will ward off attempts from the outside world to discredit Lanyer as a writer.

2.5. Conclusion.

Facing the risk of having their names and sexual reputations blemished when they took up the pen, Renaissance and early Restoration women writers consciously and unconsciously employed current discourses of religion, virginity, maternity and female bonding as the means to create an acceptable feminine image of themselves as authors. These discourses were associated with femininity in that period. Therefore, for these women writers they formed suitable means to legitimise their transgression of the feminine boundaries of silence. These social discourses could easily be recontextualised by female writers within various generic modes. The religious discourses provided women with a motivation for self-expression and Biblical figures proved appropriate models for developing feminine personae. The discourses of virginity helped women to dissociate their voices from sexual impurity and to reconstruct the gender discourses which limited female utterance. The discourses of maternity were a tool to cover up these women's transgression of their social position, while the context of women-to-women conversation helped to create the illusion of privacy.

probably female companions engaged with literary creativity: "And where the Muses gave their full consent" (I.3).
Chapter 2: Forging a Virtuous Voice: Women's Legitimisation of their Speech and Writing.

As has been suggested, the cultural idealisation of the voiceless female and the equation of woman's words with wantonness had an enormous impact on the social structure of Renaissance and early Restoration England. Nevertheless, there was a small number of women who, either as authors, prophets, preachers or petitioners, dared to cross the gender boundaries of voicelessness. These women did so by making a "virtue of necessity", as Elaine Hobby defines it;¹ that is, by either consciously or unconsciously negotiating and manipulating the dominant discourses which helped to subjugate women.

In this chapter a number of non-dramatic texts and speeches produced by Renaissance and early Restoration women, ranging from letters and mother's legacies to prophecies and political petitions, will be analysed. Having read a wide range of late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century women’s writings, one can reach the conclusion that these legitimising discourses were derived from the socially current discourses of religion, maternity and virginity, as well as the discursive patterns characteristic of conversation between women. The following discussion of the strategies used by these female authors will serve as a frame of reference for my discussion of the tragedies written by Renaissance and early Restoration women.


In Renaissance and early Restoration England, writers who admonished women to silence often used quotations from the Bible to endorse their views that women were not to speak up in public. For example, in laying out norms for feminine conduct, Samuel Torshell quoted from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, verse 14: "Let your women keep silent in the churches" (The Woman's Glorie: A Treatise, 1650, H5v).

Moreover, proponents of female voicelessness frequently referred to the story of man's Fall in Genesis, equating Eve's verbal persuasion with sexual charms, sinfulness and transgression, in order to underline the cultural idealisation of the silent woman.² Biblical discourses provided women with a number of justifications for publication and utterance, such as the parable of the talents (Matthew 25: 14-30), which encourages people to use the gifts given to

¹ See Hobby, Elaine, 1988, 7.
² As Constance Jordan argues, through this "associative logic" they linked the prohibition against woman's speech "with an originary misuse of language" (1990, 25).