Wicked words, virtuous voices
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Figure 8: Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle. Engraving by Abraham van Diepenbeke, and frontispiece to Playes. London: A. Warren for John Martyn, James Allestry, and Tho. Dicas, 1662.
Chapter 6: "To talk of naked truth": Margaret Cavendish's

*The Unnatural Tragedy* (1650's).

6.1. "Steps to…fame's tower": Margaret Cavendish as a Writer.

Margaret Cavendish (1623-73), daughter of Thomas Lucas of Colchester, descended from a Royalist family ruined by the Civil Wars. As a young woman she became lady in waiting of Queen Henrietta Maria, and when the Queen was forced to live in exile in Paris, moved with the Court to France. There she met William Cavendish, Duke of Newcastle, and although he was many years her senior, she soon became his second wife. Although Cavendish "frustrated" the Duke's design of increasing "his Posterity by a Masculine Iff", since she was "barren" (1667, P1v), the marriage appears to have been a very happy one. What is known about her life has mainly come down to us through *A True Relation of my Birth, Breeding and Life* (1656), Cavendish's autobiography, which first appeared in *Nature's Pictures*, and in a later edition became appended to her husband's biography. Cavendish's age was dominated by the social taboo on female self-expression, and women were not supposed to have identities but in relation to their male relatives. Therefore, it was quite remarkable that Cavendish wrote a document about herself in which she was "unguarded and open in acknowledging and exploring the fluid, elusive, and erratic shapings and reshapings of the self" (Battigelli, 1998, 10).

In writing her autobiography, Cavendish consciously or unconsciously adopted both feminine and masculine discourses in fashioning her self-image. On the one hand, Cavendish dissociates herself from the stereotype of the wanton woman writer by identifying herself with feminine silence and chastity. She argues that she has always been addicted "to contemplation rather than conversation" (1989, 94), "to solitariness rather than society", and claims that she abhors "an unchaste thought" (1989, 97). On the other hand, Cavendish asserts her ambition and qualities as a woman writer. She contends that she is "very ambitious", and

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1 Margaret Cavendish died on December 15th 1673 and was buried in Westminster Abbey. There the epitaph states: "Here lyes the Loyall Duke of Newcastle, and the Dutchess…This Dutchess was a wise, wittie & Learned Lady, which her many Bookes do well testifie; she was a most Virtuous & a Loueing & carefull wife…." (Murray, 1909, 4).
3 Sidonie Smith even talks about Cavendish's autobiography as "a protomodern preoccupation with the self qua self that promotes a thickness of self-representation distinguishing her autobiography from others of the period" (1998, 113).
that she writes "neither for beauty, wit, titles, wealth, or power", but to be raised "to fame's
tower, which is to live by remembrance in after-ages" (1989, 97).4

Cavendish's concern with self-presentation is not restricted to her autobiography. In
fact, many of the texts that she wrote are preceded by a preface to the reader, in which
Cavendish formulates her identity as a writer. In her address to the reader in *Nature's
Pictures, Drawn by Fancy's Pencill to the Life* (1656), a collection of stories, the Duchess
creates a feminine persona as author of the text. She suggests that the stories are meant "to
present Virtue… to defend Innocency…Also, to shew that Vice is seldome Crown'd with
good Fortune" (B2v). Moreover, she defends herself against any possible criticism of her
want of skills as a woman writer. She apologises for her stories being "rough, …not done by a
skilfull hand, so not so smooth as I could wish" (B2v). Cavendish probably appended
extensive prefaces to her writings in order to cover herself against any potential
condemnations of being improper and of producing flawed writings as a woman.

It is also possible to read Cavendish's prefaces in the cultural context of the Civil War
and the Interregnum. As Hero Chalmers suggests, Cavendish's "forthright presentation of
herself as a female author" in these long forewords may also have served as a form of "wifely
display" which was to maintain her husband's "social status" (1997, 328) that he had lost due
to his political sympathies. This could perhaps explain why her husband encouraged her
writing. Therefore, her prefaces may also be expressions of a wifely compliance with her
husband's desire to regain his status and to support the Royalist cause. Her *Sociable Letters*
(1664) reveal that Cavendish may have perceived her writing as an opportunity to make a
Royalist statement against the Civil war and the subsequent Protectorate, The volume consists
of Cavendish's invention of "the Correspondence of two Ladies, living at some Short Distance
from each other" who "Discourse by Letters"(Cc2v). In letter CLXV of this fictitious
 correspondence one of the two unnamed female friends writes to the other: "But setting aside
our Losses, Crosses and Misfortunes, our National Agreement will make you and and me
Happy, although they Restore not our Husbands to their Riches" (Ww2v). By expressing this
political criticism in the form of a correspondence between two women, Cavendish veils her
invasion of the male sphere of politics. She adopts a form which creates the illusion that the
utterances take place in a private setting. Furthermore, the political views that are at times
expressed in these letters are balanced by appropriately feminine discourses. For instance, in

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4 This desire to be remembered by after ages is also revealed by the way in which Cavendish had herself
portrayed. Figure 8, a depiction of Margaret Cavendish as a statue, shows that the Duchess wanted to be
memorialised after her death, having monuments erected for her.
Letter CXLVII one of the female friends states: "much Talking is a Disease, or a Natural Defect, or rather Effect, in the Female Sex…my Desire is rather to be a Monster for Silence than a Natural in Talk"(Qq1v). Thus, while the two ladies, and, consequently, Cavendish the writer, overstep gender norms by engaging with political expression, at the same time the text playfully refers to the gender ideal of feminine silence.\(^5\)

In her *Orations, of Divers Sorts* (1662), Cavendish discusses subjects, such as death, kingship and literature, from different possible perspectives. The oration is a formal speech on a public occasion. Not surprisingly, in the light of the social norms requiring woman's silence, the oration was considered an unacceptable genre for a woman writer. Cavendish's use of the generic format of the oration therefore implied a challenge to dominant gender norms. In the text Cavendish adopts both feminine and masculine discourses, and both feminine and feminist voices, apparently enjoying the debate of issues from different positions. As if she were a crossdressing actress on an imaginary stage, Cavendish assumes the male personae of the Privy Counsellor, a Soldier, a King in "A Kings speech to rebellious Subjects" (R2v). Thus, as a writer she speaks in a male voice on masculine political topics. At other points she assumes a woman's persona and voice, for instance, in "A Young Virgins Dying Speech" (T3r). Furthermore, the volume contains orations which alternately include dominant gender discourses or alternative gender notions. "An Oration against the Liberty of Women" calls for "Moderation, Sobriety and Silence amongst" women (Ff2v), whereas "An Oration for the Liberty of Women" argues for equal partnership in marriage (Gg1r). Likewise, one of the "Female Orations" supports the idea that women "should imitate men, so will our Bodies and Minds appear more masculine and our Power will Increase by our Actions" (Gg2v). By contrast, another of these orations suggests that women should be "Modest, Chast, temperate…which will gain us praise from men, and Blessing from Heaven" (Gg3v). By thus expressing different vantage points on the position of women without pinning herself down to one particular view, Cavendish could negotiate her own anomalous status as a woman writer and circumvent condemnation for offering a too radical plea for women's rights. At the same time, Cavendish's playful adoption of differently gendered voices testifies to her resistance towards social restrictions on women. She refuses to be restricted to the feminine discourse imposed upon the female sex, appropriating the freedom to take up various modes of discourse.

\(^5\) The irony is, of course, that the two ladies are far from silent, being given to much discourse in their correspondence.
While in the *Orations, of Divers Sorts* Cavendish moved into the masculine realm by taking up political subjects, her various works on science mark an even more drastic invasion of man's territory. Yet, writing upon such a wide range of subjects as atoms, microscopes, methodology and epistemology, Cavendish defined her own engagement with science in feminine terms, so as to legitimise her activities. Cavendish describes her scientific research in terms of the imagination, using the trope of "spin[ning] out the fine and curious thread of fancy" (*The Philosophical and Physical Opinions*, 1655, B2v). Cavendish defines "fancy" and "natural imagination" as the sources of scientific observations, and her own scientific opinions in particular. In so doing, Cavendish brings the two notions that were culturally constructed as contrary, namely science and "fancy", together, blending the imaginative and poetic with the scientific. In her address “To all worthy and noble ladies” in her *Poems and Fancies* (1653) Cavendish argues that “female brains work usually in a fantastical motion”, that is, are directed by "Fancy", going “not so much by Rules and Methods as by choice” (A2v). Because Cavendish herself identifies imagination as womanly in a variety of her writings, her relating of fancy to her scientific texts could be read as a defence of her feminine identity despite her masculine investigations. At the same time, Cavendish's description of scientific enquiry in terms of fancy implied that she reconstructed the current conceptions of scientific methodology, proposing a new way of studying nature which was no longer out of reach for women.

In her writings Cavendish often looks back to the female rule of Elizabeth I, as "a way of questioning the disenfranchisement of women in Restoration society" (Jowitt, 1997, 391). For instance, in *A New Blazing World* (1666) Cavendish creates a fantasised, self-sufficient world where women rule instead of men, and where she herself can rule as an empress: "The Empress asked, whether it was not possible, that her dearest friend the Duchess of Newcastle might be Empress of one of them?" (1994, 184). Cavendish imagines a universe, ably governed by herself as a Duchess, in which women have more access to the public sphere and can develop their innate skills to the full. Through this fantasy Cavendish not only overcomes her own exclusion from the masculine public world as a woman, but also criticises the restricted sphere to which her own society confined the female sex.

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6 Cavendish was the first woman ever to attend the Royal Society, albeit merely as a silent listener. She also corresponded with a number of scientists, such as the Dutch Constantijn Huygens, who expressed his hope that the marchioness “may be so bountifull” towards him as to “instruct” him about the natural world. Letter of March 12th 1657. Huygens. f. 37.

7 For more details about Cavendish's use of fancy in relation to science see Bowerbank 192-196, and Corporaal, 2000, 151-54.

8 See also Blaydes, 1988, 51-55.
Producing a great number of texts, and venturing upon topics such as science, politics and women's rights, it is not surprising that Cavendish was considered rather eccentric by her contemporaries. Dorothy Osborne wrote to her future husband William Temple that Cavendish must be "a little distracted, she could never be so ridiculous else to venture at writing books" (1947, 37). John Evelyn expressed hostility towards Cavendish as a writer, calling her "a mighty pretender to learning, poetry, and philosophy" (1902, II, 24).9 Veiled criticism of Cavendish's concern with learning can also be found in Huygens's letter to Cavendish of March 12th 1657. Huygens suggests that Cavendish, though a "female faire", manages to "out masculine wisdom" (f. 37). This remark creates the impression that Cavendish unjustly appropriates the male prerogative of knowledge. However, these negative comments did not restrain Cavendish from giving in to her addiction to the pen, and from having all her works published.

6.2. The Unnatural Tragedy: a Textual History.

One of the genres taken up by Cavendish was drama. Although within her work, Cavendish repeatedly denies any working knowledge of theatrical methods and techniques,10 Cavendish must have been familiar with plays from her childhood. As a young girl Cavendish and her family spent winters in London where they would go to plays. As a lady in waiting of Queen Henrietta Maria, who was involved with organising dramatic productions and performances on the courtly stage, Margaret Cavendish must have seen some of the courtly theatrical productions. While no record states that Cavendish ever saw a specific masque at the English Court, a dedicatory poem in the Sociable Letters (1664) shows that Cavendish had viewed "The ceremony and Splendor of a court/ Their Playes, Balls, Masks, and several every Sport" (B1r).11 When Cavendish lived in Paris from 1644-8, the exiles still performed masques on festival days.12 After her marriage to the Duke of Newcastle who had been patron to such dramatists as Jonson, Flecknoe and Dryden as well as a successful playwright and producer of drama in his own right, Margaret was further introduced to the theatrical world.13 Margaret Cavendish's stepdaughters, Jane Cavendish and Elizabeth Brackley, were active as writers of

9 See also Quinsee, 2000, 93.
10 For instance, in the preface to her Playes (1662) Cavendish argues: "and as for the niceties of Rules, Forms, and Terms, I renounce, and profess, that I did understand and know them strictly, as I do not, I would not follow them…” (A4r). See also Sanders, 1998, 295.
11 See also Wood, 2000, 288.
12 See Hotson, 1928, 22. According to Hero Chalmers, Margaret Cavendish seems to have had a great "investment in this feminocentric dimension of court culture" (1999, 83).
two closet plays, among which *The Concealed Fancies* (c. 1645), addressed to "My Lord", their father (preface).\(^\text{14}\)

Her marrying into a family which actively engaged with the production of drama may have encouraged Margaret Cavendish to try her hand at drama herself. During the Interregnum Cavendish wrote numerous plays, which were only published after the Restoration in the collections *Playes* (1662) and *Plays Never Before Printed* (1668). Apart from this, Cavendish may have felt induced to take up the dramatic genre by the actresses she saw on the stages of the Continent. During her years in exile in Antwerp Cavendish must have become fascinated by a female performer on the public stage, who could so easily cross boundaries of sex and gender, for *The Sociable Letters* (1664) contain a long description of a female performer:\(^\text{15}\)

> Upon this Profess'd Mountebank's Stage, there were two Handsom Women Actors, both Sisters...his Wife was far the Handsomer, and better Actor, and danc'd better than the other; indeed she was the Best Female Actor that I ever saw; and her Acting a Man's Part, she did it so Naturally as if she had been of that Sex, and yet she was of a Neat, Slender Shape. (letter CXCV, Bbb2v)

The visual pleasure that Margaret Cavendish seems to have derived from watching an actress perform may have led to fantasies about acting and producing plays herself. Having no opportunity to perform or write drama for the public stage, due to the restrictions for English women and the ban on the public theatre during the Interregnum, Cavendish imagined her brain to be a stage on which she could have the drama that she had invented enacted: "But after my Thoughts had Acted, Danced, and Played the Fool, ...the magistrates of the Mind Commanded the Fancy-Stage to be taken down, & the Thought-Actors to go out" (1662, A2r).

Cavendish's fantasies of having dramatic creations of her own performed on "My brain the Stage" where her "thoughts" are "acting" (1662, A2r) point to the ambiguous nature of the drama that she eventually wrote. The idea of her brain as a stage creates the impression that her plays should be seen as private fantasies about how these texts could be staged, while at the same time they remain actually unperformed. However, Cavendish's suggestions that her plays are merely designed for private musing and reading is contradicted by the actual desire for performance that she expresses, and the discourses of performativity that she uses in relation to her "fancied" plays. Obviously, Cavendish could only imagine her plays staged at the time when she wrote them, since there was no opportunity to have her drama performed at

\(^{13}\) See also Powers, 2000, 83.  
\(^{14}\) Thus, through her marriage Cavendish entered a "family who wrote plays or in various ways participated in playmaking" (Wiseman, 1992, 162).  
\(^{15}\) For an account of Cavendish's fascination with the woman actress see also James Fitzmaurice, 2000, 37; and Wiseman, 1992, 167.
all. Hence the comment she made when she wrote her plays in the 1650's: "the reason I put out "my Playes in print, before they are Acted, is first, that I know not when they will be Acted, by reason they are in English, and England doth not permit, I will not say of Wit, yet not of Playes" (1662, A3v). 16 However, the fact that Cavendish wrote her drama during a period in which the difference between closet and public drama had collapsed, and in which references to performativity were used to emphasise the public nature of closet plays, compels us to consider her closet plays as more public than the closet drama written by Sidney and Cary. Cavendish's performance fantasies may be interpreted as expressions of resistance towards the Puritan regime, hence, as political statements.

Yet, even when acting on the English public stage became possible again during the Restoration, Cavendish's plays retained their ambiguous status. Cavendish rejects performance of her drama, arguing that her plays were sent "forth to be printed, rather than…concealed in hopes to have them first Acted…out of the fear of having them hissed off from the Stage" (1662, A3v). Furthermore, she claims that "most of my Playes would seem tedious upon the Stage, by reason they are somewhat long" (1662, A3V). Cavendish thus mentions her lack of skills as one of the reasons for not having her plays enacted on stage. Yet, she also blames the social conditions as one of the reasons why she only had her drama printed. As she contends, staging her plays would make them lose their power. Under the Protectorate, English youths did not have the opportunity to learn acting, and it would take a long time before any skilful actors would be available again. She asserts:

The printing of my Playes spoils them for ever to be Acted; for what men are acquainted with, is despised, at lest neglected; for the newness of Playes, most commonly, takes the Spectators, more than the Wit, Scenes, or Plot, so that my Playes would seem lame or tired in action, and dull to hearing on the Stage. (1662, A3v)

In other words, the social restrictions which made it impossible for Cavendish to have her plays staged earlier, and therefore forced her to have them printed, prevented any future performances of her drama. This is of course an inadequate excuse, since Cavendish only had her plays printed in 1662, when she could have them enacted before they were spoilt by publication. Cavendish thus seems to forfeit the possibility of having her plays staged, and confines her plays to the status of texts for private reading. On the other hand, Cavendish's elaborate apology for not having her plays staged at the same time undermines the private nature of her dramatic texts, since in this way she suggests that a stage production of her plays

16 As Gweno Williams points out, by having her drama printed Cavendish even claimed "a place within the male dramatic tradition, where she located herself from the start by publishing her works in folio format, which distinguished the highest status male canonical drama of the century" (2000b, 95).
would be a possibility. Moreover, the instructions that Cavendish gives to the reader in her "General prologue to all my Playes" seem like stage directions for a performance of her texts. She thus implies that her texts are performable: "for Scenes must be read as if they were spoke or Acted…and as for Tragedies, or Tragick Scenes, they must not be read in a pueling, whining Voice, but a dash, serious Voice, as deploring or complaining (1662, A6v-A7r). Her excuses for not having her plays enacted can therefore be read as a strategic expression of feminine modesty: Cavendish's remarks betray an awareness of the impropriety of being a woman dramatist, and anxiety about her skills as a playwright.

The 1662 edition of Cavendish's dramatic corpus consisted of thirteen plays, which were probably written in Antwerp in the late 1650's. Because the manuscript of plays intended for an earlier printing was lost at sea and had to be re-edited from original copies, the publication of the plays was delayed. The volume that was issued in 1662 under the title Playes was never reprinted. The genre of the plays in this volume was defined in only a few cases by Cavendish. For instance, Love's Adventures and The Publick Wooing are just identified as "plays". Two of the thirteen plays, Matrimonial Troubles and The Comical Hash, are explicitly called comedies. While a play such as Youth's Glory and Death's Banquet contains tragic elements, of all thirteen plays only The Unnatural Tragedy is categorised as tragedy. This latter play has two plots. One plot deals is clearly modelled on the main plot of John Ford's 'Tis Pity She's a Whore: it deals with a sexually loose man, Frere, who is ordered by his father to marry the bride chosen for him. Coming home after many years, he immediately falls in love with his married sister. Unsuccessful in concealing his passion for his sister, Frere rapes her. Thus having satisfied his lust, Frere kills Soeur and subsequently commits suicide. The second plot also contrasts the wanton, wicked behaviour of a man, Monsieur Malateste, with the virtuous behaviour of his wife, Madame Bonit. The adulterous Monsieur Malateste indirectly causes the death of his wife by his emotional cruelty, and immediately remarries a rich widow. This widow, however, proves to be so strong-willed that Malateste is forced into submission. His new spouse cheats on him with other men, and wastes all his savings, while Monsieur Malateste dies in loneliness. While Cavendish defines

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17 Cavendish's suggestion that her texts are performable on a public stage is enhanced by her defence of the public theatre as a way to instruct the upper classes: "I cannot chuse but mention an erroneous opinion got into this our Modern time and men, which is, that it should be thought a crime or debasement for the nobler sort to Act Playes, especially on Publick Theatres…for it learns them [youths] gracefull behaviours and demeanours" (1668, A4v).
18 In Harbage's Annals (1967) the plays are listed as written between 1653 and 1658.
19 See Shaver, 1999, 1.
20 Anne Shaver also argues that Cavendish's dramatic "work often challenges traditional categories" (1999, 7).
her play as tragedy, this second plot consists of comic elements, such as the theme of the cuckolded husband.

6.3. Cavendish's Criticism on the Voiceless Female.

Cavendish's play was written several decades after Mary Sidney and Elizabeth Cary had started to explore alternative representations of female utterances. Therefore, not surprisingly, *The Unnatural Tragedy* stages a set of dialogues in which the dominant discourses on woman's voice are implicitly questioned.\(^{22}\) The play depicts a group of young women, called sociable virgins, who eloquently discuss subjects, such as rhetoric and literature, and who are quite outspoken, even on topics such as matrimony and gender issues. These witty, wordy young women are virgins who "resolve to live a single life" (I, 7). In other words, at some points in the text speaking women are identified with celibacy rather than sexual looseness.\(^{23}\)

The ideology of the silent woman is undermined at several other stages of the play. In a conversation with a friend, a gentleman argues that he would never marry one of the sociable virgins: "No, no, I will choose none of them; for they are too full of discourse: for I would have a Wife rather to have a listning ear, than a talking Tongue" (IV, 29). The gentleman's rejection of the sociable virgins appears to confirm the idea that a good wife is silent. However, this lip service to the dominant ideology is countered by an alternative view on the speechless woman. As the gentleman claims further on, he desires a silent wife that she may "by her Ear… receive wise instructions, and so learn to practise that which is noble and good; also to know my desires, as to obey my will" (IV, 29). Put differently, the gentleman seeks to marry a silent woman, because he would then be able to control her and have his will.

Through this conversation between the two gentlemen the social silencing of women is

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\(^{21}\) By contrast, critics have defined several of Cavendish's plays, such as *Bell in Campo* and *Youth's Glory and Death's Banquet* also as tragedies.

\(^{22}\) Significantly, Harbage categorises the plays as "dialogues, closet" in his Annals (1967).

\(^{23}\) Margaret Cavendish's *The Publick Wooing* (published 1662) also partially undermines the common analogy between woman's speech and sexual incontinence. Lady Prudence is set upon being wooed in public, because public dialogues between men and women would secure a woman's honourability: "The Vow is, never to receive a Lovers Address, or to answer a Lovers Sue, but in a publick Assembly…and surely were there a Law to forbid all private meetings of young men and women, and that no woman should marry, unless they be wooed in publique, there would not be so many unequal matches, so many perjur'd Consciencs, so many devirginate, and forsaken maids…neither would there be such flood of tears from sorrowful parents Eyes for their undutiful childrens Actions…But they will be asham'd in publique to choose dishonourably or indiscreetly" (I, 4). In her *Poems and Fancies* (1653) Cavendish similarly suggests that making women engage with writing makes them safe from the temptation of adultery, "may imploy their time no worse then in honest, Innocent, and harmlesse fancies, which, if they do, men shall have no cause to feare that when they go broad, in their absence, they shall receive an Injury by their loose Carriages" (A3v). She thus reconstructs the dominant discourses concerning the female voice. Thus, Mendelsohn appears to be right when she concludes that "furnished with a disguise in her
exposed as an unjust way for men to secure their power. Cavendish further criticises the social idealisation of speechless women by pointing out that silent women are not appreciated and are even maltreated by their husbands. Madame Bonit is represented as a woman who never contradicts her husband, and who is determined to observe a feminine silence even when her husband is unfaithful to her. She will not publicise how she is wronged by her husband out of fear of becoming "the publick discourse of the Town" (I, 5). Although Madame Bonit conforms to society's ideal of womanhood, she is neglected by her husband. Monsieur Malatesta has an affair with their maid Nan, and robs his wife of her jointure. Yet, his second wife, the assertive, unfaithful Madame Malatesta, who was once part of the group of sociable virgins, is worshipped by Monsieur Malatesta.

As the sociable virgins comment upon Monsieur Malatesta's treatment of Madame Bonit: "Husbands think a cross and contradicting Wife is witty; a bold and commanding Wife, of a heroick spirit...And for those good qualities he loves her best, otherwise he hates her; nay, the falser she is, the fonder he is of her" (I, 7). Through the virgins' remarks, Cavendish herself appears to express criticism concerning the ideology of feminine silence.24 The sociable virgins therefore appear to function as a chorus who comment on the main actions of the other characters, and thus, direct the readers' perceptions of them. Cavendish's rejection of the ideal of feminine silence through the voices of the sociable virgins is, however, accompanied by anxiety about woman's self-assertion within marriage. The virgin who marries Monsieur Malatesta has to "match" his bad "nature and disposition" (III, 23) in order to survive, and therefore has to act as an unchaste, commanding wife. Cavendish suggests that a woman's sexual incontinence and unruly speech may be attributed to a husband's bad nature, requiring a match in wickedness. The fact that the virgin adopts Malatesta's name – in contrast with Malatesta's first wife, Madame Bonit – symbolises her assumption of a behaviour that will equal her husband's domineering, wanton nature. At the same time, Cavendish appears to display unease about women who seek to imitate male models of behaviour, as far as self-assertion and sexuality are concerned. While Madame Malatesta justly punishes Monsieur Malatesta...

24 Cavendish also questions the dominant idealisation of feminine silence in *Youth's Glory and Death's Banquet* (published in the 1662 collection of plays). Lady Innocence is victimised by the fact that she observes the feminine norm of modest speech. When she is accused of wantonness and theft, she does not assert herself to defend herself against the imputations, feeling that "none can be devirginated that suffers not immodest actions" (Part II, II, 5). She is disempowered by her decision that "silence, and patience, shall be my two Companions" (Part II, II, 5), in that her feminine silence does not protect her against slander that she is lascivious. In other words, her silence does not automatically lead people to believe that she is sexually continent, and thus, the dominant discourses are exposed as inconsistent."
Malateste for his maltreatment of Madame Bonit, she represents the spectre of the woman who is both outspoken and sexually immoral.

6.4. Domestic Debates and Spotless Speeches.

Cavendish frequently dissociated herself from the stereotype of the bawdy woman writer by associating her writings with sexual purity. For instance, in the preface to her *Nature's Pictures, Drawn by Fancy's Pencill to the Life* (1656) Cavendish claims that she wants her writings to "beget chast Thoughts" rather than "Amorous thoughts" (C2v). In her tragedy, woman's outspokenness is also legitimised, since the talkative, witty young women who take delight in debating matters are virgins. In naming her outspoken female characters "sociable virgins" Cavendish combines the two incompatible concepts of virginity and female speech. In this respect there is a parallel between the sociable virgins and Lady Sanspareille in *Youth's Glory and Death's Banquet* who delivers long speeches in front of a male audience, and stands for sexual purity: "For I will never be so dishonourable, perjurious, and impious, to break the holy Laws, and pull the Virgin Altars down" (Part II, I, 4).

In *The Unnatural Tragedy* the association between woman's speech and sexual purity is reinforced, because the image of the enclosed garden, symbol of sexual purity, is evoked in relation to the young girls' debates. When the third virgin begins her poem with the words "natures Flowers are Poets Fancies, and Natures Gardens are Poetical Heads", the matrons suggest that they should "leave her in her Garden, and talk of something else" (III, 15). At the same time, Cavendish's use of the metaphor of the garden appears a playful allusion to the past reign of the Stuarts. As Vaughan Hart explains, during the reign of the Stuarts much attention was paid to garden design. It was thought that the courtly gardens should become "the paradigm of natural perfection and original setting of humankind's unity with God" (1994, 92), and thus exemplify the harmony of the Garden of Eden. The courtly gardens were therefore laid out in formal patterns, such as concentric circles representing the Pre-Copernican cosmos, in order to present an image "not merely of royal harmony with nature but of absolute royal control over the floral world as a corollary of the absolute monarch's magical power over the heavenly realm and its flora, the stars" (1994, 95). This representation

25 Linda Payne argues: "Not only can Cavendish 's heroines envision life without marriage, but they can also envision life without men" (1991, 25).
26 Misty Anderson claims that in her plays Cavendish makes "female bodies sites of pleasure accessible to women rather than consumable objects available only to men (1999, 331).
27 Cavendish also used the image of the garden in relation to herself as a poet. In *Poems and Fancies* (1653) one finds a poem called "Similizing the Braine to a Garden" in which she compares her creative writing with gathering flowers from her garden: "And from that garden Flowers of Fancies take" (S2v).
of the courtly gardens as symbol of the bond between God and humanity in Eden was often referred to in drama, as, for instance, in Ben Jonson's masque *Love's Triumph through Callipolis* (1631): "this/ The temple of all beauty is...The centre of proportion...sweetness...grace" (1969, 458). By alluding to the image of the garden, Cavendish therefore seems to recall an idealised past in which the monarchy brought social harmony. Yet, at the same time, her connection of the sociable virgins to the trope of the garden entails a subversion of the Eve myth underlying the dominant condemnation of female self-expression. As has been pointed out, Eve's persuasive speeches were often represented as the cause of man's Fall and subsequent expulsion from paradise. Placing the talkative virgins in a context which alludes to Eden, Cavendish undermines the idea that woman's words lead to downfall. Thus, she redeems the female voice.

In the opening scene of the play the male protagonist Frere utters his bawdy desires to his friend in a very explicit way: "I will stay here a while longer for the Curtezans sake: for we shall never get such store, nor such choice of Mistrisses; therefore, though the sober and chaste women are kept up here in *Italy*, yet the wild and wanton are let loose to take their liberty" (I, 1). He openly speaks of his incestuous lust for his sister, and tries to persuade her into an incestuous relationship with him. In response she angrily remarks: "Brother, speak no more upon so bad a subject, for fear I wish you dumb: for the very breath that's sent forth with your words, will blister both my ears (V, 31). Whereas Frere's speeches aim to corrupt his sexually spotless sister, Soeur mainly asserts her voice in order to defend her own sexual honour and eradicate her brother's vile thoughts and speeches: "No Brother, I never was wild nor wanton, but always modest and honest" (II, 11). This contrast intensifies Cavendish's positive, subversive portrayal of female self-expression in the play.

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28 A similar attitude towards men's speech is expressed in *Bell in Campo* (printed in 1667). The women are commanded by Victoria not to speak with men: "The reason of this is, that men are apt to corrupt the noble minds of women, and to alter their gallant, worthy, and wise resolutions, with their flattering words, and pleasing and subtil insinuations" (Part I, scene 14).

29 Deborah Burks states that "Cavendish appeals to her readers' expectation that noble Ladies are inherently chaste. In the same sentence, however, she appeals to her readers' knowledge that the chastity of noble men is not to be depended upon" (2000, 85).
6.5. Man's Blasphemy versus Woman's Religious Defence.

As we have noticed, Renaissance and early Restoration women often presented their speeches and writings as defences of God's creation against men's irreligious words. Intriguingly, when Soeur asserts her voice in the play, it is not just to protect her own and her brother's sexual honesty, but also to defend God's laws. Like Ford's protagonist Giovanni, who tells Annabella that the "holy church" (I, ii, 254) condones their incestuous desire, Frere attempts to convince Soeur that it is no sin to submit to his sexual passions for her, since the laws which have forbidden incest are "foolish binding Laws which frozen men have made". Instead they should "follow Natures Laws, whose Freedome gives a Liberty to all" (IV, 25). Whereas Ford's Annabella is represented as a lustful creature, being easily persuaded to surrender to her own incestuous longing for her brother, Soeur does not feel any sexual desire for her brother, and rejects his wooing of her. Frere's defiance of God's laws in this respect is countered by Soeur's passionate refusal to give in to his desires, which at the same time constitutes a defence of God's heavenly doctrine: "Heaven hath taught that Doctrine; wherefore we cannot erre" (IV, 25).

In addition, there is a contrast between the way in which Frere and Soeur use religious discourses in their speeches. Ford's Annabella engages with blasphemy, employing religious imagery to describe her transgressive sexual desire for Giovanni by calling him a "celestial creature" with a "blessed shape" (I, ii.,137-38). However, Cavendish's Soeur uses biblical references and positions herself as a speaker in relation to God and Heaven with honourable ends in mind. For instance, Soeur adopts religious discourses when she confesses her sisterly affection for Frere: "I do vow to Heaven I love you better than ambitious men love power" (IV, 25).30 She refers to heaven in order to express her concern about her brother's moral well-being: "Heaven bless your soul: for sure you are possest with some strange wicked spirit, that uses not to wander amongst men" (IV, 25). By contrast, Frere's motives for invoking God are immoral. He applies to divine power to help him satisfy his lust by raping his sister: "if Gods had power, they sure would give me strength…and if they cannot help, or will not help me, Furies rise up from the infernal deep, and give my Actions aid" (V, 34).

It is significant that Frere talks about "Gods" and "Furies" here. His adoption of pagan terminology in contrast with his sister mark him out as a sinner in the play. The fact that Frere uses religious discourses in order to secure his wanton lust, whereas his sister employs

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30 Due to a miscalculation or misprint two scenes in Act IV are numbered as "25". The references here are to the "second" scene 25.
religious speech in order to defend their sexual honour, implies a subversion of the dominant discourses, which identify female speech with sexual looseness. Cavendish further legitimises female utterance by alluding to the Virgin Mary in her portrayal of Soeur. At one stage Soeur pleads with her father on her brother's behalf: "Pray Sir perswade him by degrees, and be not too violent at first with him" (III, 19). Soeur thus speaks as an intercessor, just as the Virgin Mary intercedes between God and mankind. The analogy that is suggested between Soeur and the Virgin Mary in turn makes Soeur's outspokenness even more respectable.

6.6. Maternity and Female Communication in the play.

In her address to the readers in *Poems and Fancies* (1653) Margaret Cavendish casts herself in the role of the mother in relation to her text, calling her work a "Strengthlesse childe" (A3v). Interestingly, in *The Unnatural Tragedy* the sociable virgins also adopt the persona of the mother in relation to their thoughts and speeches, alleging that their words are the "children of the Mind, begot betwixt the Soul and Senses" (III, 15). Yet, there is a tension between the role of maternal discourses as a legitimising strategy in the play on the one hand, and the fact that the maternal voices in the play, as represented by the matrons, endorse the cultural equation of woman's self-expression with wantonness on the other. One of the matrons suspects the Virgins of being "wilde and wanton" because of their witty discourse on the term "naked truth" (III, 17). Yet while the matron claims experience, she is at the same time unable to distinguish between literal and figurative meaning: she interprets the phrase "naked truth" as having to do with nudity. The matron's authority, and, with this, her support of the dominant gender ideology, are thus questioned.

The two unnamed gentlemen in the play suggest that they will go and listen to the virgins' discourses, implying that the virgins will speak in front of an audience. However, in the play the virgins are never actually shown to address a public of listeners. In fact, their debates take place in an all-female setting, in that their discussions are "staged" as taking place only amongst themselves with the matrons as listeners and commentators.31 The

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31 Hero Chalmers talks about a "self-sufficient feminised space" (1999, 88) of communication in this respect. In this respect there appears to be a slight difference between *The Unnatural Tragedy* and Cavensish's comedy *The Female Academy*, in that in the latter play "the speeches exist...in a space that is both private and public. The young scholars live 'Incloystered' within the Academy and their speech is directed at each other for discussion and questioning; yet, the walls on either side of their private space are probous to the attentions of the men and women of their community. Their discourses unquestionably function as public lectures, even while the bodies of the lecturers remain secluded within the Academy" (Merrens, 2000, 247). Furthermore, there is a contrast between the private speeches delivered by the sociable virgins and the public orations given by the virgin Lady Sans Pareille in *Youth's Glory and Death's Banquet*. Lady Sanspareille's long speeches in front of a male
enclosed, isolated settings in which the virgins hold their debates evokes the association of the young women with nuns shut up from the world in a convent. Although the virgins criticise woman's exclusion from politics and government in their discussions, they never move into the public arena themselves. Woman's entry into the masculine world as agents and speakers is thus merely anticipated as a possibility in the play. The restricted privacy of the virgins reveals two things. First, it shows that Cavendish envisaged woman's participation in the public sphere as a mere possibility, not a reality. Second, Cavendish's strong emphasis on the private setting in which the virgins debate creates the impression that Cavendish deliberately distanced herself from the public theatre as well as the public connotations of closet drama.

6.7. Empowering Wit, Disempowering Silence.

As Gweno Williams remarks, in Cavendish's drama "male characters are subsidiary, relegated to the margins of the dramatic action, with a limited number of lines" (2000b, 96). This certainly applies to The Unnatural Tragedy, since the greater part of the speeches are delivered by women, and since the female characters' utterances are long compared to the male speaking parts. Furthermore, Cavendish allows her female characters full expression on subjects considered unfit for a women. For instance, the play contains a long debate between the virgins about eloquence, which established them as learned women:

4 Virgin…but the Speeches that Thucidides sets down, may be better credited, because most of them were premeditated, and soberly, orderly, and quietly deliver'd…
3 Virgin. But by your leave, let me tell you, that Chronologers do not only new dress truth, but falsifie her, as may be seen in our later Chronologers, such Writers as Camden…to follow the practice of his Profession, hath sweeten'd his pen as towards his scholars and their families; and 'tis likely most towards those scholars that were more beneficial to him. (III, 13)

At the same time that they are given many speaking lines in the play, the sociable virgins also exercise control over the process of signification. They represent themselves according to their own views as virgins who reject the yoke of marriage, they define the notions they discuss, and even use discourse to create poetic metaphors: "natures Flowers are Poets Fancies, and Natures Gardens are Poetical Heads" (III, 15). Thus, Cavendish shows women to have creative minds and to be able to think for themselves.

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32 Representing the virgins as learned women, Cavendish appears to challenge the restrictions on women's education. She shows that women are capable of intellectual debate, hence not unsuitable for education by nature.
Like the sociable virgins Soeur seeks to redefine concepts which she thinks are ridiculous and out of touch with the social reality of women. When her brother categorises Italian women as on the one hand "Curtezans" who "dress themselves finest when they entertain strangers of acquaintance" and on the other hand virgins "inclos'd with locks and bolts...so as a stranger cannot obtain a sight" (II, 11), Soeur repudiates this narrow-minded vision. Claiming "Why, do they fear they would all turn Curtezans if they should be left to themselves?" (II, 11), Soeur undermines the idea that women who are visible to public society should necessarily behave like whores.

However, her deconstruction of the binary opposition of the invisible, silent virgin and the visible, speaking whore is not respected by her brother. Because he can gaze upon his sister's beautiful face, Frere assumes that his sister is lustful. This assumption is further fed by Soeur's insistence that she would never consent to be locked up from the world as the Italian women; an attitude, which, from her brother's point of view, marks her out as sexually available. As a result, despite her heavy protestations that she will not commit incest with him, he rapes her. Showing that Frere does not heed Soeur's insistence upon her status as a pure woman, Cavendish exposes how androcentric society constrains a woman's voice and restrains her capacity for self-representation. Moreover, Cavendish points out that woman's disempowerment in language often issues from the difference between woman's sexual purity and man's wantonness. Soeur is unable to grasp the bawdy double entendres that underlie her brother's words.

Soeur. But pray leave off that unnecessary civility to me, and let us talk familiarly, as brother and sisters do.
Frere. With all my heart, as familiarly as you please. (II, 11)

While Soeur views talking "familiarly" as the spiritually intimate conversation between brother and sister, Frere means something completely different by the word "familiarly", namely sexual intimacy.

*The Unnatural Tragedy* stages several female characters who fail to exercise control over their own existence. Madame Bonit embodies the chaste, silent and obedient wife. She stops making bands for her husband when he says that he does not like them, readily parts with her jointure upon his request, and argues that she "will strive to be more fashionable drest" (I, 6) when her husband criticises her clothing. However, submitting to her husband's wishes, Madame Bonit falls victim to her own goodness. Her husband starts an affair with their maid Nan, who comes to dominate their household. In spite of being humiliated by her husband, Mme Bonit passively resigns to the cruelty that is inflicted on her:
I will not dishonour my self, to mend or reform my Husband…No, I will not venture at it, lest I and my Maid should be the publick discourse of the Town. (I,5)

Since Madame Bonit will not speak up against her husband, nor publicise his maltreatment of her, she cannot regain control over her life and improve her circumstances. Thus, Cavendish suggests that a woman's silence leads to loss of control and victimisation; a suggestion which implies a criticism of the cultural idealisation of the voiceless female.33 Likewise, it is through her silence that Soeur loses control over her existence. When her brother's vile passion has become known to her, Soeur decides to cover his shameful lust up in silence: "I would willingly hide your faults, nay I am asham'd to make them known" (V, 31). However, Soeur's determination not to speak about her brother's passion to anyone eventually makes her the helpless victim of his rape and murder of her. In sum, Frere succeeds in directing the "plot" of Soeur's existence, and even ending her life, because she wants to observe a feminine silence.34

It is notable that both Madame Bonit and Soeur, who play a part in the tragic centre of the play, fail to achieve command over language, their image and their existence. By contrast, the sociable virgins, who are at the periphery of the play, attain a high degree of subjectivity. Why does Cavendish place women who fail as subjects at the heart of her drama? It could be argued that Cavendish feared to foreground an alternative representation of women as successful discursive subjects, and therefore chose to centralise the conventionally silent, powerless women. However, this seems unlikely, considering her fierce criticism on the ideology of the voiceless female in the play. A more plausible argument would be that Cavendish wanted to direct the readers' attention specifically to her demystification of the social cult of feminine speechlessness by centralising two female characters that are victimised by their silence.

6.8. The Tragic Closure, Autonomy and Memory.

Having been raped by her brother, Soeur exclaims that death is "welcom" to her. Although she asserts that if death comes not by her brother's hand, she herself "shall give a passage unto life" (V, 42), she is slain by her brother rather than by her own hand. This points to her lack of

33 In The World's Olio (1655) Cavendish also points to the inadequacy of 'feminine' behaviour, showing how women are victimised by it. The work includes a story about the good wife who, having "Fortitude in Patience, her Constancy in Chastity, her Love in her Obedience", has a "hard Fortune in an unkind Husband" (M2v).

34 Cavendish voices a similar criticism in Youth's Glory and Death's Banquet. Lady Innocence falls victim to slander concerning her sexual reputation, because she unjustly believes that her feminine silence will defend her against any imputations of dishonourable behaviour. Thus, the ideology of woman's silence is exposed as false, and is shown to disempower virtuous women.
Virtuous Voices

autonomy. Frere's control over his sister's life is emphasised by his representation of his plans as a fate that she cannot avert:

…from the first time I saw you, since I came from Travel, I have been in love with you, and must enjoy you; and if you will imbrace my love with a free consent, so, if not, I'll force you to it….Sister I must die, wherefore you must not live…(V, 42)

Having secured that "none can enjoy her after me", Frere extends his control over Soeur beyond the grave, similar to Ford's Giovanni, whose possession of Annabella's heart transcends death. While Frere obtains autonomy over his life through his suicide, following his sister in death at the same time enables him to make his morbid fantasy of an eternal union with Soeur come true: "And as we came both from one Womb, do joyn our Souls in the Elizium, our Bodies in one Tomb" (V, 42). Furthermore, there is a contrast in the degree to which Soeur and Frere achieve transcendence, in that Soeur dies without a final moment of assertion. By contrast, Frere enjoys the possibility to establish his identity before he dies: "Let me tell you, Sister, I am as I was, and was as I am" (V, 42).

The conclusion of the Unnatural Tragedy creates the impression that Cavendish confirms the tragic conventions concerning characterisation and plot, according to which male characters enjoy more discursive and narrative command than the female characters at the tragic closure. However, the fact that Soeur is granted neither autonomy over her existence, nor a last moment of self-assertion may also be related to Cavendish's criticism on feminine silence in the play. When Soeur's death in The Unnatural Tragedy is compared to Lady Sanspareille's dying moment in Youth's Glory and Death's Banquet, it becomes clear that Lady Sanspareille displays control over how she wants to be buried and remembered. Although Lady Sanspareille is powerless against the mortal disease that has overcome her, she gives directions for the scenario of her burial: "let spotless Virgins bear me to my grave, and holy Anthems sing before my Herse…and one my Coffin spread upon a covering of smooth Sattin, white, to signify here how I lived a Virgin, pure I lived and dyed. ..and let my works, which I have wrought, and spun out of my brain, be given to times Library, to keep alive my name" (II, 14). Yet, there is not just a contrast between Lady Sanspareille's self-representation and narrative command on the one hand, and Soeur's controlled and silent death on the other hand. Whereas Soeur's conduct is frequently marked by a modest silence, Lady Sanspareille is a female orator who holds public speeches in front of a male audience, and who refuses to have her talents buried in silence. If the two female characters are compared and contrasted, the conclusion can be drawn that Cavendish depicts woman's speech as an empowering quality through which women can achieve a greater degree of
autonomy over their lives. By contrast, in her plays Cavendish represents feminine silence as a form of behaviour which weakens women's sense of selfhood and authority.35

Cavendish also questions and reconstructs the conventional tragic representations concerning memorialisation. In most seventeenth-century English tragedies the chaste and silent women are commemorated. In *Titus Andronicus* the memory of Lavinia's "delightful engine of her thoughts/ That blabb'd them with such pleasing eloquence" (III, i, 83-84) is kept alive by her uncle. Likewise, in Tourneur's *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1607) Antonio has a monument built for his once modest, virtuous wife: "Her funeral shall be wealthy, for her name/ Merits a tomb of pearl" (I, iv, 69-70). The wife's embodiment of the feminine ideal of voicelessness is stressed by her appearance as a dead body, while she never is a speaking presence in the play. By contrast, the wordy, wanton female tragic characters, like Tamora, are denied burial and are consigned to eternal oblivion. Cavendish undermines this tragic plot in which the silent woman is glorified through her memorialisation. For one thing, she questions the social respect for the feminine voiceless woman by showing that such a woman is soon forgotten by her husband when she has died. Monsieur Malateste remARRIES shortly after Madame Bonit has passed away, and does not shed many tears in her memory. Furthermore, Cavendish challenges the idealisation of feminine silence by suggesting that although silent women may be commemorated when they have died, they were neglected while they lived. Because of social expectations Monsieur Malateste pretends to devote himself to his wife's memory, whereas during her life he ignored her feelings by sleeping with their maid Nan, and abusing her goodness. Therefore, the first sociable virgin ironically remarks: "Faith, that is some kindeness in Husbands, that they will remember their wives when they are dead, although they forget them whilst they live" (III, 23). In addition, noticing the hypocrisy of men's memorialisation of dead women, the virgins conclude that women had best secure their own lasting presence in memory by aiming for greatness during their lives. They argue that women should attempt to achieve fame during their lifetime, since they cannot expect any respects to be paid to them when they are in their graves:

2 Virgin. And if I were a King, or had a Royal Power, I would create such Ceremonies, as I would be Deify'd, and so worship'd, ador'd, and pray'd to whilst I live.
1 Virgin. So would I, rather than to be Sainted or pray'd to when I were dead. (II, 13)

35 Bernadette Andrea argues that "Cavendish's characters, like Cavendish herself, seem caught in a particularly brutal double bind: for every feminist victory in her plays there exists a female defeat. If one woman wins a battle, another must die. If one woman reigns supreme over empires, the rest must be subdued by their husbands" (2000, 223).
Through the virgins' comments, Cavendish suggests that women should openly assert their talents during their lives and rise to fame's tower through their own achievements. Interestingly, in Bell in Campo (published in 1667) Cavendish similarly points out that women should secure their own glory by displaying their qualities. Having her figure "cast in Brass", and "All Poets… set forth your praise" (Part II, V, 20), the outspoken, assertive Victoria enjoys a lasting fame that will transcend the grave. The memorialisation of herself and her deeds that Victoria enjoys during her lifetime is in contrast with the little attention that is given to Madame Jantil's dead corpse: "She is dead, she is dead, the body hence convey./ And to our Mistris our last rights wee'l pay. So they laid her by her Husband upon the Tomb, and drawing off the Tomb goe out" (Part II, V, 19). The self-effacing Madame Jantil, who follows her husband loyally but submissively in death, does not receive as much attention as the living, assertive Victoria. This points to Cavendish's criticism on the socially constructed parameters of feminine conduct.

6.9. The Unnatural Tragedy and Contemporary Tragedies.

We have already discovered similarities between Cavendish's play and John Ford's 'Tis Pity She's a Whore. Both plays stage a young man who is afflicted by incestuous desire for his sister. Furthermore, in the two tragedies this incestuous desire results in sexual consummation between the brother and sister. Finally, at the tragic closure of both plays the sister is killed by the brother. However, Cavendish has reworked Ford's plot significantly. The virtuous Soeur, who is carrying legitimate offspring, abhors her brother's incestuous desires, and Frere can only satisfy his lust for her by raping her. By contrast, Annabella feels sexually attracted to her brother, and therefore consents to have sexual intercourse with Giovanni. In addition, Annabella and Soeur differ as speaking women. Once she has surrendered to Giovanni's sexual advances, Annabella comes to embody the stereotype of the wanton, wordy woman. Soeur also openly speaks her mind, yet she does so in order to purify her brother's mind and defend her honesty. Soeur's honourability is further emphasised by the fact that she is identified with the Virgin Mary, and indeed is sexually pure, whereas Ford's Annabella represents herself unjustly as the Virgin Mother. The association between Soeur's assertive

36 Anne Shaver also remarks that "although Lady Jantil is praised by male characters in the play, her passive excellence is fiercely overshadowed by Lady Victoria's courage and skill…Lady Jantil's self-sacrifice, though admired by men, is not treated as entirely inspirational to women" (186-187).

37 As Gweno Williams argues, in contrast with Ford's Annabella, "significantly… the sister in Cavendish's play is raped, and never consents to the incest. This is a further example of Cavendish's refusal to create female characters who are commodified as whores" (2000b, 117).
speeches and her sexual purity marks a reconstruction of the conventional representation of women in tragedies from the period.

In questioning the dominant ideology of feminine silence, Cavendish partly builds upon alternative gender discourses which began to appear in Jacobean tragedies. As we have seen, in Othello and The Duchess of Malfi men's speeches are associated with lechery. Likewise, James Shirley identifies Gotharus's words with sexual incontinence, and Ford represents Giovanni's speeches as expressions of his wanton desires, through which he seeks to seduce Annabella. Yet, Cavendish is more radical than her predecessors in subverting the dominant notion that a woman should be speechless. Whereas in The Politician and 'Tis Pity She's a Whore the alternative discourses are paralleled by a confirmation of the idea that wordy women are lascivious, this is not the case in The Unnatural Tragedy. While man's words are identified with sexual impurity, the assertive female characters, such as the sociable virgins, are free from sexual blemish. Furthermore, unlike contemporary dramatists, Cavendish exposes the ways in which society abuses the idealisation of feminine silence. Displaying the ways in which men use the conventional discourses concerning female utterance as a means of dominating women, and illustrating that the chaste, silent women are victimised rather than respected by their husbands, Cavendish unmasks the ideology of the voiceless female as a social mechanism through which men repress the female sex.

Demystifying the voiceless female, Cavendish shows that women who seek to live up to the social ideal are rendered powerless as far as their ability to represent their selfhood and to direct their own lives is concerned. Observing a feminine silence, Soeur and Madame Bonit are neither in command over their public image nor in control over their fates. Although Soeur and Annabella are similar in that both endeavour to construct a self-image and end up deprived of this initial control of self-representation, their loss of the status of subject should be viewed differently. In Annabella's case, Giovanni's appropriation of her authority over her public image and existence serves as the conventional punishment reserved for wanton, outspoken women. However, Soeur's loss of the power to fashion her self and shape her own existence is shown to be the unjust result of men's unwillingness to look at things from a woman's point of view or at least to listen to what she has to say.

Thus, although The Unnatural Tragedy at some points repeats the conventional tragic closure, it does so in order to criticise rather than endorse the traditional tragic ending. This is further emphasised by the fact that it is not explicitly stated in the text that Soeur is robbed of her maternity, according to the conventional tragic ending of the assertive woman. In contrast with this, Giovanni pierces Annabella's womb and kills her infant, her miscarriage thus
stressing her transgressive nature. Cavendish reconstructs the tragic closure as far as the issue of transcendence is concerned. She subverts the conventional tragic plot according to which the assertive women are conferred to eternal oblivion, and only the chaste, silent women are memorialised. In *The Unnatural Tragedy*, the women who embrace the ideal of feminine silence fail to achieve transcendence over death, whereas outspoken women like the sociable virgins have the potential to secure their own lasting fame during their lifetime by displaying their talents. Furthermore, through her representation of the "sociable virgins" Cavendish shows that it is feasible for women to command their own existence without the need to die. The virgins are in contrast with most tragic women, like Penthea, who can only attain control over their lives by seeking their deaths.


Critics have often called Margaret Cavendish's plays utterly undramatic and unstageable, because they "tend to be argumentative rather than dramatic, and they are long…rambling and digressive" (Rubik, 1998, 22).³⁸ Indeed, Margaret Cavendish's *The Unnatural Tragedy* conforms to the generic traditions of closet drama, in that the play consists of conversations rather than action. Moreover, the idea of enclosure is central to the play. The virgins conduct their debates in enclosed, all female settings, and Frere rapes and murders his sister in a room, the door of which is locked and has to be forced open by the other characters.

³⁸ Hiscock even argues that "Cavendish appears to have been fascinated by the ways in which the printed word allowed her access to the stage of oratory without the physical performance of presence" (1997, 403).

It is not remarkable that Cavendish's play includes elements of closet drama. Using the structure of dialogues, Cavendish could present the issues that she sought to discuss, such as woman's education, female speech and matrimony, from different perspectives, and thus avoid condemnation for too directly denouncing current gender norms. Moreover, by representing the virgins' speeches as taking place in enclosed settings, Cavendish could emphasise the private nature of her text as a closet drama, creating the illusion that her voice did not extend to the masculine, public sphere. Besides, using the trope of the closet in relation to the place where Frere rapes and slays Soeur, Cavendish could expose the cruelty that is inflicted upon chaste and silent women by society. Cavendish reveals that men's victimisation of virtuous women is not always apparent, but happens in secret, and the dramatic opening of the chamber parallels Cavendish's blatant exposure of this social reality.
At the same time, the image of the door, which opens the chamber to the other characters' gazes, suggests that Cavendish wanted to break free from the privacy of closet drama and bring her tragedy into public view. Apart from this, the status of *The Unnatural Tragedy* as a closet play is undermined by the sense of the stage in the play. For one thing, Cavendish's plays often suggest theatrical settings. For instance, *The Convent of Pleasure* Act 3 begins with the phrase "The Play is Ready to be Acted", which is an "unequivocal declaration of stage readiness" (Findlay et al., 1999, 129). Similarly, in *The Sociable Companions, or The Female Wits. A Comedy* the idea is created that the plot which the readers have read has been visible on a stage. It is implied that the female author of the play "listens, with a trembling ear; She stands/Hoping to hear Her joy, by your glad Hands"(A1v); a statement which suggests the presence of an audience of spectators applauding. A similar evocation of a theatrical setting is made in the prologue to *The Unnatural Tragedy*:

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Our Poetress is confident, no Fears,
Though 'gainst her Sex the Tragick Buskins wears,
But you will like it, some few hours spent
She'l know your Censure by your hands what's meant. (A1v)
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Furthermore, in *The Unnatural Tragedy* frequent references are made to acting and performance, in the sense of performing a role and dissembling. For instance, when he has already raped his sister, Frere contends that he is also "fit to act that part" of her murderer: "I, who am so full of sin; want nothing now but murther to make up measure" (V, 42). In addition, the play evokes the idea of acting, since the characters frequently disguise their true emotions. Frere first manages to hide his illicit passion from his sister, and Soeur disguises her suspicions about her brother's depression. Apart from this, the notion of identity is related to acting. Cavendish suggests that a woman's gender is a performed part.39 The virgins claim that "if women were impoy'd in the Affairs of State, the World would live more happily", and "if we had that breeding, and did govern, we should govern the world better than it is" (III, 13). The virgins' remarks imply criticism on the ways in which the world is governed by men, and, more specifically, criticism on the Civil war and the Puritan regime. Yet, the conditional mode in which they express the possibility for women to rule the world, also implies defiance of the existing gender norms: there are different ways for women to live up to their womanhood, even though society does not condone all possible modes of behaviour. Cavendish may have included the sense of performance in her play in order to question the

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39 Martha Straznicky points to the theatricality of woman's conduct in Cavendish's plays, arguing that "many of Cavendish's heroines... fulfill their destinies by "performing" in one way or another, be it in the battlefield or in a lecture theater" (1995, 375). See also DeRosa, 2000, 283.
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naturalness of the gender roles that society maps out for women, including the part of the silent, obedient wife.

In *The Unnatural Tragedy* numerous references are made to the visual. For instance, Frere defines his sister as object of the gaze by stating: "Your Beauty, Sister, will not only surprize, but astonish any man that looks thereon" (II, 12). Furthermore, the characters try to make out what the people around them think or feel by looking at their faces. For example, Soeur deciphers Frere's face in order to guess his emotions: "he looks as if he were not very well" (II, 19). Apart from this, the play contains stage directions which line out what can be seen on the stage at a particular moment. For instance, Frere's rape of Soeur is described through stage directions: "He takes her in his arms, and carries her out, she cries help, help, murther, murther. Rape scene is off stage" (V, 42). Through these stage directions the audience of readers is transformed into an audience of spectators who are invited to visualise a stage action in their imagination. In other words, whereas *The Unnatural Tragedy* was presented as a closet drama, the central role of the visual and of the stage directions in the text suggests that the play was written with a stage performance in mind.

Cavendish's recurrent references to spectacle, and her inclusion of stage directions have a specific function in the play. The fact that male characters such as Frere perceive women as objects of their gaze displays the ways in which women and their behaviour are always scrutinised by society. Moreover, the focus on woman as object of the gaze in the play highlights the lustful nature of man, who considers woman's visibility a sign of sexual availability. In Frere's opinion, women who are not "inclos'd with locks and bolts...so as a stranger cannot obtain a sight" (II, 11) are whores. Since his sister's beauties can be gazed upon, he classifies her as sexually available, without heeding his sister's dissent. Stage directions are used to make this social injustice towards women visible to the readers. Frere's rape and murder of his sister take place in a room which is at times open and at times closed to the view of the imaginary audience, the rape occurring off stage according to the stage directions. This shows that society's cruelty against women is not always visible to the eye. Using stage directions to distinguish between what is visible and invisible to the eye, Cavendish criticises society's treatment of women. The socially constructed gender norms suggest an ideal stratification of the sexes, yet underlying this illusion is the hidden reality that women are victimised by the gender discourses of femininity. The final scene in which the chamber where Frere has secretly raped and slain Soeur is opened to the public view can therefore be seen as symbolic of the way in which Cavendish exposes society's maltreatment of women. While the "closet" in which Frere has committed the crimes against his sister is
broken open, at the same time the generic form of closet drama is temporarily discarded by Cavendish.  

6.11. Conclusion: *The Unnatural Tragedy* and Tragic Plays by Female Precursors.

Like Mary Sidney and Elizabeth Cary, Margaret Cavendish reconstructs the social discourses that associate woman's voice with wantonness. Moreover, Cavendish uses similar legitimising strategies, relating her female characters' speeches to sexual purity, privacy, maternity and religion. Similar to Cary, Cavendish emphasises the representation of woman's speech as pure by identifying men's words with adultery and lechery. Also, like Cary, in dismantling the dominant ideology concerning woman's speech, Cavendish exposes the idealisation of the silent woman as a social mechanism which enables men to repress women, and which does no justice to women's real natures. Yet, Cavendish offers a more radical challenge to the dominant ideology than Cary does, by showing that women who seek to live up to the ideal of feminine voicelessness are vulnerable to men's evil intents. In her tragedy she shows that women who are assertive and outspoken thrive better, because they are able to direct their own lives and represent themselves. By contrast, Cary makes clear that a woman's silence and speech are equally self-incriminating.

Cavendish expresses a more radical view on female utterance than Cary, which is underlined by the function of the chorus in the two plays. In Cary's play the chorus consists of a company of Jewish men who appear to speak in one voice, and thus represent the community. They comment negatively on Mariam's verbal assertion and endorse the common association of woman's speech with lasciviousness. Through this role of the chorus in the play, the tension between a woman's desire to express herself and the socially imposed gender norms is intensified. By contrast, in Cavendish's tragedy the "sociable virgins" perform the part of the chorus. Yet, this all female chorus displays a negative attitude towards the female characters' silence and criticises the dominant ideology which constrains woman's voices. Thus, the chorus represents more radical viewpoints on issues of gender. That these subversive voices are at the periphery of the play may have to do with Cavendish's anxiety about being too critical of the existing status quo.  

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40 Obviously, Cavendish's partial forfeiture of the form of closet drama and her inclusion of stage direction can also be viewed as part of her politics of resistance to the Puritan regime. The opening up of the closet in which Frere committed his sins can then be read as Cavendish's exposure of the corruption of the Puritan Protectorate restricting cultural expressions.

41 This interpretation is supported by the fact that the sociable virgins do not speak in one voice, but in the form of debate. Representing the chorus as a group of individuals rather than as a collective group, suggests a distance
challenged gender roles often operated at the margins of society, being excluded from the public sphere. Furthermore, unlike Cary's chorus, the chorus of the sociable virgins do not speak in one voice: the virgins raise their voices in turns and debate among one another. Women's voices being portrayed as the expressive mediums of individuals, it is implied that women should not be subsumed under the single heading "woman". Differences among the female sex must be accounted for, and gender stereotypes fail to reflect the reality of these contrasts between individual women.

Cavendish provides a further challenge to the dominant ideal of feminine silence than Cary. This is revealed by the different ways in which the heroine's tragic error is presented in the two tragedies. Mariam's tragic error is that she fails to create the illusion that she is a chaste wife by constraining her voice. Cary's play justifies woman's outspokenness and questions the dominant gender ideology. However, at the same time The Tragedie of Mariam suggests that women who fail to appear silent and submissive in society, make a mistake for which they can be punished. In Cavendish's drama Soeur's tragic error is her failure to speak up. In other words, in Cary's play the heroine's tragic error is represented as the failure to meet social expectations, whereas in Cavendish's play the heroine's fault is her devotion to the ideology of feminine silence.

Whereas Cary's dying heroine achieves a command over discourse which she had not enjoyed previously, Cavendish's heroines Soeur and Madame Bonit die as silent, signified, helpless objects of man's tyranny. Although the ending that Cavendish envisions for these female characters seems rather bleak, at the same time it underlines her point that women's silence victimises them. Whereas Cary's Mariam achieves discursive control in death, Cavendish portrays the "sociable virgins", whose self-assertion renders them powerful in shaping their own ideas, and in securing fame during their lifetime. Cavendish's vision that women may become powerful speaking subjects without having to die is more optimistic than Cary's.

Like Sidney and Cary, Margaret Cavendish adopted the format of closet drama. Doing so, she could represent her dramatic utterance as private, hence legitimate. As we have seen, Cary partly breaks free from this generic format through Mariam's transcendence over death, and through frequent references to the visual. This move out of the closet has an important
function in Cary's play: it serves to question the social constrictions that are imposed upon woman's speech. Cavendish also challenges the enclosed nature of closet drama by suggesting visibility. Furthermore, in contrast with the tragic closet plays that women before her had written, Cavendish's tragedy includes numerous stage directions, which imply performativity. As in Cary's play, in *The Unnatural Tragedy* the reconstruction of tragic closet drama also serves to undermine the dominant ideology concerning female utterance. Discarding the nature of her play as closet drama, Cavendish can expose the hidden truth that women are victimised by adhering to the image of the speechless woman. Furthermore, as the image of the unlocked chamber suggests, Cavendish underlines the need for women dramatists to be more outspoken, perhaps even to break free from the closet of privacy and seek for more public audiences. Thus, Cavendish's drama seems a further step in the direction of more public forms of drama by women.