

The Faithful Virgins

Chap. hai thus the worlds great light at his Eyes
displays his glory to our wondering eyes.
good heavens what is he! that would once believe
that fullness in so bright a form could live
But ^{who} that by Experience know that faith
in this Admir'd shape no being hath.
Hops Charming looks revive my dying flames
and would ignore my soul, to doat again
where were it not fortified against surprise
I must no more be ruin'd by those eyes

though I move forward yet my soul looks back
as though she were unwilling to forsake
that taking object, but she must not stay
(love once in me) shall reason's power obey.
offers to go

Job

shame will not suffer me to speak to him
why should frail mortals seem to blush at him
(and dare to act it) twill speak though I
Aurora like, in my own blushing eyes
at my request for one short minute stay
for somewhat in my own defence to say
which you should hear -

Chap.

how, in your own defence?
what can ye say?

Job

did ever innocent appear more basely in unblight
why heaven such beauty made you without truth. Youth
will you to my discourse vouchsafe an ear?

Chap.

what can you treat of but how false you are
unto the left and wretched Chaphon
and how much by your fullness hea's undone.
how,

Figure 11: Fragment from Elizabeth Polwhele's *The Faithful Virgins*.

Chapter 8: "Will you to my discourse Vouchsafe an Eare?": Elizabeth Polwhele's *The Faithfull Virgins* (ca. 1661-70).

8.1. "Haunted with poetic devils": Elizabeth Polwhele as a Writer.

Until the end of the 1970's the identity of the author of a tragedy called *The Faithfull Virgins* was unknown. The message scribbled on the back cover of the manuscript, "my Lord pray remember me when you Love Jesus rescue my soule. Amen. E.P", provided at least the initials of the writer. However, the name and gender of the dramatist could only be guessed at.¹ A breakthrough in the search for the anonymous author of *The Faithfull Virgins* occurred when Judith Milhous and Robert Hume discovered the manuscript of a comic play entitled *The Frolicks* in the library of Cornell University. Written around 1670 by a woman called Elizabeth Polwhele, this play contained a preface in which the female dramatist voices her hope that she will not be "taxed for writing a play so comical", but argues that "those that have ever seen my *Faithfull Virgins* and my *Elysium* will justify me a little for writing this" (Polwhele, 1977, 57). Through this dedication of *The Frolicks* to Prince Rupert, therefore, *The Faithfull Virgins* could at last be attributed to the woman writer Elizabeth Polwhele.

The dedication of *The Frolicks* provides us with further useful information about Elizabeth Polwhele. She describes herself as a young unmarried woman "haunted with poetic devils", who voices some anxiety about taking up the pen: "I have for some minutes thrown my foolish modesty aside, and with a boldness that does not well become a virgin, presume to offer this comedy at your grace's feet" (1977, 57-58). Before she wrote her comedy, she must have managed to get two of her plays staged, a tragedy and probably a masque. This becomes clear from her allusion that people may have "seen my *Faithfull Virgins* and my *Elysium*" (1977, 57). She sought for patronage from the upper classes, as is evident from her dedication to prince Rupert who may "spurn" her comedy "into nothing, if in anything it can offend you" (1977, 57). In addition, she must have hoped that her comedy would be performed as well. Prince Rupert was an old friend and fellow cavalier exile of Thomas Killigrew, principal owner and manager of the King's Company, and Rupert's mistress was "the beautiful Margaret Hughes (or Hewes), who acted major roles for the King's Company from 1668 to Spring 1670" (Milhous and Hume, 1977, 35). Therefore, Polwhele dedicated her work to a person who had good connections in the theatre world, and who could help her play on to the stage. Although Polwhele appears to have had a production of her third play in mind, there is no record of its performance. Her earlier two plays appear to have made it to the stage, as is

revealed by Polwhele's suggestion that people may have "*seen my Faithfull Virgins and my Elysium*" (1977, 57, emphasis mine).

Despite the little information about Polwhele that can be gathered from the dedication to Prince Rupert, so far scholars have not managed to trace many facts about Polwhele's life. It has generally been assumed that she was born around 1651 as the daughter of Theophilus Polwhele, vicar of Tiverton, and married Stephen Lobb. This assumption seems likely considering the fact that Theophilus Polwhele left his son-in-law Stephen Lobb and "my eldest daughter Elizabeth his wife" 40 shillings "to buy them rings" (quoted in Eland, 1955, 11). Moreover, that this Elizabeth Polwhele may have been the same person as the female playwright is supported by the fact that Polwhele's dramatic output stopped after 1671 - a time when she may have married Lobb.² Yet, if this is indeed the Elizabeth Polwhele who wrote *The Faithfull Virgins* and *The Frolicks*, it is remarkable that she, as daughter of a Protestant minister, opted for a career as a dramatist.

Besides, if we are correct in assuming that the Elizabeth Polwhele who worked as a dramatist is the same as Stephen Lobb's wife, it follows that her husband and children must have felt very ill at ease with regard to her former dramatic activities. Lobb's son, Theophilus, who also became a minister, wrote *An Answer to that Important Question, whether it is lawful for the professors of the Christian Religion to go to Plays* (1757). In this text he condemns attendance at the theatre, because the theatre and actors "excite and increase in all, who go to them... a Love, and a Fondness for the sensual Pleasures they exhibit" (B1v). In his view "Attendance on those Assemblies is inconsistent with the serious and seasonable performances of the important Duties of family and secret Worship of the great God"(B2v), and "any Member or Guest, in a well-regulated Family" who "goes to a Play... becomes absent from Family Worship, and sets a Bad Example" (B2r). The arguments of family welfare that Theophilus Lobb uses to discourage Christians from watching plays in public playhouses are strongly emphasised. This may indicate an anxiety that he personally felt about the fact that his mother had once written plays for the public stage.

Furthermore, the Elizabeth Polwhele who married Stephen Lobb may have embarrassed her family by a former career as a dramatist, which is suggested by the funeral sermon that reverend Samuel Slater preached upon her death in 1691. A peculiar thing about this sermon is that nothing is said about the life of the deceased Elizabeth. According to a

¹ The manuscript code of *The Faithfull Virgins* is: MS. Rawls Poet. 195. ff. 49-78.

² According to Milhous and Hume, Elizabeth Polwhele must have married Stephen Lobb "well before 17 August 1678, when she bore him a son, one of their five known children" (1977, 44).

preface by Slater, which was appended to the publication of the sermon, he was "seized by, and, for sometime continued under a Sharp Distemper" so that he "could not Study a New Sermon" for Mrs Lobb's funeral, "but was forced to entertain you with one I had preached in mine own Congregation, but a little before, upon the death of a Young Gentlewoman, Mrs. Susan Hakhman"(1691, A1r). The sermon itself therefore "said nothing in her Commendation", and Slater concludes by stating that any commendation would not be necessary, since "Her works praise her, so do you, and the Tongues of them that knew her" (A1v). Although Slater may indeed have felt physically indisposed to write a sermon for Elizabeth Polwhele Lobb, it seems quite strange that he did not make the effort to write a personal sermon, considering the fact that he and Stephen Lobb were colleagues and that he must have known Elizabeth Polwhele personally. There may therefore have been another reason why the life and works of Elizabeth Polwhele Lobb remain unmentioned, possibly the shame felt by the family about her former profession as a dramatist writing for the public stage.³

It may, however, also be possible that the Elizabeth Polwhele who wrote plays for the public stage was a different person. There were several leading seventeenth-century Polwhele families, all from the southwest of England: Devon and Cornwall. The young men of one particular branch of the family were in the habit of going to Exeter College, Oxford. One of these young men, Degorie Polwhele, the son of Thomas Polwhele, matriculated at Exeter College in 1634, aged 17. He appears to have been a doctor and a royalist major of horse. After the loss of the civil war he followed Prince Charles into Holland and Flanders. He returned after the Restoration, became a fellow of Exeter College 1660-3, and died in 1672. Considering the dedication of her plays to prince Rupert, it is possible to imagine Elizabeth Polwhele the daughter of this Royalist Degorie Polwhele. The end of her dramatic production then appears to be marked by her father's death.

However, there was another line of Polwheles, of a higher social class, who seem to have moved in London circles. There was a poet John Polwhele who praised George Herbert in the earliest known response to "The Temple". This John Polwhele is known to have been associated with Lincoln's Inn from 1623 to 1662. Being a man with literary and religious interests and settled in London, where Elizabeth Polwhele's plays were staged, this John Polwhele also seems a likely candidate as the playwright's father.⁴ Probably Elizabeth's

³ At the same time, Slater's use of a previously held sermon for Elizabeth Polwhele Lobb's funeral underlines the fact that Restoration society denied women a sense of individual subjectivity. Slater's practice suggests that all women can be reduced to the same (stereo)type, one sermon applying to all womankind.

⁴ I am much indebted to Helen Wilcox for her suggestions concerning Elizabeth Polwhele's background.

interests in pursuing a career as a dramatist would have met with less opposition from a father working in the literary field himself. Moreover, having connections in the literary world, a man like the poet John Polwhele could have facilitated any daughter's entry into the dramatic world.

8.2. *The Faithfull Virgins*: a Textual History.

The first page of the manuscript provides evidence that Polwhele's *The Faithfull Virgins* was performed on the public London stage: "This tragedy apoynted to be acted by the dukes Company of Actors"(f.49). However, the date of *The Faithfull Virgins* cannot be determined specifically. Harbage's *Annals* say that the play was written and performed sometime between 1661 and 1663. According to Milhous and Hume, performance of the play probably took place around 1670 even if "the author was probably quite young" (1977, 41).⁵

As we have seen, during the 1660's women started to write for the public stage, and, like Frances Boothby, Polwehele was one of the first women who tried to make a breakthrough in the theatrical world. It is partly due to the greater demand for tragedies with many female parts that Polwehele became successful in having her tragedy staged. At the end of May 1668 the Duke's company lost Moll Davis, who retired from the stage when she became Charles II's mistress. Without their leading comic actress, the Duke's Company turned to staging tragedies. Polwehele's *The Faithfull Virgins* was a suitable piece for the company, having four fairly equal female roles, which give women "a high visibility and allows them to speak almost half the lines" (Findlay, 2000b, 134). When the play was performed, the script was cut by the censor. In fact, the manuscript records that it was performed leaving out what had been crossed out by Henry Herbert. Although Polwehele managed to have her tragedy staged, *The Faithfull Virgins* was never published, and "there is no record of any contemporary comment on it" (Goreau, 1980, 115-116). The play is only available in a manuscript in The Bodleian Library in Oxford. As Milhous and Hume assert, this manuscript is "indubitably a fair copy, license included, but nothing beyond conjecture suggests that the original script was used as a prompt copy" (1977, 40) for the performance of the play.

⁵ The editors of *The London Stage* enter the play under June 1663. Angeline Goreau argues that Polwehele "had *The Faithfull Virgins* performed sometime in the 1660's" (1980, 115), while other critics claim that it was probably written and staged at least several months earlier than March 1671/2, the last possible time when *The Frolicks* could have been produced.

8.3. Isabella: Adulterous Villainess or Virtuous Victim?

Since Polwhele's tragedy is currently only available in manuscript form, most scholars will not be familiar with it. Therefore, some introductory remarks on the text are required. What is particularly notable about Polwhele's tragedy is that, unlike most Restoration plays, *The Faithfull Virgins* was written in heroic couplets instead of prose. Polwhele's choice for a poetic mode which was conventionally associated with an elevated style and classical learning implies that she engaged with masculine genres and areas, namely drama, heroic poetry and classical learning, in spite of the fact that she had received the usual restricted feminine education.

The Faithfull Virgins stages several interrelated plots. The first plot deals with two virgins, Merantha and Umira, who choose to retire from the world in order to mourn over the ashes of their beloved Philamon. Umira's brother, Statenor, wants to convince his sister that she is wasting her time by paying her respects to a dead man, and, perceiving Merantha's beauty, immediately falls in love with her. He attempts to persuade Merantha to divert her love from the dead Philamon to him, but she chooses to remain faithful to her former betrothed. Part of this plot centres around the relationship between Statenor and his friend Floradina. While Statenor takes Floradina for a man, she is in fact a woman called Erasila. Erasila has put on a male disguise in order to be close to Statenor whom she is secretly in love with. Another plot in the play focuses on Isabella. She breaks her vows to Cleophon in order to marry the Duke. However, the Duke soon becomes unfaithful to her. Out of grief, the Duchess seeks the murder of Umira, who has won the Duke's heart.

In her representation of Isabella, Polwhele appears to identify woman's speech with sexual incontinence. In the first Act Cleophon confronts Isabella with her unfaithfulness to him. She has broken her vows to him by consenting to marry the Duke, and, therefore, she and "vertue" are no longer "Consistent" (I).⁶ At the same time that Isabella is depicted as an inconstant lover, she is also determined to assert her voice. She insists that she "will speak", since she has "somewhat in my owne defence [to say]/ such you should hear", and demands that Cleophon "to my discourse Vouchsafe an Eare" (I). Cleophon responds to these assertive commands by stating: "What can you treat of but how false you Are?" (I), implying that when Isabella raises her voice it is only to acknowledge her wantonness.

Yet, this confirmation of the dominant discourses is modified by the fact that it does not appear to be Isabella's own choice to abandon Cleophon in order to marry the Duke. Her

statement, "I having yet more Right to you then hee/I'm promised his" (I), suggests that her marriage to the Duke was not her own free choice, but an attachment arranged by her father. Isabella is torn between duty and love, and between public reputation and private feelings. She seems forced to be unfaithful rather than being inconstant by nature: she wishes not wishing to contradict her father, who finds the Duke a more suitable marriage partner than Cleophon. Cleophon justly reproaches Isabella for not being true to their vows, which she had sworn before her father had proposed the Duke as a husband. Furthermore, considering his injured male honour, it is understandable that he refuses to listen to her defence. However, at the same time Cleophon's evocation of the stereotype of the wanton, wordy woman in relation to Isabella appears to ensue from the fact that he will not listen to Isabella's explanation of her seemingly unfaithful conduct. In this way, the play implies that the cultural association of woman's speech with sexual looseness, and the classification of women as either virgins or whores, may be inadequate, resulting from society's refusal to view situations from a woman's perspective and neglects to listen to a woman's voice. In other words, the dominant ideology on female utterance is exposed as rooted in a denial of woman's speech anyway.

Furthermore, the representation of Isabella as an inconstant woman is undercut by the fact that she is associated with Chastity during the presentation of the masque for her wedding, which constitutes a play within the play. As I have pointed out in my discussion of the masques in which Queen Anne participated, court masques often consisted of a masque, in which true womanhood was celebrated, and an antimasque, in which unnatural womanhood was depicted.⁷ In Polwhele's masque, the female characters "Chastity" and "Virtue" are part of the masque structure, whereas "Pride" is part of the group of antimasque characters. Isabella is aligned with the appropriately feminine characters of the masque: she is assigned the role of the protectress of "Chastity" and "Vertue", the two characters who are seated by an Angel he at her feet. Isabella's alignment with Chastity is reinforced by the fact that, during the dramatic entertainments once held for queen Elizabeth I, the female characters of the masque usually walked to or came to sit near the queen in order to be protected by her. For instance, during the Queen's Entertainment in Suffolk and Norfolk in 1578, the character of chastity approached the queen: "Chastitie, suddainely, in view of the Queene, ... rides ... to the

⁶ In the manuscript the play is only divided into acts. Subsequent references will therefore be to the acts of the play.

⁷ See my discussion of *The Masque of Queenes* on pp. 96-97.

Queene, and speakes as followeth, musicke in the meane tyme" (Nichols, II, 191).⁸ Thus, "Chastitie"s and "Vertue"s appeal to Isabella suggests an allusion to the chaste Virgin Queen.

By contrast, in the final act the association of Isabella with sexual incontinence is re-evoked. Isabella has commanded Trasilius to murder Umira, whom her husband adores, in order to avenge the Duke's unfaithfulness to her. Similar to Beatrice Joanna in *The Changeling* who offers sexual intercourse to De Flores as a reward for murdering Alonzo, the Duchess appears to have promised Trasilius sexual favours in return for slaying Umira. In the final scene the Duchess is shown lying on her bed, wearing a night dress. When Cleophon knocks on her door she clearly expects Trasilius, since she mentions his name. However, the Duchess is driven to her sexually loose conduct by her husband's wantonness and his public rejection of her as his wife. In other words, woman's sexually immoral behaviour is presented as the result of man's lasciviousness. Thus, as Alison Findlay points out, "Polwhele seems to reintroduce the stereotype of whore only to show spectators its inadequacy as a definition of woman in a society dominated by male lust" (2000b, 137).

8.4. The Female Characters and "vertue".

The social discourses of sexual purity play an important role in Polwhele's portrayal of female utterance. As the title of the play indicates, the tragedy focuses on a mode of female conduct that accords with the feminine norms of constancy and chastity. The experiences of "Faithfull Virgins", women who are sexually spotless and loyal, are central to the perspective that is offered. Polwhele stays closer to the social norms of femininity than Margaret Cavendish who evokes a contradiction in terms by calling her virgins "sociable" instead of "faithful". While Polwhele endorses the cultural ideal of femininity, she is, however, just as radical in relating woman's speeches to chastity. By calling her tragedy *The Faithfull Virgins*, Polwhele suggests that her dramatic self-expression is acceptable, as it is concerned with a feminine sexual spotlessness. Furthermore, Polwhele shows that the two virgins who mourn over Philamon, Merantha and Umira, discard any speeches that refer to unlawful sexual passion. For instance, when the adulterous Duke woos her, Umira angrily comments that "to your discours I must no more give Eare/You speaking what 'tis guilt in me to heare" (IV).

⁸ In "The deliverie of the Ladie of the Lake", an entertainment organised during Queen Elizabeth's visit to Kenilworth castle on July 18 1575, the queen was also associated with a virtuous, virginal character. The Lady of the Lake addressed the queen, asking for protection from her: "What worthy thanks , might I poor maide expresse?/Or thinke in heart, that is not justly due:/To thee (O Queene) which in my great distress,/ Succours hath sent mine enemies to subdue?" (Printed in Gascoigne, 1918, 104; and quoted in Orgel, 1965, 41).

Umira asserts her voice in order to avoid having to listen to wanton language. Furthermore, she demands that the Duke ceases his illicit discourse "and loue where 'tis fit" (IV). When Umira speaks of Merantha's enchanting beauty, which attracts men, Merantha replies. "I with Tear's implore/ Umira on this theame to speak no more" (II). Thus Merantha does not admit any discourses which have to do with her sexual potential. Moreover, Umira kept silent about her passion for Philamon while he was still alive, and only reveals her affection for him now that he has passed away: "And doe freely now that passion owne/W:ch had he liu'ed the ayre should ne'ar haue knowne" (IV). It is significant that Umira only confesses her love for Philamon now that his attractive body has turned to ashes, and is no longer sexually available. It shows that she only confesses to a passion when this passion can no longer be consummated, and can only be enjoyed at a spiritual level. Umira thus observes a feminine modesty concerning sexual desire.

Woman's speech is further identified with sexual purity, in that the female characters express themselves assertively in order to defend their chastity. Merantha counters Statenor's claims that she should marry him and not waste her beauty in mourning for Philamon with the remark: "the light I have must shew it selfe to non/But rest here in the Shade of Philamon" (II). In other words, she raises her voice in order to defend her loyalty to her former lover Philamon and her virgin state. The faithful virgins' discourses are also mainly concerned with virtue and chastity. Umira states that "Vertue Could not my passion disaproue,/ For as chast virgins worthy Brother's loue/ I lou'd Philamon..."(I). This association of Umira's and Merantha's speeches with sexual purity is intensified by the setting in which they express their thoughts and feelings: the enclosed space of the "hearse" (I) of Philamon. The enclosed, virginal nature of their speeches is further emphasised by stage directions according to which the "hearse" is to open during scenes in which Umira and Merantha appear, and close after such scenes. This opening and closing of the tomb after each scene involving the virgins stresses the nature of the "hearse" as an enclosed space: the virgins are never shown to move out of it.

Intriguingly, Polwhele also aligns her own utterance, the dramatic text, with chastity. The play within the play, that is presented in Act IV to the audience on stage and the theatre audience, is concerned with the victory of chastity and virtue over baser human qualities such as lechery. According to two unnamed gentlemen this staged play within the play is therefore "somewhat in vertue's prayse" (III). By thus including a masque within her play that highlights her role as a dramatist, Polwhele could emphasise that the text of her play was also "in vertue's prayse" (III). Furthermore, although Polwhele's play was performed on the public

stage, and her work was thus on public display, the structure of the play within the play suggests privacy and enclosure. It is embedded within the larger structure of *The Faithfull Virgins* and has a marked beginning and ending, constituting an enclosed space. The embedded structure reminds one of the common association of virginity with enclosure. The centrality of the notion of enclosure to the play, therefore, reinforces the association of the tragedy with sexual continence, despite its being a text performed in the public theatre.

The two gentlemen who prepare seats for the performance on the occasion of the Duke's marriage argue that the play "in vertue's prayse" is "not worth our sight", since virtue is "a pitious, wratched out of fashion thing" (III). Polwhele uses the term "vertue" ironically here, in that the men's rejection of plays on virtue, in that their view on virtue as out of date does not match the appraisal of sexual and spiritual morality in Polwhele's tragedy. It can also be argued that the two men, as the potential theatre audience, represent the Restoration audience's tastes for lascivious rather than virtuous dramatic entertainment. In presenting the two gentlemen's comments Polwhele appears to criticise the demands of the theatre audiences. She wards off any criticism from critics and spectators in advance, that she, as a female dramatist, would stage bawdy plays, transferring the potential for lust to the audience.

The negative attitude that the two men express with regard to virtue is characteristic of the nature of male speech in the play. On the whole, Polwhele associates the male characters' words with inconstancy and lascivious desire. Statenor voices disbelief that lovers can remain constant when the object of their affection is dead, and thus tries to convince Umira and Merantha that getting married is more sensible than remaining faithful to a corpse: "Loue in our brest's can hold but little roome/When the effect that made us loue is gon" (I). He even utters the idea that Philamon "had he bloud would blush" (II) at Umira's mourning. He connects the concept of shame to chastity and faithfulness rather than to wantonness, which is usually related to blushing shame in discourses of gender and sexuality. He thus redefines the notion of shame, which signals his own concern with sexual desire. He woos Merantha persistently in order to persuade her to become his lover. His speeches to her are tainted by his lust for her: "Why should you hide more then the world can boast/Beneath that cloud" (II). The contrast between Statenor's words, which are marked by sexual desire, and Merantha's and Umira's expressions of constancy to Philamon, underlines the association of women's words with chastity in the play. A similar contrast exists between Umira's insistence on her virginity and the Duke's adulterous words:⁹

⁹ Alison Findlay argues that Polwhele's criticism of the Duke serves "to broadcast an indirect yet obvious condemnation" of the King Charles I's "licentiousness" (2000b, 136-37). In the manuscript it is stated that lines

all you can urge can ne'ar my heart reclayme
 From that wild passion w:ch yre Eye's create
 W:ch you must lesson and extinate,
 By your dispencing what I must disire
 For as y've kindled, ye must feed my fyre. (IV)¹⁰

8.5. Nuns and "seraphin's": The Function of Religious Allusions in the Play.

The inscription on the back cover of the manuscript of *The Faithfull Virgins* is Elizabeth Polwhele's prayer to Christ to protect her: "my Lord pray remember me when you Love Jesus rescue my soule. Amen.E.P". Interestingly, in her representation of the dead Philamon, Polwhele appears to allude to Christ. Philamon remains a living presence to Merantha and Umira who are faithful in their love to him beyond the grave. As Merantha argues, "though the Efect That Caus'd him first is gon", he lives "whilst I can Think of Philamon" (IV).¹¹ In this respect, Philamon is similar to Christ who was worshipped beyond the grave, by his disciples, Mary Magdalene and his mother Mary. There is another allusion to Christ in the representation of Philamon in the play. For example, Statenor seems to refer to the idea of Christ's resurrection in relation to Philamon and the faithful virgins. He mockingly remark that Umira's tears will not "bring" Philamon back "to Life" (II), thus playing upon the idea that the dead Philamon, like Christ, may be resurrected.

Considering the allusions made to Christ in relation to Philamon, Umira's and Merantha's worship of his ashes resembles the mourning of "Mary Magdalene and the other Mary", Christ's mother, "sitting over against the sepulchre" (Matthew 27: 61). Furthermore, in the light of the ways in which Philamon appears to be associated with Christ, the women's thoughts about their relationship with Philamon is similar to the ways in which nuns envisage their bond with the Messiah. The women's lasting devotion to Philamon's remains, and their

of the play were cut out by a censor: the play was performed "leaving out what was Cross'd by Henry Herbert MR" (f. 49). The lines that were cut out all have to do with the Duke's lechery. For instance, in Cleophon's warning to Isabella the references to the Duke's wantonness are crossed out, because they were thought to be a comment on King Charles II's unfaithfulness to his queen, Catherine of Braganza: "hee;/ should have been woman or unconstancy/ he must have mistreses and often change" (I). Likewise, the lines in the final act referring to the Duke's death as a just punishment for his lust were crossed out: "for it is fitt/ all that so sinn, should punisht be for itt" (V). Polwhele's implicit criticism of the monarch in the play shows that she dared to engage with controversial issues.

¹⁰ In *The Frolicks* Polwhele also identifies man's speeches with lechery. Courtall tries to seduce Faith by discoursing "a story of my own, in your sweet ear" (II, 1977, 407), using his tongue as the means to guarantee his sexual satisfaction. Furthermore, Rightwit is pursued by a group of women whom he has impregnated, because he had made unfaithful promises of marriage to them with "a tongue would tempt the Devil, were he a woman" (IV, 1977, 128-29).

¹¹ Through the name Philamon Polwhele also identifies her dead male character with Christ's qualities: love, generosity and eternal life. The Greek verb "fileo" means to show affection. Furthermore, the name Philemon comes up in a mythological story. Philemon and Baucis were a couple who displayed hospitality towards Zeus

seclusion from the public world, makes them similar to devotional nuns who retreat from the world in a convent. Furthermore, the young virgins' belief that in the afterlife they will both be married to Philamon appears to allude to the practise of nuns taking on the veil in order to become Christ's spiritual brides. Umira and Merantha envisage a shared "marriage" to Philamon in heaven: "he there shall still be yours, and yet myne too" (II).¹² Furthermore, the name Merantha appears to allude to St. Emerantiana, who was a Nun persecuted under the reign of Diocletianus. The possibility of identifying Umira and Merantha with devoted nuns, endorses the association of their at times assertive speeches with sexual purity.

In the light of the religious, even Catholic, overtones in the play, the women's outspoken defences of their choice to remain true to Philamon after his death seem like Christian confessions and defences of their faith. Interestingly, when Chastity and Vertue, the female characters in the masque, speak, they use religious discourses. For instance, Vertue claims that "The seraphin's aloude my prayes sing/And when I'm nam'd each cherub clapse his wing" (IV), thus exhibiting her connection to God and Heaven. At the same time Vertue's speeches in the play serve to convert the other characters, who represent human sins. Consequently, her words, as defences of Christian morals, seem appropriate. By contrast, the male characters in the play often adopt religious discourses for dishonourable ends. For instance, Statenor alludes to heaven in his attempt to persuade Merantha to lift her veil once more and expose her beautiful eyes to his amorous gaze. He suggests that "heaven" would not "permit" (II) her to hide her reviving sight. The contrast between woman's speeches which defend Christian morality, and man's utterances, in which religious discourses are perverted to achieve physical lust, further supports the positive portrayal of woman's words in the play.

8.6. Misrepresentation and Miscommunication: Gender and Subjectivity in the Play.

As has already been pointed out, Umira and Merantha only speak up in the secluded setting of the "hearse". Moreover, the two virgins communicate with each other, and they do not appreciate being forced into discourse with the men that come to visit them. For instance, Umira expresses dissatisfaction about her brother's attendance which "does our peace molest" (II). In other words, the women would prefer to live in silence and keep their conversations

and Hermes despite their extreme poverty. As a reward they became Priests, and later on were granted eternal life in the shape of trees.

¹² Interestingly, the ideas of being Christ's bride was taken up by other seventeenth-century English women writers as well. For instance, in *Eliza's Babes* (1652) the anonymous female author often portrays herself as wedded to the Messiah. In the preface she states that "the Prince of eternall glory had affianced mee to himselfe"

between them, rather than being forced to speak to others. Umira and Merantha raise their voices in the company of men, because the men force them into communication.

The communication between Merantha and Umira has an additional function in the play. When Umira and Merantha converse, they are very open to each other and can easily discuss their feeling and thoughts. This contrasts with the difficult communication between the male and female characters in the play. In their dialogues with women, the male characters are often only concerned with making their own points rather than listening to what the women have to say in response. This is illustrated by, for instance, Cleophon's refusal to vouchsafe an ear to Isabella's defensive speech, and by the fact that Statenor and the Duke continue to plead their cause with Umira and Merantha, not showing any respect for the repeated rejections that these women express. In other words, the ideology of the silent woman makes the male characters apparently deaf to the speech of their female partners, and they envisage their own speeches as monologues rather than dialogues. Furthermore, the play exposes how society's restriction of female speech hinders an open communication between the sexes. As a woman it was improper for Erasila to voice her love for Statenor to him, and therefore she chose to put on a male disguise and adopt the name Floradina. While her impersonation of a man makes it possible for Erasila to be close to Statenor and to talk with him, at the same time her man's apparel impedes her from confessing her amorous feelings to him, that she "most unhappy must retayne with breath" (I). As a result many misunderstandings arise in the conversations between the two. For instance, when Erasila secretly weeps because of the impossibility of displaying her affection for Statenor, Statenor himself thinks that his friend Floradina cries for him, because he has been rejected by Merantha: "com dry thy Eye's, what should this passion moue,/In thee whose youth is unconcern'd in Loue" (III). Ironically, Statenor is too much focused upon his own emotions to notice the feelings of the women around him.

In line with her repeated legitimisation of woman's speech within the play, Polwhele allows her female characters much room to express themselves. The female characters are assigned a large number of speaking lines, and Erasila is granted the opportunity to express her most intimate thoughts through soliloquies. For instance, in Act I, Erasila enters the stage alone, in a pensive mood, exclaiming:

I love; is it not tyranie in thee (god of love)
To spare him, whilst thou giv'st such wounds to me. (I)

(A1v). In her poem "The Bride" the female poet-persona claims that she has been "prepaar'd a bride...for that great Prince...That for my love on earth here dy'd"(C3r).

While Erasila is forced to hide her feelings in her communication with the other characters, and Statenor in particular, she openly expresses her mind through the soliloquies that give the audience insight in her secret love and grief. The long speeches that Polwhele gives to her seem appropriately private for a woman. Yet, Erasila's soliloquies also serve as a tool to criticise the dominant social condemnation of female self-expression. The monologues expose the pain and misunderstanding that women suffer when they cannot fully communicate their feelings to men. Consequently, the social idealisation of feminine silence in seventeenth-century England is implicitly challenged by Polwhele.

Although the female characters are assigned a considerable textual and performative space for self expression, they fail to exercise full command over their own representations. Towards the tragic closure Isabella is denied the possibility to assert self-representation. Cleophon defines her as "the Cause of all the Spoiles you see" (V), and Isabella is not given the opportunity to create an alternative image of herself. When she addresses "her selfe to Speake" (V), Cleophon interrupts her, thus leaving her no chance to construct her own identity. Cleophon's silencing of Isabella, which marks Isabella's loss of command over her representation, is similar to the ways in which most transgressive women in seventeenth-century tragedies are deprived of control over their public image. It can therefore be argued that Polwhele repeats the conventional tragic plot according to which the verbally assertive, lascivious woman is turned into the signified, silenced object. However, Cleophon's appropriation of Isabella's power of self-representation can also be interpreted differently. In the light of Cleophon's earlier refusal to listen to Isabella's version of her infidelity to him, the scene may also dramatise the fact that women are denied a voice as well as the opportunity to construct an image of themselves by the androcentric society they live in. This interpretation is confirmed by the disempowerment that the other, virtuous women characters experience as a result of man's restrictions on their self-expression. For example, Statenor does not allow Merantha to speak up in response to his wooing words, and to express a self image that would mar his fantasy of them as potential lovers: "make no reply... Your Eye's but wound me your *Eyes* doe kill/ for all that you doe utter I declare/ but animates your Louers to dispayre" (II). Cleophon's appropriation of Isabella's discursive control may therefore be seen as part of Polwhele's commentary on the cultural silencing of women in general.

Polwhele also makes clear that society's restrictions on female self representation lead to women's lack of command over their own existence. This is exemplified by Erasila's situation. As a woman she cannot openly confess her passion for Statenor without being considered a whore for her openness. Therefore, in order to avoid risking her sexual

reputation, but enjoy the "Blessing" to be within Statenor's "sight", Erasila dresses up as a man: "transform'd myself from what I am/ (and though a mayd, in shew a youth became)"(V). She proves to be successful in acting the man's part, since Statenor and Merantha never discover that she is actually a woman. Erasila's act of crossdressing may suggest that she manages to fashion her identity according to her desires. In many sixteenth- and seventeenth-century comedies female characters who adopt the breeches part achieve a greater freedom to speak their minds and put their desires into practise than in their woman's attire. For example, in William Shakespeare's *As You Like It* (1599) Rosalind manages to liberate herself from a culture that forbids women to woo actively, and she escapes from an oppressive domestic environment by dressing up as the page Ganymede. She can move out into the world, express criticism on society's treatment of women and engage in active courtship with Orlando while she adopts the breeches part: "and I thank God, I am not a woman, to be touched with so many giddy offences as he hath generally taxed their whole sex withal...But are you so much in love as your rimes speak?...I would cure you, if you would but call me Rosalind, and come every day to my cote and woo me" (III, iii, 371-455). Whereas the conventional comic transvestite heroine is liberated from social restrictions on her voice and conduct, Polwhele's tragic female character Erasila is further constricted by her male apparel.¹³ Adopting a male disguise, Erasila is forced to go against her own interests,¹⁴ when Statenor asks her to implore for him with Merantha: "aganst my selfe and my dead brother to wo" (II). At the same time, Polwhele's suggestion that her heroine attempts to preserve her virtue by dressing up as a man implies a reconstruction of the conventional role of crossdressing in drama. Breeches roles became popular on the Restoration stage, because they afforded the male spectator visual titillation: "Breeches roles seem to have been designed to show off the female body- there was no question of the actress truly impersonating a man...The breeches role titillated both by the mere fact of woman's being boldly and indecorously dressed in male costume, and, of course, by the costume suggestively outlining the actress's hips, buttocks, and legs, usually concealed by a skirt" (Howe, 1992, 56). Whereas crossdressing thus usually functioned as a sign of a woman's sexual availability, Polwhele employs female transvestism to point to woman's

¹³ An exception to this convention of the comic heroine who is liberated by her male apparel is Viola in *Twelfth Night* (1601). Erasila seems to be modelled on Viola, in that she is also restricted in confessing her love by her male disguise.

¹⁴ In this respect, there is a difference between Erasila and the female protagonist of *The Frolicks*, Clarabell. Putting on a male attire, Clarabell manages to free herself from the yoke that society imposes upon women. For instance, she can join Rightwit to a tavern, and engage with dancing there. Furthermore, she can test out Rightwit's love for her. Furthermore, even without male disguise, Clarabell manages to exercise authority over her existence. For instance, she determines herself whether or not she will accept Rightwit as a lover: "I meann not to marr with any man; but when I am weary of my life, I'll have thee (IV, 1977, 446-448).

sexual purity. Thus subverting the conventional erotic significance of crossdressing, Polwhele questions the idea that women who dress up as men seek sexual pleasure. Consequently, at the same time she challenges the eroticisation of the transvestite female actresses on the public stage.

Erasila is forced to adopt a male identity, since the only self-images that are available to her as a woman are either that of the outspoken, wooing whore or that of the passive, silent virgin. This limited number of stereotypes that are open to women encourages Erasila to represent herself as a man, since the male sex enjoys the freedom of both courting and self-expression. Yet, in her man's attire, Erasila cannot turn Statenor into her lover. It is only when she finally uncovers herself as female, and expresses her affections to Statenor, that she can secure his love. Thus, woman's lack of discursive command is shown to be interrelated with her lack of command over the "plot" of her life. It is notable that Erasila ultimately manages to attain the desired goal of a love union with Statenor by freeing herself from her disguise and the roles that society outlines for women. Having transferred the comic device of crossdressing to a tragic setting in which the breeches part restricts rather than stimulates woman's self-expression, Polwhele implicitly pleads for woman's freedom to represent herself as she is. Furthermore, in her depiction of the suffering Erasila Polwhele voices criticism on the dichotomy of the silent virgin and the outspoken whore, showing that alternative representations of women are possible and necessary.

8.7. Tragic Closure: The Issue of Autonomy and Memorialisation.

Although Polwhele pleads for women to have more control over their public image and existence, she makes a distinction between the degree of subjectivity that she grants the transgressive Isabella on the one hand, and the virtuous female characters on the other. Isabella successfully takes revenge on the Duke by having the object of his adulterous passion, Umira, murdered by Trasilius. In so doing, Isabella exercises authority over her own life by having her aims achieved. She directs the other characters according to her own will, as is revealed by Trasilius's statement: "but 'tis the Will of her, whom I adore/and I must her comand's dispute no more" (V). Yet, using her sexual attractiveness as the means to make Trasilius perform her will, Isabella's involvement with Umira's murder is soon discovered. Isabella is turned from a scheming subject into a discovered object in the course of the play, as is revealed by Cleophon's exposure of Isabella's crimes in front of the other characters: "I sayde you should be satisfied by mee/What Auther'd this unheard of Tragedy" [To the Lords]"

(V). At the tragic closure Isabella loses command over her own existence. Whereas she wants to be sent to death as punishment for her sins, Cleophon determines that instead she must live and "betake you to a monas'try...and an example bee to all that may/, be faythless like you"

(V). His command that Isabella should purify her soul there till it becomes white again, illustrates how the patriarchal world around her comes to govern her representation, forcing Isabella to cast off the identity of the whore and turn into the chaste virgin again. The fact that Cleophon "must see My will perform'd" concerning the Duchess's fate underlines her loss of narrative command over her life and the tragic plot. She is assigned the fate that was usually reserved for adulteresses in seventeenth-century tragedy. Furthermore, she is relegated to a figurative burial from the rest of the world, in that she is sent off to a convent. Although Isabella is allowed to live on rather than die, at the same time she is committed to oblivion.

Isabella ends up as the other characters, namely as confined to a figurative hearse. Yet, there is a difference between her and most of the virtuous female characters in the play. Whereas Isabella loses direction over her life, the other women achieve autonomy over their lives and control over their self representation at the tragic closure. Erasila chooses to shape her own fate by following her beloved Statenor in death, in order to be united with him in heaven: "since you are not, what should I do but dye/Whilst you doe leave the world, I Will not stay" (V). Furthermore, her last moments are marked by a speech in which she uncovers and asserts her true identity as the maid Erasila who loved Trasilus. In other words, when dying she overcomes her former lack of control, performing the role of the self-fashioning subject. Yet, Erasila feels urged to end her life in order to prove a conventionally feminine faithfulness to Statenor, modelling the plot of her existence on a man's fate. By contrast, Merantha displays a greater independence from men. The dying Statenor requests that Merantha grieves "o're my ashe's" (V) when he has passed away, and will thus secure his lasting presence in memory. However, Merantha states that she will not comply with his request, since she is intent upon dying herself:

Merantha, has so short a tyme to stay
In this bad world, that S:r she shall not pay
Ought to your memory when you re dead. (V)

Merantha refuses to devote her life to the task of memorialisation that Statenor has in mind for her, insisting upon her right to dispose of her own life. Fashioning her own ending by committing suicide, Merantha's autonomy over her life is emphasised by the fact that the act of her killing herself is visible to the audience, as well as by the fact that she pronounces the ending of her life: "and it were sinne for me to stay behind" (V). Furthermore, instead of

assuming the role of the mourner that Statenor had planned for her, Merantha assigns Statenor and Cleophon tasks which they ought to perform:

Now Statenor you have my justice scene-
and when you have expir'd you may unfold
to my umira in the other world,
what for her sake merantha here did doe
the story will be handsomes't told by you
brother, you'l not deny if you are just
to mix our ashes with Philamons dust. (V)

Merantha thus leaves a legacy, in which she directs Cleophon and Statenor. This shows that she not only experiences control over her own existence, but also command over the male characters' fates at the tragic closure. When Statenor dies, he is not in a position to command, but is steered by Merantha. In this way the conventional tragic patterns concerning narrative command are reversed by Polwhele.

The conventional tragic plot according to which the female characters perform memorialising rites for the dead male protagonist is also reconstructed. At the beginning of the play Umira and Merantha are cast in the conventional feminine role of the mourner when they weep at Philamon's grave and keep his presence alive. However, at the tragic closure it is the men who are assigned the task of commemorating the dead. Merantha's command to her brother to "mix our ashes with Philamons dust" (V), and his subsequent organisation of burial rites according to her wishes, show that Merantha is in command over the process of her commemoration: "oh: glorious maydes, who can Express yr worth/Emira, and merantha in this Toombe/Must be interr'd with nobel Philamon" (V). Thus, Merantha transcends the annihilation of her identity by death. The faithful virgins will continue to be a presence in memory beyond the grave, as is emphasised by the fact that their corpses become part of a living monument that serves to show Isabella her sins: "All set up as a sort of statue. The women in white-with sparkling wreaths or coronetts upon their heads" (V).

8.8. *The Faithfull Virgins* and Contemporary Tragedies.

Unlike the tragic drama by her female predecessors, Polwhele's *The Faithfull Virgins* was written for the public stage. Being one of the first Englishwomen to write drama for the public theatre, Polwhele may have felt vulnerable in her anomalous position. It could therefore be expected that, as a woman who ventured into the masculine theatre, Polwhele would have opted for rather conservative gender representations in her play in order to mask her own transgression of feminine propriety. This is, however, not the case. Compared to most

seventeenth-century tragedies, Polwhele's play is more revolutionary in questioning the dominant gender discourses, in particular those concerning female utterance. As we have seen, most tragedies written before the Civil War confirm the stereotype of the lascivious, outspoken woman. Although Isabella resembles these wanton, assertive tragic women, at the same time Polwhele questions the stereotype. Unlike most seventeenth-century playwrights, Polwhele implies that Isabella's unfaithfulness to both Cleophon and the Duke stems from society's repression of women's autonomy over their own lives and man's adulterous behaviour. As we have seen, Thomas Porter's *The Villain* (1662) exposes the dominant ideology of feminine silence as a social construction, showing that society's demand for woman's silence is rooted in man's sense of insecurity, and making clear that the dominant association between woman's speech and wantonness is abused by men in order to hurt their social rivals. Porter depicts men's rather than women's speeches as marked by lechery. Polwhele takes her criticism on the dominant discourses a step further than her contemporary. She not only represents man's words as expressions of lustfulness, but contrasts men's wanton words with the sexually pure intents that underlie woman's utterances. Moreover, through Erasila's inability to communicate her emotions, Polwhele criticises the dominant ideology which impedes dialogues in which women can be open about their feeling, and in which men actually listen to women.

In spite of her subversion of the dominant discourses concerning woman's speech, Polwhele takes up the conventional tragic plot in relation to the outspoken, inconstant Isabella. In accordance with the tragic closure, which characterises most seventeenth-century tragedies, Isabella is deprived of her former control over discourse, the plot of the play and the "plot" of her life. Like Alice Arden, Tamora, Beatrice Joanna, Evadne and Annabella, Isabella ends up as the silent object of the representations that Cleophon imposes upon her. Yet, a difference between Isabella and these other tragic women is that Isabella is still alive at the end of the play, albeit isolated from society. In this respect, Polwhele's representation of Isabella is similar to Nathaniel Lee's depiction of Roxana in *The Rival Queens*. Both women become the victims of man's infidelity, and subsequently murder the innocent woman who has become the object of their lover's passion in order to win their beloved back. Yet both women fail to get reconciled with their lovers, and are banished from society instead of being killed off for their transgressions. In other words, *The Faithfull Virgins* and *The Rival Queens* display a greater sympathy for the assertive female character than most Renaissance and early Restoration tragedies do. Still, the threat that these assertive women pose to the social order is eliminated, even if the women themselves are not.

By contrast, the virtuous women in both Polwhele's play and Lee's tragedy achieve a glorious moment of self-assertion and autonomy at the tragic closure. Yet this achievement of discursive and narrative command ironically precedes the annihilation of the women's identities through death. Polwhele thus appears to create possibilities for the realisation of female subjectivity in her play, but follows the conventional tragic pattern adopted by Porter and previous tragic dramatists by relating woman's attainment of discursive and narrative control to death. In contrast with other playwrights who grant their female characters a degree of subjectivity, Polwhele also presents her female characters as speaking subjects at earlier stages of the play. Furthermore, Erasila's self-expression before her death implies a criticism of the confining roles that society outlines for women, as well as a subversion of the social ideal of feminine silence. By showing how the binary opposites of the speaking, wooing man and the silent, passive woman do not do justice to woman's real natures, and obstruct a deeper understanding between the sexes, Polwhele implies that women can break their silence and reconstruct the identities that society imposes upon the female sex. She takes up both conservative and radical stances with regard to the notion of the female voice, which may have to do with her position as a woman writing for the public stage. As a playwright and a woman Polwhele may have been torn between, on the one hand, the need to direct attention away from her own transgression of gender norms by endorsing the status quo, and on the other hand, her desire to legitimise woman's engagement with discourse.

8.9. *The Faithfull Virgins* as a Play for the Public Stage.

Unlike the tragedies by women that we have studied before, *The Faithfull Virgins* was written for performance on the public stage. Polwhele's tragedy was intended as a stage play, as is underlined by performative elements in the play, and by recurrent allusions to the visual and theatrical. The dumb show at the end of the first act shows how Eumanus "presents" Isabella "to the duke", as the stage directions indicate. This reminds one of the masques which were formerly acted out at Court. A part of the plot of the play is told by visual images rather than by speeches. Cleophon's visit to the witches in act II, during which "two Spirets ascende in white Like Nimphs", suggests stagecraft. In addition, Polwhele's tragedy refers to its own status as a play for public performance through the inclusion of a masque which is performed in front of an audience of characters. The masque that is subsequently staged is highly theatrical, making prominent use of visual elements such as dancing. At the same time that the masque within the play emphasises the performative nature of *The Faithfull Virgins* itself,

Polwhele's use of the masque form alludes to the earlier tradition of female domestic drama. As we have seen, before actresses were admitted to the public stage, upper-class women such as Queen Anne, Queen Henrietta Maria and the Countess Lucy of Bedford played active roles in the performance and production of masques at court or noble households.¹⁵ Therefore, the masque was identified with women's earliest involvement with drama in England as well as with a private, domestic setting. In view of these associations of the masque with femininity and the domestic, Polwhele apparently endeavoured to create the illusion that her drama was related to a feminine, private dramatic tradition as well as to the tradition of the public stage.

Erasila's assumption of male attire, through which she plays the man's part, implies the idea of acting out a role. Apart from this, the visual plays an important role in the relationship of the male characters with the women in the play. For instance, Statenor falls in love with Merantha because of the beautiful face that she unveils, and the Duke argues that he is ravished by Umira's beauties: "will you still cruelly eclips yr light/And not dispence on ray to bliss my sight?" (IV). The nature of the tragedy as a performative text which suggests the presentation of a spectacle implies that Polwhele wrote her play with a stage production in mind.

The performative elements also have an additional function: they support the criticism that Polwhele expresses about the current gender norms, in particular those concerning female speech. Erasila's act of crossdressing underlines the performativity of gender. Women can cross gender boundaries simply by putting on a male disguise, so that gender proves unrelated to sexuality. According to Dieter Mehl, the dumb shows that occurred as essentially visual intervals in seventeenth-century drama "were intended to help express the deeper significance and moral message" of the plays in order to "impress them forcefully upon the minds of the spectator by visual presentation" (1964, 169). The dumb show which presents how Isabella was given away in marriage by her father Eumanus underlines the suggestion made earlier in Isabella's defence, that she was forced to be inconstant to Cleophon because she had been promised in marriage to the Duke by her father. In other words, the dumb show is a tool through which Polwhele implicitly deconstructs the dominant discourses concerning female utterance. It is significant in several respects that Polwhele expresses this criticism through a dumb show. It reveals that Polwhele may have felt uncomfortable about questioning the dominant gender ideals too openly by voicing them on stage, while also indicating that the reality of society's repression of women is often left unspoken. Polwhele suggests that

¹⁵ The Countess Lucy of Bedford commissioned the masque *Cupid's Banishment* which was performed in front of Queen Anne on May 4th 1617. See Cerasano and Wynne-Davies, 1996, 76.

alternative views on woman's sexuality and speech may exist but are not always expressed through language.

Polwhele's point that society fails to listen to women's voices is also emphasised by the fact that the male characters consider their female counterparts as visual objects. Statenor and the Duke stress the physical attraction that ensues when they gaze upon Merantha and Umira. Their definition of the women in visual terms is a counterpart of their failure to listen to what the women have to say. As a result, the men do not respect the women's assertions of their sexual honour. In other words, the references to women as spectacles serve to expose how the dominant view that "maides must be seene not hearde" (Krontiris, 1992, 3) induces men to force women into wantonness, because they will not respect the latter's insistence on chastity. Moreover, the men's description of the women as titillating objects of their gaze is a playful allusion to the actresses now appearing on the stage, who were regarded as sexually available objects because of their visibility and their speeches in the public theatrical setting. By showing that the sexualisation of visible women is a male fantasy which does not correspond to what these women really desire, Polwhele also criticises the sexual commodification of the actress.

At the same time that Polwhele's tragedy is essentially performative, *The Faithfull Virgins* also contains elements which remind one of closet drama. Merantha and Umira are staged in the enclosed space of the hearse, and the opening and closing of this hearse on stage emphasises the fact that their female voices do not surpass the boundaries of this private enclosure. Perhaps Polwhele included this element of enclosure to cloak her own transgression of feminine silence. However, the given that the two faithful virgins' voices can only be heard in the enclosed space of the hearse may also point to woman's social isolation from communication, the men being unwilling to listen to what women have to say. Another element of closet drama that figures in the play is the appearance of the messenger. In Act IV Floradina/Erasila reports to Statenor how Merantha has responded to his declarations of love, arguing that Merantha pities him, but will not marry him: "she to cure the wound's she make's declines". The conversation between Floradina/Erasila and Merantha could also have been staged. However, at this point Polwhele deliberately opts for a narration of the scene through a messenger, emphasising Merantha's inaccessibility to Statenor as a faithful virgin. At the same time, the narrative structure in which Merantha's rejection is presented dissociates her speech from the presence of her female body, subverting the dominant ideology which normally condemns women's voices by linking them with their sexuality.

8.10. Conclusion: *The Faithfull Virgins* and Tragedies by Female Precursors.

The Faithfull Virgins differs from previous tragedies written by women, in that it was specifically written for performance on the public stage. Although performance elements also come up in Cary's and Cavendish's tragedies, in Polwhele's play references to theatricality, stagecraft and visibility are more numerous. As in *The Unnatural Tragedy*, in *The Faithfull Virgins* the visual and performance elements have the additional function of challenging the dominant gender discourses. Polwhele takes things even further than Cavendish, pointing out how society's reduction of women to sexual objects of the gaze contributes to women's silencing and victimisation. Implicitly, she thus criticises the sexualisation of the actresses on the public stage. Although Polwhele's play is essentially performative, she also refers to the tradition of closet drama that was taken up by her female precursors. Like Sidney, Cary, Philips and Cavendish, Polwhele sets woman's speeches in an all female, enclosed space in order to circumvent criticism of her own transgressive utterances as a woman writer. Furthermore, like Cary she uses the convention of the messenger in order to dissociate woman's speech from the sexual female body, and thus, to undermine the conventional association between woman's words and sexual incontinence.

Like her female predecessors, Polwhele associates her female characters' utterances and her own dramatic text with sexual purity and a religious stance. Contrasting the pure, religious female speeches with men's wanton, blasphemous tongues, Polwhele uses the strategy of subverting gender norms that had also been adopted by Cary, Philips and Cavendish before her. Furthermore, like Cavendish, Polwhele does not only question the dominant discourses, but also exposes the social mechanisms underlying the ideology, namely man's lechery, lust for power and oppressive governance of woman's fate. However, in comparison with her female precursors, Polwhele is more conservative in the degree of subjectivity that she grants her female characters. Although she questions Cleophon's stereotyping of Isabella as the lustful, wordy woman, the fate that Isabella has to undergo resembles the ending that is conventionally reserved for outspoken, tragic women. In this respect, Philips and Cavendish allow their outspoken female characters a more positive ending, granting them discursive and narrative command as well as the opportunity to achieve greatness in life. In this respect, Polwhele's tragedy constitutes a less radical reconstruction of the dominant discourses and the generic parameters of tragedy than *Pompey* and *The Unnatural Tragedy*, though her play signifies a major step forward in bringing the issues of female speech and female subjectivity to the public stage.

Being probably the first woman who wrote a tragedy for the public stage, Polwhele openly questions the dominant discourses on woman's self-expression by associating woman's words with religion, privacy and virginity, and exposing the ideal of the silent woman as a socially constructed form of behaviour. Furthermore, she makes clear that the myth of feminine silence leads men to disrespect women's words, and thus makes woman's sexual honesty vulnerable to man's assaults. Although Polwhele thus voices criticism on the miscommunication between men and women as a result of the idealisation of female silence, it is nevertheless only in the moments before their identities are erased by death that women achieve the full status of subjects. As far as the issue of transcendence is concerned, however, Polwhele shifts the conventional gender roles concerning memorialisation. Rewriting a considerable part of the established tragic closure, Polwhele encourages her audience to "vouchsafe...an Eare" to her alternative representations of female tragic subjectivity.