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"But leaving *Shakespear*'s Works to their own Defence, and his Detractors to their Envy". Women's Early *Defence* of Shakespeare and their Role in the Rise of Shakespearean Criticism: the Case of Margaret Cavendish.

ABSTRACT:

Moving from the debates within women's and gender studies and Shakespeare studies, and in dialogue with the studies dedicated to the analysis of the relationship between the plays of Shakespeare and the writing of Margaret Cavendish, the essay investigates Cavendish's reading of Shakespeare's plays and its role within the rise of Shakespeare criticism at a time when Shakespeare's plays started to be adapted for the stage but only few people encountered them as texts. The aim is to show how Cavendish's reading of Shakespeare's plays not only focuses on aspects that would be at the core of Eighteenth-century Shakespeare criticism, but also on issues crucial for future feminist readings of Shakespeare which, since the 1980s, have been unpacking the plays of Shakespeare, exploring the representation of gender, class, race, sexuality, and their hold on women in Shakespeare's time and beyond.

KEYWORDS: gender, performance, reading, authorship, Margaret Cavendish.

1. Introduction

After the publication of the first anthology dedicated to women as readers of Shakespeare's plays by Ann Thompson and Sasha Roberts (1997), the influence of women in the rise of Shakespeare criticism has become of great interest for women's and gender studies and Shakespeare studies, and their fruitful interconnection. Unlike the scientifically recognized 'male' criticism, expressed across time through those genres established within the academy such as essays, articles, and literary compendiums, the contribution of women has been heterogeneous from its very beginnings. Excluded from the domain of literary criticism, and from those emerging academic disciplines such as aesthetic, philosophy and history, women expressed their opinions on and interpretations of Shakespeare's plays in letters, prefaces, poems, and prologues.

Fiona Ritchie's studies of women's responses to Shakespeare also confirms that a crucial element within this process was the role of female playgoers and actresses who, with the reopening of the theatres in 1660, could for the first time interpret Shakespearean female characters, thus giving them new emphasis and power. Indeed, "adapters recognised this and worked to enhance the possibilities for the Shakespearean actress by increasing the relatively small number of female characters in Shakespeare's plays and by expanding existing female roles in the canon" (Ritchie 2014, 9). In so doing, they authorized women to occupy a prominent place in the theatre of the time, implicitly contributing to the first interpretations of Shakespeare's plays and characters on stage. The introduction of actresses played an important role in the rise of a new sensibility thanks to their ability, unlike those of boy-actors hitherto employed to perform female roles, to affect "the drama of the period profoundly. Love and marriage and adultery could be enacted with a frankness and realism impossible in a theatre where all performers were male" (Pearson 1988, 26). This new 'realism' possibly influenced the criticism of Shakespeare's plays in the first articles dedicated to Shakespeare that were published in the emergent journals and essays of the Augustan age, when the "performance had a far greater impact" also on the formation of the English taste than the

nascent and still unstable criticism itself which appeared in prefaces, introductions, or proper essays (Dugas 2006, 2).

Moving from these studies, and in dialogue with one of the very first volumes entirely dedicated to the analysis of the relationship between the plays of Shakespeare and the writing of Margaret Cavendish edited by Katherine Romack and James Fitzmaurice in 2006, I will interrogate Cavendish's reading of Shakespeare's plays and its role within the rise of Shakespeare criticism at a time when Shakespeare was not only read by women as "a prominent part of 'Love's Library'" (Scheil 2000, 116) but when his plays started to be put on stage in various and new adaptations. Cavendish was one of those female readers who became acquainted with Shakespeare's work more in print rather than on stage, contributing through the heterogeneous literary production that she outrageously published under her own name to the development of Shakespeare criticism in print. Far from considering Shakespeare's texts as "the favorite reading of amorous girls of the mid-seventeenth century" (Wright 1931, 674), as it was for many aristocratic women who mainly read Shakespeare's poems[1], Cavendish was one of the first female readers who focused on Shakespeare's plays and on some of their aspects that would be at the core of eighteenth century Shakespeare criticism. Her reading also anticipates issues that would be developed by future feminist readings of Shakespeare which, since the 1980s, have been unpacking his plays, exploring issues concerning the representation and performance of gender, class, race, sexuality, and their hold on women in Shakespeare's time and beyond[2]. Moreover, unlike many of her contemporaries who were becoming familiar

[1] In one of the very first articles on the reading of English women during the seventeenth century, Louis B. Wright draws from John Johnson's allegorical description in *The Academy of Loue describing ye folly of younge men, & ye fallacy of women* (1641), to show that Shakespeare's texts were mainly read as a sentimental reading (1931, 671-88). Shasa Roberts has demonstrated that the most popular Shakespeare texts read by women were his poems, in particular *Venus and Adonis*, which was not only "Shakespeare's best-selling work during his life time, running to an astonishing ten editions by 1617", but also saw "a further five reprints by 1636" (Roberts 2003, 2). On the reading habits of early modern women, see also Katherine West Scheil (2000, 116-17).

[2] On this specific aspect, apart from some pathbreaking works such as Juliet Dusinberre's *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, originally published in 1975, and Lisa Jardine's *Still Harping on Daughters: Women and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare* (1983), of particular significance are Dympna Callaghan's, *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare* (2000) and Phyllis Rackin's *Shakespeare and Women* (2005).

with Shakespeare's plays by mainly watching their adaptations on stage, Cavendish encountered them on the page through what could be today defined as their textual version[3]. In other words, she read plays that were neither amended to be accepted by the emergent neoclassical taste, nor performed by actors or actresses and thus inevitably interpreted according to the fashions of the Restoration stage.

2. Margaret Cavendish's access to Shakespeare's work

Considered by many of her peers a ridiculous lady whose writing reflected her eccentricity and madness, Cavendish came under attack from many quarters. Samuel Pepys, in defining Cavendish's biography of her husband William, declared in his diary that the text "shows her to be a mad, conceited, ridiculous woman and he an ass to suffer her to write what she writes of him and for him" (2000, 123 [18 March 1668]).[4] Nowadays, however, Cavendish is being reassessed and unanimously seen as a proto-feminist eclectic writer and, although her plays were not performed in the theatre, one of the very first female dramatists (see Williams 1988, 94-107). She is considered one of the first advocates of women's literary empowerment and cultural agency, overtly denouncing, despite her conservative and royalist beliefs[5], those false prejudices which, in the name of a natural and unchangeable superiority of men, had relegated women to an inferior position, excluding them from a proper

[3] Although nowadays critics agree with the idea of the multiplicity of the Shakespearean text, the publication of the First Folio meant that a literate and wealthy audience could read Shakespeare in what, at the time, were seen as authoritative texts. Therefore, as Stephen Orgel reminds us, it was with the reopening of the theatres in 1660 that "the revised versions, 'as presently performed,' were published and could be compared with the plays in the folio, and critics from Dryden's time on observed, with varying degrees of regret, that the revisions weren't the same as the originals" (Orgel 1988, 12).

[4] Some years before, in one of her letters, Dorothy Osborne had written: "Sure the poore woman is a little distracted, she could never be soe ridiculous else to venture at writeing book's and in verse too" ([1652-54] 1903, 83, Letter 18).

[5] Particularly thought-provoking in this respect is Katherine M. Romack's essay on Cavendish as Shakespeare critic. According to Romack, even Cavendish's approach to Shakespeare reflects her privileges as an aristocratic woman since she "neutralized the problems for Royalism […] by attributing to Shakespeare an androgynous, abstracted, and decommercialized wit, a wit to which the aristocratic woman of quality could lay claim. Cavendish thus 'purifies' Shakespeare" (2016, 45).

education, from the opportunities offered to men, and from the possibility of being recognized as subjects and especially as writers and literary critics. Regardless of her rank, which made her a privileged woman in comparison to other women of her time, she "was both a royalist and a feminist who raised some of the most profound questions about the intersection of women's place in government, the common law, marriage, and motherhood during the 1600s" (Smith 1998, 2).

Cavendish's access to Shakespeare's "authoritative texts" (Orgel 1988, 5) would probably not have been possible had she not been Maid of Honour to queen Henrietta Maria and the wife of William Cavendish, Duke of Newcastle, a celebrated general in the army of Charles I, tutor of Charles II, patron of letters of important Jacobean and Caroline playwrights, and himself an "amateur professional playwright" (Steggle 2020, 88). Although it is difficult to verify whether she possessed her own copy of Shakespeare's Folio, it is highly likely that she had access to her husband's Folio, whose possession seems to be confirmed by one of his plays, *The Country Captain*, written and performed between 1638 and 1642. In this play, not only is there a reference to Shakespeare's characterization of soldiers in his chronicle plays and to *Henry V*, but there is also an overt reference to Shakespeare's work, thus to the concrete volume, which is not only evoked by a character but is also literally, and thus visibly, brought on stage as a prop (see Pasupathi 2006, 129).

Margaret Cavendish's knowledge of Shakespeare's plays is instead confirmed by the prefaces and prologues she wrote to her own plays in which the name of Shakespeare gives shape to several meanings and undertakes different functions. It is also demonstrated in her defence of Shakespeare in her *Sociable Letters* (1664) and by the content of most of her plays, which literally 'play' with the practice of cross-dressing – vital in the Shakespearean comedies – and re-elaborate Shakespeare's characters and dramatic situations to experiment with gender roles and give voice to her proto-feminist views.

Cavendish evidently became familiar with Shakespeare's plays by reading the First Folio of 1623, since her view of Shakespeare is initially influenced by Heminge and Condell's epistle to the variety of readers and Jonson's poem dedicated to Shakespeare, which are both included in the Folio edition. As we know, the introductory pages of the Shakespeare Folio are not only concerned

with establishing Shakespeare as the "happie imitator of nature", as Heminge and Condell define him, who "was a most gentle expresser of it. His mind and hand went together. […] Reade him therefore, and againe and againe and if then you doe not like him, surely you are in some manifest danger not to understand him" (qtd. in Wells and Taylor 1994, xlv), or as a poet whom "Nature herself was proud of his designs and joined to wear the dressing of his lines" as Ben Jonson declares (ibid., xlvi), but also with setting him in opposition to Jonson, who was crowned as poet laureate by his own Folio of 1616. This image of Shakespeare, and in general of the Renaissance theatrical canon inherited from the Restoration, is, as Dobson reminds us, further enhanced by Sir John Denham's dedicatory poem in the Folio edition of Beaumont and Fletcher's *Comedies and Tragedies* published in 1647, in which he speaks of a Triumvirate of English dramatic poets, where Jonson stands for Art, Shakespeare represents Nature, and the university-educated Fletcher embodies Wit (see Dobson 1994, 29-30).

In her "General Prologue to all my Playes" (1662), Cavendish recommends her readers not to expect a work of the quality of the great Renaissance poets: "But Noble Readers, do not think my Playes Are such as have been writ in former dais; / As Johnson, Shakespear, Beaumont, Fletcher writ; / Mine want their Learning, Reading, Language, Wit". She also outlines the difference between her plays and those of Jonson "who could conceive, or judge what's right, what's wrong" (Appendix A in Shaver 1999, 265) and then recalls the image of Shakespeare as the imitator of nature. According to Cavendish, Shakespeare "had a fluent wit although less learning" than Jonson, and "that notwithstanding, he full well writ, for all his playes were writ by Natures light, which gives his readers, and Spectator sight." (ibid., 265). The undergraduate Shakespeare is therefore evoked not as a master of learning but on account of his unique ability to imitate a personified nature that is "proud", as also Jonson wrote in his celebration of Shakespeare, "to wear the dressing of Shakespeare's lines" (qtd. in Wells and Taylor 1994, xlvi). This is a definition that has also been reinforced through its continuous recurrence in prefaces – also in the new editions of the Folio of 1632 and 1664 that Cavendish was perfectly familiar with – and in letters published throughout the whole Commonwealth (see Miller 2006, 7-29). Yet, unlike the previous comments on the originality of

Shakespeare, Cavendish, who like Shakespeare lacked a university education, praises Shakespeare's talent also to justify the publication of her own plays which, like most of her literary productions, do not respond to any form or rule. Many of Cavendish's works, from her plays to her romances, scientific and philosophical observations, and utopian writing are in fact introduced by apologetic and self-justifying prefaces, in which Cavendish humbly, but artfully, explains her rejections of form and accepted rules.

"There are many Scholastical and Pedantical persons that will condemn my writings, because I do not keep strictly to the Masculine and Feminine Genders, as they call them. [...] If any dislike my writings for want of those Rules, Forms, and Terms, let them not read them", she wrote in her preface to the 1662 edition of her *Playes*, in which she declared herself unlearned and undisciplined, as well as not interested in restricted gender forms (Appendix A in Shaver 1999, 259).

Her praise of Shakespeare's talent is thus a way to claim a sort of authorship that, until then, had been recognised only to poet laureates and, exceptionally, to Shakespeare. At the end of her prologue, Cavendish creates an analogy between herself and the dramatist, showing how it is Nature rather than education which makes her a dramatist who, despite her being a woman excluded, due to her sex, from university education and any form of cultural authorship, feels free and justified to attempt the pen: "Just so, I hope, the works that I have writ, / which are the building of my natural wit; / My own Inheritance, as Natures child" (ibid., 266). Cavendish is placing herself in relationship to well-established male writers and uses the cultural discussion around Jonson and Shakespeare to outline a debate (see Miller 2016, 7-29) on her own aesthetic as writer and dramatist that she compares with that of Shakespeare. Like her, Shakespeare owns a natural wit and is a "Natures child", able to generate plays by following a natural, and not artificial or acquired, wit. If it is true, as Shanon Miller has demonstrated, that wit is seen by Cavendish in natural terms, I argue that it might also be possible that wit, for Cavendish, is 'ungendered'. Like the soul or the mind, as other women writers of the second

half of the seventeenth century were trying to demonstrate, also wit, a distinctive male quality, seems, for Cavendish, to have no sex[6].

In this respect, it is significant that in the "Introduction" to her plays she challengingly dramatizes the difficulties faced by women writers, inventing a dialogue between three gentlemen who, talking about a play written by a Lady, expound the idea that women hardly write good plays because, being women, they cannot naturally pretend to possess wit:

> 3. Gentleman: Why may not a Lady write a good Play?
> 2. Gentleman: No for a womans wit is too weak and too conceited to write a Play.
> 1. Gentleman: But if a woman hath wit, or can write a good Play, what will you say then.
> 2. Gentleman: Why I say nobody will believe it, for if it be good, they will think she did not write it, or at least say she did not, besides the very being a woman condemns it, were it never so excellent and rare for men will not allow women to have wit, or we men to have reason, for if we allow them wit, we shall lose our prehemency. (Appendix B in Shaver 1999, 270)

It is evident that Cavendish is also one of the first among the emergent female authors to use Shakespeare's plays as a tool for cultural empowerment, seeing the dramatist as a precedent or an example they could refer to. The belief that Shakespeare had very little knowledge of rules, allowed female writers, who were usually thought less learned than their male peers, to claim an affinity with Shakespeare and to enter the realm of public theatre. Aphra Behn, for example, in the preface to her *Dutch Lover* (1673), famously justifies her profession as a dramatist by declaring: "We all well know that the immortal Shakespeare's Plays (who was not guilty of much more of this than often falls to women's share) have better pleas'd the World than Jonson's works" (2016, 162).

But Cavendish's praise of Shakespeare is not only employed for her cultural empowerment and authorship in an age in which women are silenced due to

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[6] Emblematic, in this specific respect, is what Anna Wooley declared in her *The Gentlewoman's Companion* (1675) about the existence of a sexless mind: "Certainly Mans Soul cannot boast of a more sublime Original than ours; they had equally their efflux from the same eternal Immensity, and therefore capable of the same improvement by good Education. Vain man is apt to think we were merely intended for the Worlds propagation, and to keep its humane inhabitants sweet and clean" (qtd. in D'Amore and Lardy 2012, 100).

their sex or are easily forgotten due to social and legal mores, as emerges from an epistle that appears just before her autobiography written in 1656 in which she explains that she wrote it "for the sake of after ages, which I hope will be more just to me than the present" (1903, 155). Her praise is rather one of the first attempts to understand Shakespeare's work critically by examining its textual corpus and focusing on the potential of the plays that she encountered as text. It is an attempt to produce what would be later defined as literary criticism in which the critic explores and is confronted with a text, the play-text, that is written but not yet performed. Cavendish therefore tries to explain what the image of Shakespeare as a 'happie imitator of nature' – which she read in the Folio, repeated in her prologue, and used to explain her own aesthetic – not only implied but could mean for those women writers, like herself, who were experimenting with different forms of writing[7]. The description of Shakespeare that emerges from Cavendish's preface in fact suggests how she read the Shakespearean plays also to contemplate new possibilities for women writers willing to participate in the creation of culture, investigate different aspects of human nature and experiment, as a writer and a dramatist herself, with different gender roles so far denied to women[8].

In general, as Marta Straznicky argues, "whenever Cavendish comments on drama, she is far more likely to do it in terms of reading rather than playgoing" (1995 note 98, 389) confirming, once again, that Cavendish's interpretation of

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[7] Cavendish was a prolific writer who explored many of the available genres of the seventeenth century – poetry, romance, drama, utopia and scientific treatise – to examine issues concerning gender, nature, culture, education and authorship.

[8] In this respect, if it is true that Cavendish, like other women writers of the Restoration who followed her, looked at Shakespeare without the aim of reading his texts in a political way, thus contributing to a process of "depoliticization of culture" (Romack 2016, 57), it is also true that the writer Cavendish was not only well aware of the advantages linked to her class position, but also that women at the time were not considered political subjects. In Letter 16 of her *Sociable Letters*, she overtly declares that "As for the matter of Governments, we Women understand them not; yet if we did, we are excluded from intermedling therewith, and almost from being subject thereto; we are not tied, nor bound to State or Crown; we are free, not Sworn to Allegiance, nor do we take the Oath of Supremacy; we are not made Citizens of the Commonwealth, we hold no Offices, nor bear we any Authority therein; we are accounted neither Useful in Peace, nor Serviceable in War; and if we be not Citizens in the Commonwealth, I know no reason we should be Subjects to the Commonwealth; And the truth is, we are no Subjects unless it be to our Husbands" (1997-2012 [1664], 25).

Shakespeare is also a way to legitimate her consideration of the 'play-text' and of her own plays which were written first of all for publication, rather than for a performance in a public theatre. They were in fact published for a delight (see Tomlinson 1992, 136) that Cavendish, as dramatist, spectator, reader and actor of the theatre of her mind, could feel for herself and produce not for a spectator but for a reader of a (her) textual corpus. In the dedication to the first book of her plays (1662) she explains that they were written for:

> My own Delight, for I did take
> Much pleasure and delight these Plays to make;
> For all the time my Plays a making were,
> My Brain the Stage, my thoughts were acting there.
> (Appendix A in Shaver 1999, 252)

It is also telling that Cavendish invariably speaks about her experience of Shakespeare's plays and his greatness and exceptional wit, primarily in terms of reading. As Stranznicky once again remarks in focusing on Cavendish's *Sociable Letters*, Cavendish refers four times to reading and only once to performance in her Letter 123, which contains a long critical passage on the peculiarity of Shakespeare's plays (1995, 389). Indeed, Cavendish measures Shakespeare's genius by the way his texts are able to reproduce within the mind of the reader, and thus within her own mind as reader and critic, the experiences described in the plays:

> in his Tragick Vein, he Presents Passions so Naturally, and Misfortunes so Probably, as he Pierces the souls of his Readers with such a true sense and Feeling thereof, that it Forces Tears through their Eyes, and almost Perswades them, they are Really Actors, or at least Present at those Tragedies." (Cavendish 2012, 130-31)

The famous Letter 123 that starts as a defence of Shakespeare's characters against a neoclassical detractor who has had the "Conscience, or Confidence to Dispraise Shakespeare's Playes", accusing them of being only "made up with Clowns, Fools, Watchmen and the like" (ibid., 130), then turns into a significant example of what could be defined as a first model of critical analysis in which Shakespeare's advocacy is convincingly argued through a close-reading and a textual criticism of his way of producing plays and characters independently from their interpretation by the actors on stage.

Although Shakespeare's wit might be able to answer for itself, since it is the ignorance of the reader and not of Shakespeare that makes his plays deplorable, as Heminge and Condell had already declared in their Preface to the First Folio, Cavendish goes further and demonstrates that Shakespeare's written language is able to "properly, rightly, usually, naturally" depict low characters, "a Fool's or Clown's Humour, Expression, Manners" and in general "their Course of life". This ability is, for Cavendish, just as good as that of portraying the "Words and course of life of Kings and Princes" (ibid.). Cavendish focuses on Shakespeare's original capacity to substitute empty characters with credible and authentic persons, "to express naturally, to the life, a mean country Wench as a Great Lady; a Courtesan, as a Chast woman; a Mad man, as a man in his right Reason and Senses" (ibid.). She also adds that it is even more difficult to grasp and depict irregular and non-static characters, such as those portrayed by the wit of Shakespeare, since it is more challenging and complex "to express Nonsense than Sense, and that tis harder and requires more wit to express a Jester, than a Grave Statesman" (ibid.). It is hard to deny that in these lines, in which a general overview of Shakespeare's characters is accurately outlined, Cavendish elects Shakespeare as the true painter of the variety of human beings able, as she herself argues, "to Express to The Life all Sorts of Persons, of what Quality, Profession, degree. Breeding, or Birth soever" (ibid.). For Cavendish, the definition of Shakespeare as a "happie imitator of nature" also implies his ability to convey "the Divers, and different Humours, or natures, or several Passions in Mankind" (ibid.), generating, like nature itself, true human beings with true and mutable human passions.

Cavendish's praise also foresees what would be at the core of Shakespeare criticism in the second half of the eighteenth century when critics would ignore the neoclassical problem of what and how Shakespeare should have written – and the attempt to correct his plays for the stage according to neoclassical taste – and turn instead to what Shakespeare actually did write, thus to a real analysis of the language of Shakespeare's characters, seeing in their original creation Shakespeare's greatest genius and innovation. "To pay a regard", as John Upton would write in his *Critical Observations of Shakespeare* (1748) "to what Shakespeare does write", rather than "guessing at what he should write" (1748, 8).

I also argue that Cavendish's reading of Shakespeare is even more important since with her focus on the passions explored by Shakespeare through the characterization of his diverse characters[9], she anticipates that kind of criticism which would represent a great innovation within the trend of Shakespeare criticism that emerged between the first and the second half of the eighteenth century when Shakespeare, like other ancient poets and writers, started to be considered a great classic and to be included in the nascent English literary canon (see Ross 1998; Kramnick 1998).

It is in fact from the second half of the eighteenth century that literary critics would see and theorize how the new individuals created by Shakespeare were the most successful representation of the complexity and mutability of the human subject, using his multifaceted characters and their passions to define the many-sided aspects of human nature and its feelings[10]. And it is again from the second half of the eighteenth century that these same critics, as Kramnick points out, would also secure literary criticism, and I would add, Shakespeare criticism as well, to "a restricted group of male experts and professionals" from where women readers (and possible critics) of the past, of their age, and of the future had to be duly excluded (1998, 102). In this respect, I believe that Cavendish's original focus on Shakespeare's characters is also a clear example of how the gender of the reader/critic has always underpinned the mechanisms of inclusion in and exclusion from a broader vision of the history of literature and critical thought which, as gender and women's studies remind us, and as the until now almost neglected role of Cavendish and of women as literary critics seems to confirm, have never been neutral.

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[9] With reference to the importance of Shakespeare's characters within the development of Shakespearean criticism, Vickers reminds us that a significant turning point occurred during the second half of the eighteenth century since "What is new in the last quarter of the eighteenth century […] is that essays and whole books are devoted to individual characters, and those alone" (1989, 197).

[10] They elected him as the true inventor "of the human", to borrow a definition by Harold Bloom in his book *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (1998).

3. Shakespeare's protean nature and the power of metamorphosis

Although Cavendish's criticism clearly refers to reading Shakespeare rather than to watching his plays, I believe that in her analysis she also confirms her ability to handle the dramatic structure, to be perfectly confident with the potential of the performance and to own a deep dramatic imagination, recognizing the performable nature of Shakespeare's play-texts. In her praise, she in fact imagines a dramatist able not only to describe, but also to perform each one of those persons he portrays "as one would think he had been transformed into every one of those persons he hath described" (Cavendish 2012, 130). And this not only regards male characters but also female, offering a microcosmic mirror for Nature's "fluid unity", as Brandie Siegfried reminds us (2006, 64), and of its perpetual transformative and generative power that a protean figure like Shakespeare is able to express. "One would think" Cavendish states in her Letter 123, "that he had been Metamorphosed from a man to a woman, for who could Describe Cleopatra Better than he hath done, and many other Females of his own Creating, as Nan Page, Mrs. Page, Mrs. Ford, the Doctors Maid, Bettrice, Mrs. Quickly, Doll Tearsheet, and others, too many to Relate?" (Cavendish 2012, 130).

Cavendish certainly read Shakespeare through the idea of self-fashioning, which pervaded not only the Elizabethan culture, but was still at the very core of the Stuart court culture of which she was both a user and an agent, as well as a promoter. "The idea of staging or recreating oneself through performance," Rebecca D'Monte reminds us, "was one that was endemic to seventeenth-century culture" (2003, 109). Indeed, if it is undeniably true that Cavendish was deeply familiar with the potential of the performance having been Maid of Honour to Queen Henrietta Maria and taking part in courtly performances or masques (see Peacock 2003, 89) that allowed the Queen to adopt various identities and personae, it could also be said that Cavendish herself, as a writer and a woman of court, recognized how the writing of plays implied the use of the performance as an unpredictable strategy which could allow her not only to imagine but also to experiment with different identities and gender roles. In this respect, it is notable that she does not seem

particularly interested in Shakespeare's poems but instead focuses on his plays and on his capacity to create reliable characters traversing each social level, from the lowest to the highest classes.

The great novelty of Cavendish's observations on Shakespeare's protean nature, on his being both a dramatist and an actor, as Thomson and Roberts (1997) and Ritchie (2014) have shown, lies in having recognized Shakespeare's ability to understand the variety of the nature of men and, for the first time, that of women. It also lies, I would add, in having recognized how through his plays the dramatist and actor Shakespeare managed to express the fluidity of human nature itself, and to show what would be defined today as the mutability or instability of human identity. Cavendish, who mostly read Shakespeare's plays rather than watching them, saw Shakespeare as a writer able to simulate the performance in the mind of the reader, as well as a dramatist exploiting the potential of a play-text that is performable and thus completes its meaning once it is interpreted on stage. This was a potential that Cavendish, as a writer and a woman, but also as a critic who wanted to compete with the men of letters of her time, was exploring to elaborate strategies and models which could better unveil the false preconceptions that for centuries had relegated women to a lower position due to their allegedly weak and inferior nature. Emblematic in this respect, I suggest, is the use of the verb to 'metamorphose', which is employed to highlight Shakespeare's ability to be and to shape different male and female identities, spanning from high to low characters, from Cleopatra to Nan Page or from a clown to the great Henry V.

Undoubtedly used as a homage to Ovid, a poet whom Cavendish passionately loved alongside Virgil and Shakespeare, as emerges from Letter 162[11], the verb to 'metamorphose'[12] is also employed to create a link between

[11] In her Letter 162 Cavendish declares "Madam, Remember, when we were very young Maids, one day we were Discoursing about Lovers, and we did injoyn each other to Confess who Profess'd to Love us, and whom we Loved, and I Confess'd I only was in Love with three Dead men, which were Dead long before my time, the one was Caesar, for his Valour, the second Ovid, for his Wit, and the third was our Countryman Shakespeare […]" (173).

[12] According to the *Oxford English Dictionary,* this verb which appears also as 'metamorphise', appeared in the English language during the second half of the sixteenth century as a borrowing from the French 'métamorphoser', and it generally meant "to change in form; to turn to or into something else by enchantment or other supernatural means" (1989, 674). It is interesting to see the way in which Shakespeare employed the verb in his *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* since it

the power of metamorphosis – the action or process of changing in form, shape or substance – and that of the performance which is based on artifices that allow actors to be transformed into someone else, to change shape, a device that dramatists often exploit to depict situations, characters and even events they want to be believed as real. Indeed, Cavendish depicts Shakespeare not only as a poet of nature, but also as an actor in his ability to perform his own characters and thus to metamorphose from a man into a woman, revealing the performative nature of gender which the stage is able to make evident[13]. Masculinity, femininity, class, race, body size and even sexuality are traits that actors – also boy-actors during the time of Shakespeare and now, for the first time, women – were expected to perform, making aspects of his or her character visible and credible. Aspects, as Cavendish would demonstrate through her own plays, that are the result of a metamorphosis, of a performance that makes them appear as if they were natural.

In this respect, if it is true that Cavendish's proto-feminist works explore various categories of women[14], it is also true that she never exactly explains what a woman is, giving us a single and unambiguous definition. Instead, she sets the content of the concept in continuous motion as if wanting to resist the static nature imposed on women by patriarchal rule. Indeed, it is interesting to note how much Cavendish was fascinated by the liquid-like adaptability of the new female actor, who regardless of their sex, could successfully perform the masculine or feminine parts with equal success. In Letter 195 she declares how greatly she was impressed by an actress she saw in a play performed in Antwerp, who "acted a Man's Part so Naturally as if she had been of that Sex,

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appears when Speed accuses Valentine of having been transformed into a woman due to his lack of those aspects which would make him a Master and a man: "And you are metamorphise'd with a Mistris, that when I look on you, I can hardly think you my Master" (2.1.28-30).

[13] Viviana Comensoli and Anne Russell remind us that crucial to the "multivocality that characterized the English Renaissance theatre was its pervasive fascination with gender, a category of signification which, through the stage conventions of cross-dressing and the deployment of boy-actors to play women's parts, was represented as protean and ambiguous" (1999, 1).

[14] In Cavendish's works, from her romances to her *Plays Never Before Printed* or *Female Orations*, we find the representation of different kinds of women: orators, travelers, warriors, daughters, devoted and unfaithful wives, and even empresses. These women question the burden of custom and their own nature as women without however focusing on a clear definition of what a woman really is, without trying to define their sex.

and yet she was of a Neat, Slender Shape; but being in her Dublet and Breeches, and a Sword hanging by her side, one would have believed she had never worn a petticoat, and had been more used to Handle a Sword than a Distaff; and when she Danced in a Masculine Habit, she would Caper Higher, and Oftener than any of the Men" (Cavendish 2012, 206).

Further confirmation that Cavendish read the plays of Shakespeare critically comes, in my opinion, from the composition of her own works. Rhetorically constructed as a public performance, but written, as she declared, to be read, Cavendish's plays present deep analogies with Shakespearean comedies, which, as we know, deal with marriage and misogyny, and rely on misunderstanding, deception, and mainly cross-dressing. Having recognised the way in which the dramatist and actor Shakespeare exploits the potential of the performance to depict the mutability of gender, Cavendish read and re-elaborated his plays both to experiment with forms of female emancipation, and as a paradigm to express her own conception of the fluidity and mutability of human identity, both male and female, and the performative nature of gender. In *The Convent of Pleasure* (1668), in a retreat similar to that of Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost*, where the king of Navarra had decided to spend three years separated from material temptations amongst which women clearly play a crucial role, a group of rich virgins convinced by Lady Happy decide to withdraw from the public world by literally "encloistering" themselves in a convent, which is conceived as "a place for freedom, not to vex the Senses but to please them" (Cavendish 1999, 220). Here, women experiment with different forms of pleasure and spend their time performing theatricals in which, disguised in different male and female roles, condemn the real dangers of marriage for women. This choice is not only a form of resistance to a patriarchal ideology whereby women were considered "married or to be married and their desires are subject to their husband", as emerges from the anonymous *The Law's Resolution of Women's Right* (1632), one of the first legal books concerning women's rights published in England (qtd. in Aughterson 1995, 155). It also reveals a conception of a female desire which is no longer exclusively linked to women's role as wife and mother, and is for the very first time overtly based on the fulfillment of the senses and on the reappropriation of the female body. Another emblematic example is *Loves Adventures* (1662),

which like Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* focuses on the cross-dressing of the female protagonist and her final marriage to the master she serves in male disguise. Unlike the Shakespearean heroine Viola, whose disguise is motivated by self-protection, Cavendish's heroine, Lady Orphant, chooses to disguise herself as a boy to pursue her love for Lord Singularity but also and mainly (and once again unlike Shakespeare's Viola) to show herself as an independent woman, able, like men, to fight, to strategically think, to be wise, and to be equal to men, thus to show how much gender inequality is the product of custom.

Fully aware that her work and her plays would not have been understood and appreciated by the "envious" and "malicious" readers of her time, as is clearly confirmed in the Epistle to the readers contained in her second collection of plays, *Plays Never Before Printed* published in 1668, in which she declares that "I regard not so much the present as the future Ages, for which I intend all my Books" (Appendix D in Shaver 1999, 273), Cavendish imagines that in the future wiser and more generous readers, those for whom she probably wrote, would understand her plays and find them interesting. Indeed, it is hard to deny that today wiser and more generous readers recognize that Cavendish's writing and ideas do not only prove her pioneering role within the development of a female genealogy of writers and dramatists, but also her function as a literary (Shakespearean) critic. Her observations on Shakespeare's characters, on his ability to metamorphose into men and women, together with her re-elaborations of Shakespeare's comedies and appropriation of his use of cross-dressing, anticipate the eighteenth century interpretation of Shakespeare's greatest originality and also seem to indicate, some three centuries earlier, what a gender and feminist approach to Shakespeare would later look for and disclose in its re-reading of his plays: the social construction of class, desire, masculinity and femininity, the social construction of gender.

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