# CAVENDISH'S CLOWNS: USES OF WISE FOLLY IN FOUR PLAYS BY MARGARET CAVENDISH[1]

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.14712/2571452X.2021.62.4

Abstract: This article explores the significance of the figures of folly in four plays by Margaret Cavendish: *The Matrimonial Trouble*, published in her first volume of drama, *Playes*, in 1662, and *The Presence*, *The Bridals* and *The Convent of Pleasure* from the 1668 *Plays, Never Before Printed*. An author of considerable breadth and some influence in her day, Cavendish, who also published poetry, natural philosophy, essays and a plethora of other genres, wrote at a time when the literature of folly, immensely popular only a few decades earlier, fell out of favour. After close consideration of the ways artificial fools are used in the four aforementioned plays, Cavendish's decision to include these fools – so far largely passed over in criticism – is interpreted as an example of her creative appropriation of early modern folly as a discursive phenomenon which was, at its height in the works of Erasmus, Shakespeare, Rabelais and others, employed as a way of questioning the knowledge of the ostensibly reasonable world.

Keywords: Margaret Cavendish, early modern comedy, fools, folly, Shakespeare, humanism

> The Fantastical Fool is wedded to strange singularities.
> Margaret Cavendish, "Of Fools," *The World's Olio*

Margaret Cavendish's second volume of dramatic texts, *Plays, Never Before Printed* (1668), opens with a preface in which the author considers the wisdom (and, implicitly, the folly) of publishing knowingly unconventional work, of the type

[1] This work was supported by the European Regional Development Fund Project "Creativity and Adaptability as Conditions of the Success of Europe in an Interrelated World" (No. CZ.02.1.01/0.0/0.0/16_019/0000734).

that had already earned her a considerable amount of notoriety. As is typical for her paratextual addresses to the readers[2] – and this one is atypical only in its brevity – Cavendish professes a lack of concern for whether her work is read and how it may be judged, proclaims writing to be her "cheafest delight and greatest pastime" and reaffirms her position as an author whose principal concern is subsequent survival in the discourse, stating that: "I regard not so much the present as future Ages, for which I intend all my Books."[3]

All of this falls in line with many of her prefaces which, as Amy Scott-Douglass notes, constitute "deliberately crafted devices for establishing her public identity."[4] Far from being expressions of disinterest, or indeed authorial humility, such openings showcase Cavendish's knack for pre-emptive rhetorical justification and point to an intentional straying from the playwriting norms of the age. Rather than admitting fault in her plays for not being "suitable to ancient Rules, in which I pretend no skill,"[5] Cavendish demonstrates that she indeed *is* well aware of the Aristotelian principles of dramatic structure, which were increasingly prevalent guidelines at the time, but that she just happens to be of the opinion they should be scrapped. As Sarah Mendelson observes, "Cavendish habitually used the topos of the self-deprecatory preface to emphasize her own originality," while her "apparent avowals of her lack of skill should be seen as a rhetorical ploy that enabled her to occupy the moral high ground in her debate with the 'carping critics' in her audience."[6]

But her prefaces are another thing too: by implicitly affirming what they appear to deny, they open something of a semantic labyrinth and allow for the first subtle glimpse into the workings of a creative mind with a pronounced tolerance for contradictions and an understanding of the discourse of folly which suggests the ways of the world may always be viewed differently, an understanding, as this essay will show, which Cavendish likely gleaned from Shakespeare and, indirectly, Erasmus.

[2] For a detailed overview and discussion of Cavendish's paratextual materials, see Amy Scott-Douglass, "Self-Crowned Laureatess: Towards a Critical Revaluation of Margaret Cavendish's Prefaces," *Pretexts: Literary and Cultural Studies* 9, no. 1 (2000): 27-49.

[3] Margaret Cavendish, *Plays, Never Before Printed* (London: A. Maxwell, 1668) prefatory matter.

[4] Scott-Douglass 30.

[5] Cavendish, *Plays, Never Before Printed* prefatory matter.

[6] Sara Mendelson, "Playing Games with Gender and Genre: The Dramatic Self-Fashioning of Margaret Cavendish," *Authorial Conquests: Essays on Genre in the Writings of Margaret Cavendish*, ed. Line Cottegnies and Nancy Weitz (Madison, WI, and London: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press/Associated University Presses, 2003) 198.

Where Cavendish is concerned contradictions abound. She was herself a paradoxical figure in her own age, when she was, as David Cunning notes, "regarded alternately as mad, pretentious, a curiosity, and a genius."[7] Hilda Smith argues that Cavendish "understood, better than any of her sisters, the multifaceted nature of women's oppression […] and society's pervasive vision of women as incompetent, irresponsible, unintelligent, and irrational." Yet, as Smith also notes, "she often suggested that society's perception was correct; women had made few contributions to past civilization, not because they were ill-educated but because they had less ability than men."[8]

Cavendish observed the world, natural and political, from the position of an exile, that is, of an ex-centric outsider nonetheless actively concerned with matters of central importance and familiar with the work of leading contemporary thinkers. Her engagement with and appropriation of the typically male-dominated new science and its rationality is especially telling because, as Anna Battigelli argues, "these systems seemed to her to promise to provide explanations for the political turbulence of mid-seventeenth-century England."[9] And her fictional work secured her an arena for experimentation and creation of worlds free of frustrations imposed on her, as a woman, by that same environment.

She embraced this textual experimentation wholeheartedly. As she proclaims herself in *Nature's Pictures*, "Since all Heroick Actions, Publick Employments, as well Civil as Military, and Eloquent Pleadings, are deni'd my Sex in this Age, I may be excused for writing so much."[10] In other words, Cavendish managed to thrive in her own way despite finding herself torn between the externally prescribed guidelines for how to properly perform herself as a woman, and the urge to bring into existence something that would dislodge her (and her readers) from the tired and tyrannical ways of the surrounding world: she thrived despite finding herself torn between the push to perform and the urge to create.

[7] David Cunning, "Margaret Lucas Cavendish," *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 2017), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/margaret-cavendish.

[8] Hilda Smith, *Reason's Disciples: Seventeenth-Century English Feminists* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982) 75-76.

[9] Anna Battigelli, *Margaret Cavendish and the Exiles of the Mind* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1998) 8.

[10] Margaret Cavendish, *Natures Pictures Drawn by Fancies Pencil to the Life* (London: John Martyn and James Allestrye, 1656) sig C.

### Plays for the Page

Cavendish's plays – her fragmented dramatic collages reminiscent more of playful postmodernism than anything contemporary – bear little resemblance to other plays published and performed in the seventeenth century. They were not her primary output, nor do they currently receive as much critical attention as her natural philosophy or her proto-science-fictional utopian romance, *The Blazing World*, for instance.[11]

Of the two dozen plays collected in two volumes and preserved thanks to Cavendish's dedication to seeing her work in print, not a single one was performed in her lifetime,[12] as is now fairly certain. She wrote them, however, with considerable gusto, as she demonstrates in her addresses to the readers, showcasing a brazen assurance that her gender need not be a hindrance, even daring to suggest that her creative act has certain revolutionary potential. She dramatizes these ideas in the Introduction to her first volume of plays, tongue firmly in her cheek:

> *2 Gentleman:* A woman write a Play! Out upon it, out upon it, for it cannot be good, besides you say she is a Lady, which is the likelyer to make the Play worse, a woman and a Lady to write a Play; fye, fye.
>
> *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 will say no body 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 condemnes it, were it never so excellent and care, 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.[13]

[11] Gweno Williams, "'Why May Not a Lady Write a Good Play?' Plays by Early Modern Women Reassessed as Performance Texts," *Readings in Renaissance Women's Drama*, ed. S.P. Cerasano and Marion Wynne-Davies (London: Routledge, 1998) 100.

[12] Mendelson 195.

[13] Margaret Cavendish, *Playes* (London: John Martyn, James Allestry and Thomas Dicas, 1662) 2.

Yet, Cavendish's plays are still something of an acquired taste. Famously deemed "intolerable" by Virginia Woolf,[14] they sometimes earn such scathing remarks as that of Rose A. Zimbardo who declares that, "[a]s a playwright Cavendish is a strong contender for worst in the tradition," quickly qualifying it with a concession that "she is a thinker of some stature, and even her mockery of the popular practice of her time is enlightening."[15] These plays are possibly best seen as rudimentary experiments in creative expression where Cavendish proceeds through a steady accumulation of detail or series of loosely connected vignettes to construct scenarios for her heroines in which they can creatively defy normative female behaviours of the age, while she as a playwright can comment upon the practice as she perceived it in the peculiar historical moment of writing, before (and immediately after) the ban on theatre was repealed in 1660. As Judith Peacock contends, drama "not only offered [Cavendish] an opportunity to explore her own vacillating and often contradictory ideas about gender roles, but her dramatic writing also demonstrates a theoretical exploration and an understanding of the constraints of the form."[16]

14 Virginia Woolf, "The Duchess of Newcastle," *The Essays of Virginia Woolf: 1925-1928*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (London: The Hogarth Press, 1986) 87. Woolf is often quoted for her colourfully negative portrayal of Cavendish in *A Room of One's Own*, which likens the Duchess to a "giant cucumber" which "had spread itself over all the roses and carnations in the garden and choked them to death." Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (San Diego, CA, and New York: Harvest Books, 1989) 65. For a discussion of the usage of Woolf in Cavendish scholarship and a comprehensive list of negative portrayals, see Lara Dodds, "Bawds and Housewives: Margaret Cavendish and the Work of 'Bad Writing,'" *Early Modern Studies Journal* 6 (2014): 29-65 (esp. 29-32). Woolf is, although still patronising, rather more generous in the aforementioned quote: if not to the writing itself, then to Cavendish's genuine and unique creativity. In its entirety, the quote reads: "Though her philosophies are futile, and her plays intolerable, and her verses mainly dull, the vast bulk of the Duchess is leavened by a vein of authentic fire. One cannot help following the lure of her erratic and lovable personality as it meanders and twinkles through page after page. There is something noble and Quixotic and high-spirited, as well as crack-brained and bird-witted, about her. Her simplicity is so open; her intelligence so active; her sympathy with fairies and animals so true and tender. She has the freakishness of an elf, the irresponsibility of some non-human creature, its heartlessness, and its charm."

15 Rose A. Zimbardo, *A Mirror to Nature: Transformations in Drama and Aesthetics, 1660-1732* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1986) 58.

16 Judith Peacock, "Writing for the Brain and Writing for the Boards: The Producibility of Margaret Cavendish's Dramatic Texts," *A Princely Brave Woman: Essays on Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle*, ed. Stephen Clucas (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003) 87.

Her plays have a paradox at their core. Akin to closet dramas, a genre that exists at the intersection of the public and private spheres – although she never designates them as such – they are spectacles that cannot be observed, or unstaged stagings.[17] By incorporating scenes that describe battles, masques, or elaborate and fantastical scenery, the performative aspects of Cavendish's plays transpose the enactment into the imagination and invite the reader to fashion themselves a spectator. Such experimental quality of form coupled with experimental quality of content whereby she places strong female characters into plots that rely on unorthodox sexual politics and situations, which challenge and affront perspectives on gender relations, are what makes her plays distinguish themselves and demand attention. They are creative efforts that stand in complex relation to the tradition she esteems and is striving to both emulate and supplement with her unconventional imaginings, always looking more to the past glory of early modern playwriting than to her contemporaries. As Anne Shaver summarises:

> The duchess's plays are structurally closer to some of Shakespeare's than to the neoclassical ideal espoused but not always happily achieved by Ben Jonson and most Restoration playwrights. Her works cohere not through unities of time, place, or affect but through an underlying question or idea that may be treated fantastically, realistically, comically, and pathetically all in the same work.[18]

## The Discourse of Folly

It is indeed "Gentle Shakespear" with his "fluent Wit"[19] who earns a lot of Cavendish's earnest admiration, even at the time when his popularity was

[17] However, Cavendish's plays are far from unperformable, as Gweno Williams's work on their actual staging and the recorded versions of six plays demonstrated. See Gweno Williams, *Margaret Cavendish: Plays in Performance* (York: York St John University, 2004) [video]. Discussing Cavendish and several other English early modern female playwrights, Williams argues that "the continuing and increasingly undeserved question mark over the issue of the performability of these plays has led to the maintenance of a critical blind-spot, a repeated and sustained ambivalence about their significance and full status as theatrical texts and their unique and important place in the complex history of English drama." See Williams, "'Why May Not a Lady Write a Good Play?'" 95.

[18] Margaret Cavendish, *The Convent of Pleasure and Other Plays*, ed. Anne Shaver (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1999) 10.

[19] Cavendish, *Playes,* "A General Prologue to all my Playes."

approaching an "all-time low."[20] Ever the independent thinker with little regard for fleeting fashions dictated by authorities on different matters, Cavendish had anticipated even John Dryden in delivering "the first sustained evaluation of Shakespeare as playwright,"[21] defending Shakespeare from the view typical for the Restoration, namely that his plays are "made up onely with Clowns, Fools, Watchmen, and the like."[22] In the now-famous Letter 123 of her *Sociable Letters*, she offers a critical appraisal of playwriting through an assessment of Shakespeare's artistry and his ability to write plausible characters, claiming boldly that "'tis Harder, and Requires more Wit to Express a Jester, than a Grave Statesman,"[23] and revealing particular admiration for his capacity for empathy and compassion, specifically when it concerns women, because "one would think that he had been Metamorphosed from a Man to a Woman, for who could Describe Cleopatra Better than he hath done."[24]

By noting the understanding of liminality necessary for a successful portrayal of folly and a writer's openness and fluidity which allow for the genuineness found in Shakespeare's female characters, Cavendish calls attention to qualities crucial in her own creative and philosophical writing. As Brandie Siegfried observes, "she saw in [Shakespeare's] theatrical works an ontological constant that paralleled her own philosophical stance on matter" and perceived in his works "learned schemes which could be useful for the study of both moral and natural philosophy."[25]

It is hardly surprising that a thinker such as Cavendish, who unequivocally advocates the view that a vital energy permeates matter itself,[26] who exalts bodies

20 Emma Depledge, *Shakespeare's Rise to Cultural Prominence: Politics, Print and Alteration, 1642-1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018) 39. For a thorough discussion of the popularity of Shakespeare's work in print and the various alterations it underwent during the renewed staging in the period when Cavendish was publishing her own plays, see especially Chapter 2, "Shakespeare on the Early Restoration Stage and Page, 1660-1677," 39-51.

21 Katherine Romack and James Fitzmaurice, eds., *Cavendish and Shakespeare: Interconnections* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006) 2.

22 Letter CXXIII in Margaret Cavendish, *Sociable Letters Written by the Thrice Noble, Illustrious, and Excellent Princess, the Lady Marchioness of Newcastle* (London: William Wilson, 1664) 245.

23 Cavendish, *Sociable Letters* 246.

24 Cavendish, *Sociable Letters* 247.

25 Brandie R. Siegfried, "Dining at the Table of Sense: Shakespeare, Cavendish and *The Convent of Pleasure*," *Cavendish and Shakespeare* 64.

26 For a comprehensive discussion of Cavendish's animate matter, see Jonathan L. Shaheen, "The Life of the Thrice Sensitive, Rational and Wise Animate Matter: Cavendish's

and subjectivities together and is capable of drawing on reason as well as imagination in equal measure, would understand the paradoxical wisdom of folly, as encountered in the works of Erasmus, Shakespeare, Rabelais and Cervantes – to name but the most celebrated few – which exposes incongruities and contradictions in everyday knowledge as well as in theoretical systems, shedding light on flaws in human pretentions to certainty.

Rather than signifying simply a trifling involvement with the comic or the absurd, the discourse of folly in the Renaissance is a profoundly serious matter: as a way of understanding, it makes no positivist truth claims; rather, it fragments and creatively reassembles the fictions that shape reality. It is not wholly constrained by the ways of the world, but is prepared to postulate alternatives, and its paradoxical wisdom is equally as performative as it is creative. As Sam Gilchrist Hall reflects in his lucid examination of the Shakespearean philosophy of folly in the context of contemporary humanism:

> many of Shakespeare's most profound philosophical ideas stem from the discourse of folly's critique of dominant modes of reason. The wordplay, jubilant ironies and vertiginous paradoxes intrinsic to this discourse offer alternatives to the instrumental ways of understanding that continue to dominate and dogmatise serious philosophy.[27]

And this is what Cavendish reaches for and recuperates in her plays, boldly and deliberately, which is all the more significant given the fact that she is writing at the dawn of the Age of Reason.

The falling into disfavour of the discourse of folly in the Age of Reason was famously taken up by Michel Foucault. As he argues in *Madness and Civilization*, first "a great disquiet"[28] occurs on the horizon of European culture when *folie* – a term that encompasses both madness and folly – leaves the place in the hierarchy of Vices that the Middle Ages had assigned it, and steps out into the limelight of literary, philosophical and moral concern. Folly contests the truth of man's knowledge by pointing to its absurdity and becomes, among other things, "the punishment of a disorderly and useless science."[29] Not merely a sin among other

Animism," *HOPOS: The Journal of the International Society for the History of Philosophy of Science* 11, no. 2 (2021): 621-41.

27 Sam Gilchrist Hall, *Shakespeare's Folly*: *Philosophy, Humanism, Critical Theory* (London: Routledge, 2016) 2.

28 Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (1964), trans. Richard Howard (London: Routledge, 2006) 11.

29 Foucault 22.

sins any longer, madness, or folly in early modernity becomes a tool of derision and a method of a Madman who in early modern farcical forms "is no longer simply a ridiculous and familiar silhouette in the wings: he stands centre stage as the guardian of truth."[30] But soon after such liberation, Foucault identifies a "strange act of force"[31] that occurs in the Age of Reason, when madness is defined, pathologised and disconnected from reason by Rationality. In this traumatic split, "the classical age was to reduce to silence the madness whose voice the Renaissance had just liberated, but whose violence it had already tamed."[32]

Disagreeing with Foucault's sweeping work on the history of the concept of madness has a history of its own and doubtless some of its parts will never pass the scrutiny of orthodox historiographical standards,[33] but a much more focused historicist study such as Robert Hornback's *The English Clown Tradition from the Middle Ages to Shakespeare*[34] clearly reveals the same fate of folly in Cavendish's age and milieu. Employing an approach he terms "literary archaeology," Hornback draws on religious, political and theatre history, combining them with various methods of historicist and literary research to re-examine "supposedly long familiar comic figures,"[35] discerning reductive and dismissive attitudes derived from a long history of misconceptions that shoehorned early modern comedy and folly into an easy category of "comic relief,"[36] a concept that originated as late as 1825. Hornback locates a very precise waning of the age of clowning already at the end of the Jacobean era[37] and the new primacy of neoclassical aesthetics and decorum which favoured a diffused satire and a more gentrified kind of comedy aimed at aristocratic audiences.

However, clowning was not simply unpopular towards the end; in the great political turmoil Cavendish herself witnessed first-hand, it was becoming dangerous too. The very last popular player of clownish roles with a political bent, William Robbins, was in fact assassinated in 1645 during the Civil War, while fighting for the King, which illustrates that, as Hornback notes, "the lengths to

30 Foucault 11.

31 Foucault 35.

32 Foucault 35.

33 For an overview of the historicists' reception of Foucault's *Histoire de la folie* see Colin Gordon, "History, Madness and Other Errors: A Response," *History of the Human Sciences* 3, no. 3 (1990): 381-96.

34 See Robert Hornback, *The English Clown Tradition from the Middle Ages to Shakespeare* (Woodbridge, and Rochester, NY: D.S. Brewer, 2013).

35 Hornback 20.

36 Hornback 13.

37 Hornback 191.

which the authorities went to silence an old tradition of satiric clowning are a tragic tribute to such mockery."[38] The fact that someone like Margaret Cavendish would reach into this tradition and include fools in her experimental plays certainly speaks of her independently creative thinking and, if we examine the instances of specifically foolish characters in her plays, an appreciation of the potential of the discourse of folly very similar to that found in its heyday and Shakespeare's works.

## The Fools in the Plays

Even though her plays are replete with instances of foolish behaviour, buffoonery and even that what we would today call slapstick, Cavendish introduces the first full-fledged fool into her first volume of plays rather quietly. The unmistakeably thrice-named "Raillery Jester the Fool" is the only explicit figure of folly in that edition. Occurring in the *Second Part of the Play Called the Matrimonial Trouble, A Come-Tragedy*, Raillery is written as a mild artificial fool[39] who jests with the folly of the world around him. *The Matrimonial Trouble* takes issue with the happy endings of typical Renaissance comedies and the silence that ensues after the marital ceremony. As the title suggests, the play deals with various miseries of married life taking a panoptic view of different types of unions explored in no less than nine plotlines over the two-play structure.

By designating its second part a "come-tragedy," Cavendish is attracting attention to her experimentation with the comparatively novel genre of tragi-comedy, which became popular in England towards the end of Elizabeth's reign and which the defeated Royalists especially favoured during the Interregnum and the closure of the theatres as something of a symbol of their defiance.[40] While the genre itself presupposes a play that is tragic in tone but leads to a happy conclusion, in *The Matrimonial Trouble* Cavendish turns this on its head by varying comic and tragic scenes and wrapping up most of her plotlines tragically. As Erna Kelly observes, it is a play (together with *The Religious*) in which Cavendish seems to actively engage with liminality, and where its liminal positioning within her

38 Hornback 202.

39 The Renaissance saw a split in the concept of the fool; all were no longer the same, as they came to be divided into natural and artificial ones. When the harmless half-wits wandering loose through the medieval world began to be perceived as "naturals," this was followed by the recognition of artificial fools: professional buffoons who used the all-round license of the natural fool for personal advantage.

40 Erna Kelly, "Drama's Olio: A New Way to Serve Old Ingredients in *The Religious* and *The Matrimonial Trouble*," *Cavendish and Shakespeare* 49.

dramatic corpus "mirrors the liminal space all of her plays occupy both between Renaissance and Restoration drama and the liminal performance space she appears to have intended for them; i.e., somewhere between solitary reading and performance on a public stage."[41] Introducing a witty fool into such a play, a liminal character in and of itself with a licence to cross various boundaries of reason and decorum, adds yet another dimension both to the generic experimentation and to the position towards various theatrical traditions with which the play communicates.

Raillery Jester is no simple fool, and is certainly not introduced as mere comic commentary on the action that unfolds around him. Although a relatively minor role, no sooner does he open his mouth in Act 1, then Biblical allusions start pouring out. When asked to comment upon the degrees of understanding, the first instance of anything not directly connected with marital relations uttered in the play, Raillery offers his tri-partite division of "Coelestial," "Terrestrial" and "Airestial" understanding, attached to the wise, the fools, and the half-witted respectively, itself likely a parody of Cavendish's own metaphysics and her musings on three different types of matter, for instance. He goes on to explain that beasts in his hierarchy qualify as wiser than the wise because:

> beasts (for the most part) are more industrious, prudent, temperate, and peaceable, than the best of men; neither do they trouble their heads, nor break their sleeps, about the trifles of the World […]; besides, we are taught to imitate the Serpent and the Dove, and Examples are Principles, and the Original is to be preferr'd before the Copy, the Sample before the Pattern.[42]

Bringing to mind Job 35:11, "Who teacheth us more than the beasts of the earth, and maketh us wiser than the fowls of heaven?" and Matthew 10:16, "Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves," this establishes a connection with a long line of fools (mis)appropriating the scriptures in their discourse of folly. These are the likes of Shakespeare's Feste, Falstaff, Bottom, or the Fool in *King Lear*, for instance, from whose mouths holy words sound at once poignant and misplaced, but most significantly and gloriously of Erasmus' Moria, the speaker of his *Praise of Folly* who in its final section erupts into what M.A. Screech describes as "a witty, erudite, sustained and moving praise of a form of religious ecstasy which is indistinguishable from a bout of temporary madness."[43] However humble,

41 Kelly 48.

42 Cavendish, *Playes* 463.

43 M.A. Screech, *Ecstasy and the Praise of Folly* (London: Duckworth, 1980) xvii.

Raillery is thus shown as a clown with a humanist pedigree and the fact that Cavendish includes him even though he has no specific role in any of the numerous subplots speaks for her conscious effort to align herself with a tradition that appreciated the wisdom of folly.

Cavendish's second volume of plays, *Plays, Never Before Printed*, brings three more foolish characters, the first of which appears in *The Presence*. A comedy which explores the humorous limitations of unskilful use of idealism and materialism alike, the main story of *The Presence* takes place at a court beset with a vexing fashion of its ladies imitating their Princess, "in love with an Idea she met with in a Dream in the Region of her Brain; and unless she may enjoy this Idea, not only awake, but imbodied, she cannot be at rest in her mind!"[44] Before this Idea is embodied – first as a suitor (a common sailor) who threatens the political stability of the court, then as a momentary confusion (the sailor is revealed to be a princess), only to be metamorphosed into a more stable solution (the princess turns out to be the twin of a prince) – a cacophony of voices expresses a number of wildly different views on life, art, love, and marriage. This cacophony is then supplemented – or interrupted – by the voice of the Fool bursting onto the scene, breathlessly describing the "Monstrous Creatures" he saw in his dreams:

> I saw Men with strange Heads, and as strange Bodies; for they had the speech of Men, and the upright shape of Men, and yet they were partly like as other Creatures; for one Man had an Asses head, and his body was like a Goose; another Man had a Jack-a-napes-head, but all his body was like a Baboon, […] Then I saw a Woman that was not like a Mare-Maid, for Mare-Maids are like Women from the head to the waste, and from the waste like a Fish; but this woman was like a Fish from the head to the waste, and from the waste like a Beast […][45]

Here Cavendish likely has the Fool riff on Horace's chimeric description of bad poetry which opens his *Ars Poetica*, a verse treatise on the poetic method and the poet's role within the state. Cavendish might have been familiar with it from Ben Jonson's translation as he "Englished" the epistle in its entirety,[46] and his first verses present the following grotesquerie:

[44] Cavendish, *Plays, Never Before Printed* 7.

[45] Cavendish, *Plays, Never Before Printed* 23-24.

[46] Jonson had a long-standing interest in Horace, studying his work carefully throughout his career, incorporating Horatian themes and imitations in his writing and translating him profusely, most notably *Ars Poetica*, of which two of his translations exist, both

If to a womans head, a painter would
A horse neck joyn, & sundry plumes o'erfold
On every limb, ta'en from a several creature,
Presenting upwards a fair female feature,
Which in a black foule fish uncomely ends […][47]

Both instances, on the surface at least, seem to sound a warning against an overactive imagination, Horace's in relation to composing poetry, and Cavendish's in relation to an overzealous and misguided idealism. But by hinting at Horace while donning a mask of Folly, Cavendish uses classical wisdom ironically and aligns herself with a tradition of writers – among whom is Erasmus and his famous *Encomium* – who employed Horatian satire[48] to create a self-deprecatory rhetorical persona with the gift of mild jesting in order to deliver uncomfortable truths to society, but also to complicate the very concept of truth: "in Erasmus' extended paradox," as Kathleen Williams argues, "we are presented not with a choice between true or false statements, but with a view of the complexities of truth."[49] The viewpoint of the Fool in *The Presence* is therefore not fixed, nor should it be read as the closest approximation to an authorial voice in the play, as Battigelli suggests, which solely "emphasizes the dangers of insisting that the product of an unbridled imagination be imposed upon the real world,"[50] but is in fact Cavendish's creative concession to the very power of imagination

published posthumously in 1640, although not particularly appreciated for its excessive adherence to the original. For more detail on Jonson's translation technique and the text itself, see Victoria Moul, "Translation as Commentary? The Case of Ben Jonson's Ars Poetica," *Palimpsestes* 20 (2007): 59-77.

47 *Horatius Flaccus: His Art of Poetry. Englished by Ben: Jonson. With other workes of the author, never printed before* (London: John Bonson, 1640).

48 The tone of *Ars Poetica* itself is far from straightforward. As Ellen Oliensis argues, "[w]hat Horace teaches the Piso brothers is finally not what to do or not to do but what he can do and they cannot. Horace's disquisition on the art which is the source of his authority (social and poetic) is addressed to an audience that boasts conventional social advantages Horace cannot claim, and this conjunction of subject matter and audience produces an extremely volatile blend of authority and deference: a 'masterwork' which is also a study in self-defacement, an educational essay which is also an exercise in antididaxis." Ellen Oliensis, *Horace and the Rhetoric of Authority* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 198-99.

49 Kathleen Williams, ed., T*wentieth Century Interpretations of* The Praise of Folly*: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1969) 9.

50 Battigelli 36.

and an obvious signal for the rich polyphony of the dramatic text which does not prefer one single stance.

The hybridity of the creatures from the Fool's dream has another connection with the canon of folly: it has a predecessor in the medieval fascination with deformities in nature and human physique,[51] which was, as Jacques Le Goff indicates in *The Medieval Imagination*,[52] often linked with the fantastical, and by extension sinful and sexually deviant. These traditions survived in the masterful creations of folly by authors such as François Rabelais, but also in much older popular practices of masquerading during the controlled subversiveness of the carnival season. What is more, the Fool is quick to appropriate Old Testament imagery. When accused of speaking like an ass, he declares proudly: "If I speak like *Balaam's* Ass, I speak wisely,"[53] fancying himself the only biblical beast apart from the serpent gifted with the power of speech, but also a creature who sees the blatant truth before the so-called wise do.

Much like she had done with Raillery Jester, in *The Presence*, Cavendish intertextually connected the Fool with the long tradition of folly resting on a paradoxical philosophy which can serve as a potent means of questioning stale societal norms she would have had issue with, such as quietly accepting an unexamined married life. Unlike Raillery, however, the Fool of *The Presence* is a more active character, one who in fact disentangles the brief confusion with the twins of royal birth which concludes the comedy,[54] thereby also warping the perspective of the play – if the Fool is the cleverest and most industrious character,

[51] Indeed, the Fool's carnivalesque catalogue of creatures also sounds as though they might have walked out of the central panel of Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*, which, whether interpreted as a scene of sin leading logically into the hellish landscape of the right panel, or as the paradisiacal state of man before the Flood, focuses on earthly pleasures of the intertwined bodies mingling freely with plants and animals. Bosch's distinctive iconography is usually traced back to the motives appearing in the margins of illuminated medieval manuscripts, yet what he does is endow marginal images with centre-stage value. See Lynn F. Jacobs, "The Triptychs of Hieronymus Bosch," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 31, no. 4 (2000): 1029.

[52] Jacques Le Goff, *The Medieval Imagination*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992) 37-41.

[53] Cavendish *Plays, Never Before Printed* 25.

[54] Cavendish uses the well-known twin trope of Renaissance comedy only in passing in *The Presence*: it is introduced in the penultimate scene of Act 4, only to be resolved less than two pages later, in Scene 1, Act 5. For a thorough recent examination of the early modern understanding of twinship see Daisy Murray, *Twins in Early Modern English Drama and Shakespeare* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017).

what does that say of the rest? – and drawing attention to the foolishness of the farcical circumstances which engendered the whole plot.

With Mimick of *The Bridals* Cavendish expands the role of the fool even further and delivers her bawdiest, most scathing clown. *The Bridals* is a comedy which starts where comedies normally end – with a wedding; or at least talk of a wedding, one which quickly grows into a discussion of the deceptive nature and durability of women's modest countenances and how they relate to their marriageability. An experimental inquiry into various modes of marital sexuality in women, it is something of a "hodgepodge, perhaps, at first glance," as Anne Shaver reflects, one for which "it might be instructive to consider that 'wit' itself, in many different forms, from creative intelligence to fashionable behaviour, might be the protagonist."[55]

Hence there should be no wonder that it includes a disproportionately large number of lines for the character of a professional fool whose presence, nonetheless, sometimes baffles critics, as Joyce Devlin Mosher's view that "Mimick in *The Bridals* is merely a go-between for the kaleidoscope of marital pitfalls and compromises" who "lacks agency to affect any significant outcomes in the play"[56] illustrates. While Mimick indeed acts as a go-between, he is also the central motivation for several highly charged scenes which do more than simply comment upon the main action of the play. Also, whereas it may indeed seem on the surface that he is a character who does not directly affect outcomes, the very presence and scope of the scenes which involve him influence the perspective and the meaning of the play a great deal.

Towards the end of Act 2, Mimick is found alone on the stage with Sir William Sage and Lady Vertue, the couple who represent a stable, harmonious marriage in the play, one which in fact most closely resembles Cavendish's view of her own relationship with William, the Duke of Newcastle. The lengthy exchange they engage in, unrelated to the play's main themes, concerns the wisest choice of profession that Mimick can make as a fool. Ideas are taken up, considered, and invariably discarded over four pages (along the lines of: "What think you of being a Scholar?" "That I am now; for I learn every day to play the Fool better and better."[57]) and the conundrum reaches a resolution only two scenes later, in Act 3, when the same trio shares the stage again. Then we discover, perhaps unsurprisingly, that Mimick has decided, unswayed by Sage and Vertue's

55 Shaver 12.

56 Joyce Devlin Mosher, "Female Spectacle as Liberation in Margaret Cavendish's Plays," *Early Modern Literary Studies* 11, no. 1 (2005): 23.

57 Cavendish, *Plays, Never Before Printed* 30.

opinions, to pursue the profession of an orator. Following, of course, the uncrowned queen of foolish oratory, Erasmus' Moria, Cavendish thus yet again quite explicitly invokes the tradition of an inconspicuous but enduring philosophy which mocks the omnipresent certitudes of reason, a paradoxical, non-hereditary "tradition" peculiarly attuned to the dual etymology of the word itself, which carries within it the sense of both "deliver" and "betray."

Mimick's newfound profession is then put into practice and, after some bravado on his deep understanding of the art of persuasion, both performative and intellectual, he lunges into an oration on the subject that lies at the very heart of *The Bridals*: the chastity of women. This is delivered in a marvellously parodic manner, declaring chastity and women two subjects in their essence so far apart that they can never be joined, or if done so, then joined only nominally, because "Names are more easily joined than the things they signifie."[58] Cavendish here makes him a mock-humanist, basing this 'foolosophical' argument which bungles Shakespeare's famous "What's in a name? That which we call a rose / By any other word would smell as sweet" (*Romeo and Juliet*, II.i.85-86), on the vacuousness of words and their inability to express felt reality.

Mimick's foolish oration is, however, soon interrupted by Lady Vertue who, seemingly outraged at his very words, forces him to descend from his makeshift pulpit and addresses his make-believe audience of nine thousand herself. Literally taking the place of a fool, Lady Vertue proceeds to deliver a sizeable speech of her own which, granting first the existence of "some Women, as the scum of the Female Sex, [who are] Incontinent," exalts the many virtues of their vast majority, who are "beloved and favoured by the Gods" despite being "the unhappiest Creatures which Nature ever made,"[59] given how they are treated by men. This jolly foolish debate is continued in Act 5, when Mimick offers to prepare a metaphysical "Hodge-podge" consisting of a long catalogue of faults, ills and vices to be served at Pluto's table, which Lady Vertue immediately counterpoints with her own concoction of honours, virtues and qualities fit for the table of Jove. Mimick and Vertue's good-humoured and lengthy sparring, however, should not be taken at face value; it is not a simple exposition of a faulty argument followed by a winning one. By having a fool involved in the delivery of what seems to be the central philosophical point of the play, Cavendish judiciously deploys the discourse of folly in order to show that the truth – be it the truth of female chastity as taken up in the play, or the truth which one attempts to reach by the means of rhetoric – depends greatly on perspective.

58 Cavendish, *Plays, Never Before Printed* 39.

59 Cavendish, *Plays, Never Before Printed* 40-41.

Mimick of *The Bridals* is carried over into *The Convent of Pleasure*, where he also appears as the fool of another Lady Vertue, although the Mimick of the latter play may seem but a pale shadow of the garrulous provocateur who took up so much of *The Bridals*. And it is quite significant that *The Convent of Pleasure* contains a fool. Contemporary critics' favourite due to its honest portrayal of potentially queer desire, the play, as Sylvia Bowerbank and Sara Mendelson note, "unfolds as an ongoing debate over what constitutes 'natural' behaviour [and] demonstrates, in numerous ways, what Judith Butler calls the 'performative character of gender.'"[60] Performativity is in fact one of the mechanisms Cavendish employs to build her subversive fictional worlds (or social orders) in which new conceptualisations of identity become possible. As Katherine Kellett argues, "by resisting stable identities in [*The Convent of Pleasure*], Cavendish exemplifies queer performativity more radically than by just resisting heterosexuality and instead complicates the very identity categories on which heterosexuality relies to assure its dominance."[61] The role that the discourse of folly plays in this has so far mostly been overlooked.

*The Convent of Pleasure* gradually moves from active engagement with an alternative existence for Lady Happy and her companions in the all-female cloister – the pleasingly creative proto-feminist scenario of the first part of the play – to the push towards reinstating the dominant order for which the man in the guise of a Princess is the catalyst. This move is parallel to Lady Happy's gradual silencing: from the self-assured, outspoken and witty creator of an alternative safe space for women instituted through performative utterances (most significantly in the first two acts of the play), to her stumbling into stunned silence after she becomes aware of her passionate feelings for the Princess/Prince and ultimate surrender to marriage she once so vehemently opposed. The play thus creates a tension not only between intentions and outcomes, but also between private affections and public status and the binary of feminine and masculine. What remains is the question of the play's attitude towards this tension and whether or not it can even be read as resolved.

Writing about Cavendish's view on the gendered production of knowledge, Lisa Walters concludes that, "[a]s Cavendish systematically deconstructs metaphors, analogies and cultural associations that define and maintain authority, she reveals the multifaceted dimensions of power, particularly how the belief in natural gender differences and the patriarchy they entailed was entrenched within

[60] Sylvia Bowerbank and Sara Mendelson, eds., *Paper Bodies: A Margaret Cavendish Reader* (Peterborough, Ont., and Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, 2000) 17.

[61] Katherine Kellett, "Performance, Performativity, and Identity in Margaret Cavendish's *The Convent of Pleasure,*" *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 48, no. 2 (2008): 430.

the early modern perception and experience of the world."[62] It is possible to find a very similar awareness of multiplicity articulated in *The Convent of Pleasure*, regardless how traditional its outcome may seem at first. A hint for a possible reading that could overcome a rigidly constructed conclusion that rejects alternatives proposed at the beginning of the play appears at its very end, when Cavendish, seemingly out of nowhere, concocts the character of Mimick, quite obviously a professional fool. After her mute marriage to the Prince, and after they mime the first rituals of a married couple – the walk under a canopy, the dance, all described in stage directions – Lady Happy breaks her silence only to address Mimick and offer him to leave his mistress, Lady Vertue, and become her own fool. All of that might seem gratuitous – a married woman trifling with a jester, two creatures whose words are null and void interact while her new husband handles the affairs of the Convent and what is to become of it now that the couple is about to re-enter the world – were it not for the fact that it establishes a direct connection with the discourse of early modern folly.

After it has been settled that the Prince will make a gift of the Convent (which through marriage became his to give away) under the condition that Mimick speaks the Epilogue, the fool is left as the final voice of the play and, before the standard speech, has this curious exchange with himself:

> I have it, I have it; No faith, I have it not; I lie, I have it, I say, I have it not; Fie *Mimick*, will you lie? Yes, *Mimick*, I will lie, if it be my pleasure: But I say, it is gone; What is gone? The *Epilogue*; When had you it? I never had it; then you did not lose it; that is all one, but I must speak it, although I never had it; How can you speak it, and never had it? I marry, that's the question; but words are nothing, and then an *Epilogue* is nothing, and so I may speak nothing; Then nothing be my Speech.[63]

For a play which is as economical with the lines as *The Convent of Pleasure*, this is more than a navel-gazing riff. Tara Pedersen notes that in this passage, "Mimick invokes the philosophical Latin grammars that would have been commonplace in the learned society of the seventeenth century, specifically the familiar syllogism that words are air or breath."[64]

[62] Lisa Walters, *Margaret Cavendish: Gender, Science and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017) 99.

[63] Cavendish, *Plays, Never Before Printed* 52.

[64] Tara Pedersen, "'We shall discover our Selves': Practicing the Mermaid's Law in Margaret Cavendish's *The Convent of Pleasure*," *Early Modern Women* 5 (2010): 129.

Apart from that, it calls to mind Falstaff – Shakespeare's larger-than-life creation of folly who also happens to speak an Epilogue which complicates the play that precedes it – and his "catechism" on honour. Called upon by prince Hal to fight in the battle that rages around them, he is left alone on the stage, posing copious rhetorical questions and answering them with literal counter intuition: "What is honour? A word. What is in that word honour? What is that honour? Air. A trim reckoning!" (*Henry IV, Part 1*, V.i.139-40) But Mimick's "nothings" are reminiscent also of the tragic "nothing" that echoes ominously throughout *King Lear*, a play deeply concerned with the misapplication of folly and reason. Cordelia's "Nothing" (I.iv.93) is the answer that provokes the old king when he grasps for a quantification of love, and one that triggers all the madness that ensues. It is also what his Fool repeats back to him, mocking him and the terrible mistake he had made in banishing his only honest child: "I am better than thou art now: I am a fool, thou art nothing." (I.iv.183-84) And Lear's Fool and Cordelia share more than the fact that they would have originally been played by the same actor: they share the affection of the foolish king and an important capacity for seeing through pretensions and telling the unadorned truth – which is a hallmark of the discourse of folly.

Mimick's words at the end of *The Convent of Pleasure* pull into focus the fact that "sense and nonsense are locked in a mutually defining relationship"[65] and his presence (and the presence of folly) opens up critical space in which incongruities such as those that arise in the play in fact need no resolution. This is the space in which John Keats will later recognise the concept of Negative Capability, a philosophical position which substantiates the state of cognitive dissonance, or a way of thinking which is, in Keats's words, "capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason."[66] And if anyone had first-hand knowledge of such a position, it would have been Margaret Cavendish with her great intellectual project in which she dared to make a stand against entrenched traditions. So much so that she might have agreed with the line from Ecclesiastes (1:17): "And I gave my heart to know wisdom, and to know madness and folly: I perceived that this also is vexation of spirit."

Cavendish's direct engagement with folly at the end of *The Convent of Pleasure* devalues the neat conventional conclusion of the comedy and reveals both the performative constructedness of this conclusion and the potential consequences of the play's more creative proposals. After what had happened between and *to* the two central characters, what ensues can hardly be a typical marriage. And this

[65] Gilchrist Hall 1.

[66] John Keats, "To George and Tom Keats, 21 Dec. 1817," *The Selected Letters of John Keats*, ed. Grant F. Scott (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983) 60.

is very much in accord with what Butler says about performativity, which is that it "describes this relation of being implicated in that which one opposes, this turning of power against itself to produce alternative modalities of power" – and to become creative with it, one might add – "to establish a kind of political contestation that is not a 'pure' opposition, a 'transcendence' of contemporary relations of power, but a difficult labor of forging a future from resources inevitably impure."[67]

## Creativity and Folly

One of the main aims of this article was to draw attention to a particular brand of creativity that can be ascribed to Margaret Cavendish, which she used to bring about primarily "alternative modalities" of writing and, consequently, of power, as Butler has it. This creativity is, however, significantly different from what it might entail today. Put bluntly, creativity is always an ability to bring into existence something that was previously not there; while not being altogether synonymous with invention. Today, social sciences (and psychology) operate with a standard definition of creativity, one that has been in circulation since at least 1952, and that postulates two crucial requirements of creativity: originality and effectiveness.[68] In contemporary world, it is a particularly potent concept, one that is even elevated to the status of an imperative. We tend to have high hopes for creativity to be the means to save us from ourselves by providing innovative solutions for immensely difficult issues, such as the climate crisis. Practically useful and usually very marketable, creativity is an object of private desires and a valuable commodity. And when yoked to capital and redirected towards profitable ends, it becomes one of the great ills of neoliberalism, appropriated and redefined to augment the injustices of capitalism and feed the growth of the very system it should seek to contest.[69] One of the reasons why such creativity is divorced from its full experimental potential can be sought in the fact that it curbs the discourse of folly and its paradoxes, failing to understand the deadening effect that "proliferat[ing] more of the same"[70] has on the imagination.

67 Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter* (London: Routledge, 1993) 241.

68 See Mark A. Runco and Garrett J. Jaeger, "The Standard Definition of Creativity," *Creativity Research Journal* 24, no. 1 (2012): 92-96.

69 For a thorough exposition of these ideas, see Oli Mould, *Against Creativity* (London: Verso, 2018).

70 Mould 7.

This, a thinker like Margaret Cavendish seems to have known all too well. Her ideas remain peculiarly fresh even to this day, so much so that her theory of matter could be read as something of an alternative to mainstream physicalist metaphysics of the present moment. Her insistence on writing in various generic forms reveals a respect for both intellectual rigour and the fluidity of imaginative literature, especially that of Shakespeare's works, and shows a readiness, and even need, to accept the free flow and exchange of ideas. As Brandie Siegfried insightfully argues,

> [b]y alluding to Shakespeare's plays, and then restructuring Shakespeare's theatrical strategies as evaluative sieves for philosophical assertions, Cavendish firmly folds the arts of delight back into the practice of moral and philosophical reason. For Cavendish, aesthetically tutored senses not only warm the intellect to true insight, but make possible the cognitive leap from the limitations of present episteme to new realms of knowledge.[71]

In writing her curious plays, Cavendish, dissatisfied with the gendered social roles of the world around her and unperturbed by societal expectations of women, performs what Gilles Deleuze would deem a creative act as an act of resistance. Her unperformed, unorthodox plays open up experimental literary spaces to think through problems despite the obvious limitations of the seventeeenth-century reality and put forward creative examples of how to think differently. They also exemplify the fact that, as the French philosopher boldly claims, "[c]reation takes place in choked passages."[72] And it is precisely overcoming an intellectual climate that tends to "choke" voices that are conspicuously different what Cavendish is most concerned with, introducing as she does clowns into her plays who, speaking their "nothings" from the liminal position of relative freedom, manage to criticise without claiming authority and complicate the order of things which would normally be taken for granted. As Deleuze elaborates further,

> [r]epressive forces don't stop people expressing themselves but rather force them to express themselves. What a relief to have nothing to say, the right to say nothing, because only then is there a chance of framing the rare, and even rarer, thing that might be worth saying.[73]

71 Siegfried 65.

72 Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995) 133.

73 Deleuze 129.

The reason why Cavendish chose the discourse of folly, one clearly connected to the earlier iterations which her own age deemed inappropriate, as previous passages have shown, is that it makes "certain modes of thinking and forms of writing possible," as Gilchrist Hall argues, reminding us that "[t]he paradoxical wisdom of folly is, after all, the possibility of the impossible."[74] By no means the only examples of Cavendish's use of folly, the clowns of the four plays discussed here are merely the most obvious ones, they are windows into a mind with a great capacity to generate alternatives.

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[74] Gilchrist Hall 19.

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