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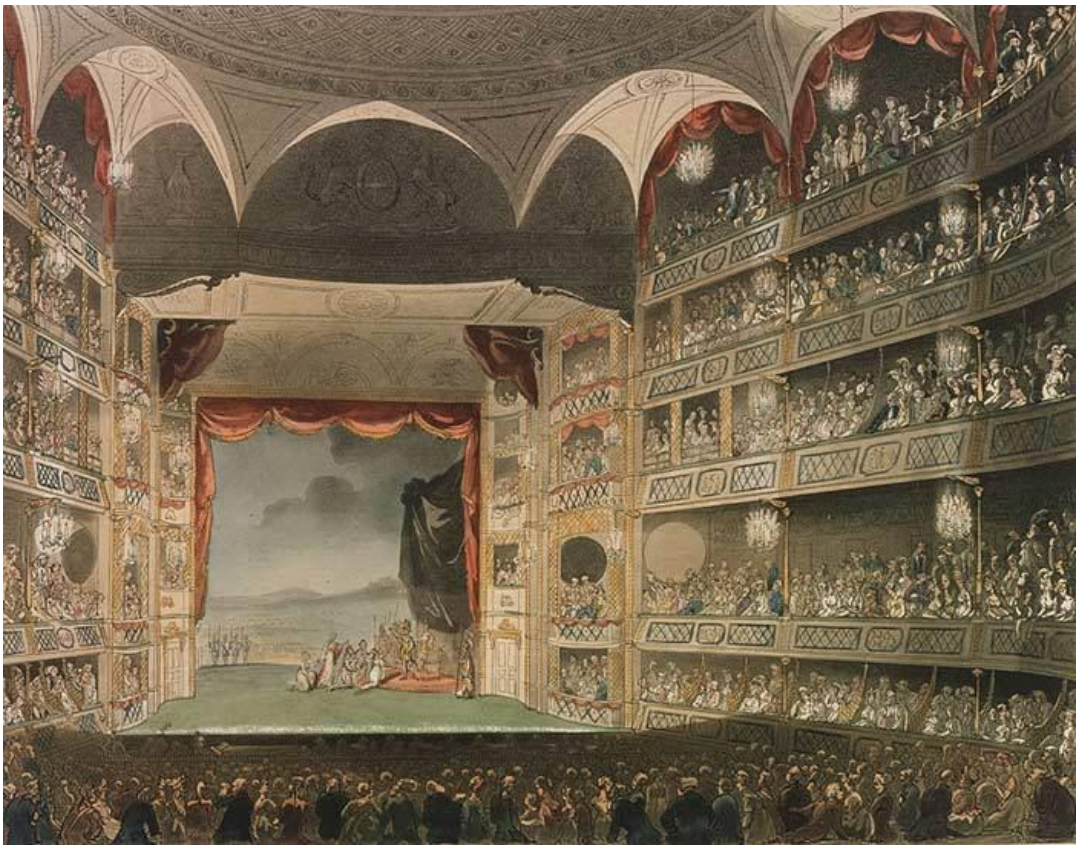
"With a paper of scurvy verses fastened to thy breast": Female Theatricality, Stage Metaphors and Competing Textual Appropriations of the Female Body in Four Early Modern Comedies



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Introduction

I Come, unknown to any of the rest
To tell you news; I saw the Lady drest;
The Woman playes to day, mistake me not,
No Man in Gown, or Page in Petty-Coat[.]
– Jordan's Prologue to Killigrew's *Moor of Venice*

On 8 December 1660, when Thomas Killigrew's adaptation of *Othello* premiered at the Vere Street Theatre in London, these lines greeted the audience to one of the first recorded productions featuring a professional actress in the leading female role (Jordan qtd. in Danchin 55.1-4). Almost three centuries later, in his *All the King's Ladies* (1958), stage historian and literary critic J. H. Wilson patronisingly minimized the impact of actresses' professionalisation on Restoration drama and, mostly grounding his enquiry on the players' romantic liaisons with patrons, playwrights and stage managers, he contended that "the influence of the actress … was as good or as bad as the private character of the actress" (105). Since then, feminist criticism has extensively challenged this claim but, as it transpires from the titles of Jacqueline Pearson's *The Prostituted Muse* or Catherine Gallagher's "'Who Was That Masked Woman?' The Prostitute and the Playwright in the Works of Aphra Behn," early influential publications parallelly contributed to crystallise the association between professional acting / writing and prostitution. In 1992, Elizabeth Howe's pioneering study *The First English Actresses* triggered a gradual re-evaluation of Restoration women players, and their professionalization has been increasingly regarded as a crucial dramatic innovation. Indeed, as Hero Chalmers, Julie Sanders, and Sophie Tomlinson phrase it, "[n]o history of Restoration theatre" would be "complete without due acknowledgement of the seismic shift in theatrical conditions and writing styles that took place in order to accommodate the spectacle of female bodies on the public stages" (1).

As Sara Mueller rightly points out, however, "[d]espite the exclusion of women from the commercial stages of London," female players did perform in England before 1660 and, far from being "more culturally unacceptable than their male counterparts," they "were acknowledged as

professional entertainers, licensed by the state to perform, and paid for their performances in cities, town and households across the country" (55, 53). Already in the late Middle Ages, working-class women were engaged "in the mechanics of pageant production and staging" while, throughout the early modern period, they regularly featured in "guild plays, May games, and civic entertainment" and female "itinerant musicians, acrobats, and other performers … toured the English countryside" (Stoke 48, Rackin 115). Excluded from the commercial theatre buildings, women acted on make-shift stages consisting of a "few boards and a curtain set up in public places, in squares, or piazzas, at fairs, church ales, on street corners, in the courtyard of inns, [or] outside storefronts" (Mirabella 89). Moreover, while actresses "had regularly been seen on the professional stage in Spain since 1587, in Italy from the 1560s and in France from the 1590s," English noblewomen only started performing "in private entertainment in aristocratic households and in court masques" during Henrietta Maria's queenship (1625-1649), when "amateur women's theatricals became a regular pastime" at the Royal court (Ritchie 77, Rackin 115, Gough 193). As the ubiquity of female performers in England despite their exclusion from the commercial stage illustrates, the early Restoration society's acceptance of female theatricality offered favourable conditions for actresses' imminent professionalisation.

But women also occasionally appeared on the commercial stage before 1660 and, as the *Consistory of London Correction Book* reports, in 1612 "'Moll' or Mary Frith" came "vppon the stage in the publique view of all the people there presente in mans apparel & playd vppon her lute & sange a songe" during a performance of Middleton and Dekker's *The Roaring Girl, or Moll Cut-Purse* at the Fortune Theatre (Mulholland qtd. in Korda 71). Similarly, in 1656, William Davenant "obtained special permission to produce *The Siege of Rhodes* and cast Catherine Coleman to sing and act the part of Ianthe," first in the dining room of [his] home at Rutland House," then at "the Cockpit theater in Drury Lane," which paved the way "for the given of Restoration theatre: female impersonation of the woman's part" (Depledge and Willie 3, Clare 35). Far from merely affecting the theatrical performance through the presence of a female body

on the stage, the advent of the professional actress in England also impacted on the way female characters were (re-)written as playwrights adapted pre-Restoration plays or composed new ones. As it transpires from the multiplication of female roles and breeches parts in Restoration drama, the "voyeuristic impulse" (Marsden 43) afforded by the display of the female body considerably shaped the portrayal of female characters. Furthermore, as Marsden, Howe and others have shown, the flourishing of female characters / bodies entailed by the adaptation of pre-existing dramatic works is symptomatic of a shift whereby female sexuality and performance were not condemned anymore, but celebrated and even endorsed by royal authority (Howe 21).

On 25 April 1662, under the pretext of expunging "profane, obscene and scurrilous passages" from Restoration plays, and in response to what he saw as the offensive dramatic convention of having "women's parts … acted by men in the habit of women," Charles II issued a patent declaring that "all the women's parts … may be performed by women" (qtd. in Thomas and Hare 17-18). But the royal warrant did not automatically erase the "tacit agreement upon the similarities between actors and seductive women," nor the residual anxieties about female theatricality deriving from the fact that both actresses and prostitutes deceivingly "seek to captivate and please those who pay" (Maus 608, Nash 78). Indeed, it has often been argued that audiences assumed that female players were prostitutes and "the actress's sexuality – her potential availability to men – became the central feature of her professional identity as a player" regardless of the on-stage roles she embodied (Howe 32-34). This prejudice diminished views of the actress's professionalism and ignored the fact that Restoration actresses, the majority of which were not of high birth, managed to emulate the behaviour of accomplished ladies; they did not simply "read and memorise lines at speed," but could also "sing and dance" (Howe 8). As this thesis intends to demonstrate, players and playwrights consciously exploited prejudiced assumptions about the actresses' sexual availability for dramatic effect.

The role of actor was unusual in that it offered women a rare opportunity to enter a profession with "a prominent position in the public arena" (Howe 26). Debora C. Payne acutely

depicts the commodifying and yet empowering effects of the actress's career, claiming that while "objectification undoubtably diminished actresses … in a public sphere with an increasingly pronounced sense of the visual, objectification simultaneously *amplified* actresses, situating them at the new nexus of power" (16). Combining stage history and feminist critical approaches, while also drawing from Judith Butler's theories of gender performativity and of (female) bodies as inscribable surfaces, this mémoire project will study how the changing material conditions of the English stage and, most importantly, the advent of the professional actress, shaped audiences' perception of female theatricality, affecting the writing and the staging of the female body in four seventeenth-century comedies: William Shakespeare's *All's Well that Ends Well* (~1605-6), Margaret Cavendish's *Convent of Pleasure* (1668), William Davenant and John Dryden's *Tempest, or The Enchanted Island* (1667) and Aphra Behn's *Rover; or, The Banish'd Cavaliers* (1677).[1]

In his *Essay on Comedy* (1877), George Meredith highlighted "the connection between comedy and women's freedom and warn[ing] women that sentimentalism was their enemy," arguing that by lifting "women to a station offering them free play for their wit," this dramatic genre offers an exhibition of their battle with men, and that of men with them" (Zimbardo 373, Meredith §26-27). Sharing this perspective, I will privilege comedy over other dramatic genres, as it seems to offer a higher amount of individualised female roles pursuing self-assertion.[2] Although the four aforementioned plays often resist clear-cut categorisations, all of them were labelled as comedies when they first appeared in print.[3] As Pearson observes, throughout the Restoration it "was widely believed, at least by male commentators, that women preferred tragedy,

[1] I will henceforth refer to these works as *All's Well*, *The Convent of Pleasure*, *The Enchanted Island*, and *The Rover* and abbreviate them in parenthetical references as *AW*, *CP*, *EI*, and *Rov*..

[2] I intend comedy in its broad acceptation, which here includes Shakespeare's problem play, Cavendish's pastoral comedy and Dryden and Davenant's tragicomedy.

[3] *All's Well* first appeared in Shakespeare's First Folio (1623), *The Convent of Pleasure* in Cavendish's *Plays, Never before Printed* (1668), while *The Enchanted Island*'s and *The Rover*'s first editions date respectively from 1667 and 1677.

especially if its emphasis was on female virtue in distress;" periodicals addressed to women primarily advertised tragedies and "[m]ale writers believed their female audience enjoyed passionate emotion and pathos" (37). Nonetheless, the comedy-to-tragedy ratio among the plays revived in the early eighteenth century thanks to the Shakespeare Ladies' Club clearly indicates the members' fascination with the comic genre as well (Pearson 40). Indeed, while late Restoration tragedies often relegated their heroine to the typified role of the powerless lady in distress, comedy allowed women players to enact more individualised roles, to appear in more women-only scenes, to speak more often and at length and to open plays, thereby inviting the audience to adopt a female viewpoint (Pearson 42). As shown by Pearson's survey "on one hundred plays by women and one hundred by men in the period 1640-1740," comedies' tendency to establish "a woman's viewpoint on the action as central" delineates itself even more clearly in female-authored comedies (Spencer 90).

Although this project is primarily concerned with Restoration comedies, I have also included a Renaissance play and an adaptation of a Renaissance play. Shakespeare's *All's Well* allows me to reflect on the extent to which all-male theatrical companies promoted or hindered the dramatization of women's self-assertion in the Jacobean age. By beginning with a Renaissance play, I will also be able to provide comparison with the post-1660 period to explore the impact that the advent of the professional actress had on the crafting of female characters and on the performance of femininity on stage. In the play, by miraculously curing the King of France from a deadly sickness, low-born Helen gains the privilege to marry the socially unattainable Bertram. As he contemptuously rejects her and flees to the Tuscan wars, Helen stages her death and follows him to Florence, where she arranges a bedtrick to fulfil the seemingly impossible conditions that he imposed to recognise their married status. Davenant and Dryden's adaptation of Shakespeare's *Tempest* (1611) similarly enables me to look at a Renaissance play's transformation for the Restoration stage. The play emblematically illustrates how audiences' tastes evolved as the

theatres reopened, inducing playwrights to reshape pre-Restoration plays by introducing additional female characters and breeches roles.

I have also included a closet drama, Cavendish's pastoral comedy, and I read the depictions of Lady Happy's foundation of an all-female separatist community to subtract herself from the patriarchal marriage institution as offering parallels with the freedom of expression afforded by the closet drama genre.[4] The Convent's dissolution by a cross-dressed Prince(ss) who intruded this theatre-like space also, I suggest, exposes patriarchal anxieties surrounding female autonomous self-fulfilment through performance.[5] Finally, *The Rover*, Behn's alteration of Thomas Killigrew's closet drama *Thomaso* (1654) enables me to explore the impact that the author's gender, her professional status and a switch in medium – from closet drama to stage play – have on the dramatic representation of gender. *The Rover*, I claim, dramatizes the liberating potential of carnival arising from the levelling of social classes, as well as the gender double standards regulating it (Bakhtin 6, Taylor 58): while female characters take advantage of the anonymity afforded by masquerade to contrast the male gaze and to emancipate from patriarchal narratives, male characters exploit it to escape punishment for transgressing the law, legitimizing rape as a natural component of carnival anarchy.

Following the order of the plays' composition dates, this mémoire project will investigate how the evolution of the material conditions of the English stage in the seventeenth century, and most prominently the advent of the actress, affected the perception of female theatricality and shaped dramatic portrayals of female characters in comedy. Kent R. Lehnhof contends that as soon as a heroine is represented on stage "as a theatrical actor (one who creates dramatic illusion) she becomes a social actor (one who takes action in the world), and consequently exemplifies the

[4] Although Cavendish's plays were never publicly staged during her lifetime, it cannot be excluded that they were privately performed.

[5] In conformity with Cavendish's text, I will use a female pronoun to designate the Prince(ss) while she wears a female disguise, shifting to a male one afterwards, while always signalling her gender fluidity through the (-ss) suffix.

dangers of female theatricality" (121). Proceeding from this claim, I will argue that, by establishing an analogy between the theatrical space and their settings, the four plays expose patriarchal anxieties surrounding the empowering potential of female performance. I will also resort to the body-as-text metaphor that Judith Butler employs in *Gender Trouble* to illustrate the malleability of gendered bodily surfaces "through corporeal signs and other discursive means," and contend that externally initiated performative "acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance … *on the surface* of the body" (184). In other words, I will suggest that the four comedies dramatize female and male competing endeavours to performatively (re)appropriate the female body / text by (re)writing it as a theatrical script which can either liberate that body from patriarchally convenient, superficial inscriptions or entrap it in them. "Associated with abduction, adoption and theft," appropriation carries an evidently negative connotation: whether literal or literary, it "comprehends both the commandeering of the desired object and the process of making this object one's own, controlling it by possessing it" (Marsden 1). The four plays are also crucially concerned with female characters' theatrical strategies to *re*appropriate their own body, subtracting it from external, predominantly male control and possession. The collision between female and male competing forms of textual / bodily appropriation illustrates how, although "gendering … is a compulsory practice," it is not fully determining," which admits the possibility for women to autonomously reinscribe their bodies against patriarchally convenient definitions of femininity (Butler, *Bodies that Matter,* 231).

Focusing on Shakespeare's comedy, Chapter 1 analyses Helen's social ascension as a healer, as well as her plot to designate and conquer Bertram as her partner, in order to suggest that she can be read as a female itinerant player performing on several make-shift stages at a time when actresses were excluded from the commercial theatre. The heroine subtracts herself from male characters' linguistic constructions of the female body by advocating for sexual liberation and gradually deprives Bertram of authorial agency, rewriting him as her legitimate husband.

Chapter 2 concentrates on Cavendish's *The Convent of Pleasure* and the spatial analogy established between the closet drama genre and Lady Happy's Convent; taking into consideration the alternation between sections of the play written by Margaret and those written by William Cavendish, the second part of the chapter analyses how the Prince(ss)'s interference in the Convent Ladies' theatricals renders the protagonist submissive and voiceless.

Chapter 3 first examines metatheatrical allusions to the sexual availability of the female bodies / characters inhabiting the theatre-like island of Davenant and Dryden's adaptation; I will also suggest that the dramatists' appropriation of Shakespeare's *Tempest* is reproduced on the plot level by Prospero's and Trincalo's discursive appropriations and misleading rewritings of Dorinda, Miranda, Hippolito, and Sycorax.

Finally, in Chapter 4, I argue that in Behn's comedy female characters exploit the subversive potential of masquerade to blur class boundaries, manipulating the male gaze through theatrical and visual self-advertisement. I end by examining how these instances of female-empowering performances are violently repressed by male characters who forcibly appropriate women's bodies and narratives, rewriting them by distorting the notion of consent and legitimizing rape.

As a whole, this thesis studies how the advent of the professional actress in the Restoration shaped audiences' perception of female theatricality, affecting the crafting of female characters and the staging of the female body in four seventeenth-century comedies. In each chapter, I investigate how the protagonists challenge or reinforce patriarchal anxieties surrounding female theatricality, in which way the establishment of spatial analogies between the theatre and the comedies' settings affects the representation of female self-empowerment though performance, and how female characters (re-)appropriate their bodies / texts, resisting male characters' repressive attempts to reinscribe them with(in) patriarchal-contrived narratives.

1. *All's Well that Ends Well*

The lack of recorded performances of *All's Well* in the Renaissance and the presence of several "confusions in the Folio text … have led some scholars to propose it was not actually performed in early modern period," or at least very rarely, and only "after Shakespeare's retirement," when the manuscript was presumably "adjusted for performance at the indoor theatre" (Smith 5, Gossett and Wilcox 23). Similarly, the scarceness of eighteenth-century revivals may be symptomatic of the theatrical industry's concern that the play would prove incompatible with the audiences' taste and dramatic expectations. From its opening lines, the play voices female perspectives that resist traditional gender roles. Thanks to the high ratio of female to male roles and the abundance of all-women scenes, the play has accordingly been described as "a bold effort to place on the comic stage women who show sexual desire, pursue consummation, have intercourse during the five acts, and are celebrated at the end" (Stanton qtd. in Waller 28). The attribution of the opening speech to a woman, a rare occurrence in the Shakespearean canon, "establish[es] a woman's viewpoint on the action as central" even before Helen first appears on stage and discloses her romantic interest for the unattainable and contemptuous Bertram (Spencer 90). Determined to abandon the restrictive environment of the Roussillon Court, the heroine confidently prepares audiences to witness her spectacular social ascension in Paris, where the King officially recognises her as a healer and rewards her for her service by conferring her the power to "choose[] her sexual partner" among his wards (Waller 20). Female theatricality is thus connoted as a sexualised, empowering tool, as a subversive strategy for emancipation that threatens the audience's conservative assumptions about traditional gendered power dynamics.

In the Renaissance, all-male companies "enforced a female 'lack'" on the stage that tempered the portrayal of female empowerment through performance (McCandless 12); however, Gary Waller contends that the mere representation of a "clever woman … who pursues her desires, sexually, socially, and professionally, clearly made for unease" (30). Examining *All's Well*'s

presumably inexistent stage history during Shakespeare's lifetime, he speculates that Helen's "'daring activism' may have presented her as a potentially revolutionary figure, which may account for the play's not being staged" (Waller 30). Yet, even when in the eighteenth century "the play was edited to make Helena more reassuring to the assumed audience," its revivals remained unpopular (Waller 30). The first documented performance of the comedy took place "at Goodman's Field in 1741: over the next 60 years it had only 51 London performances and for the whole of the 19th century only seventeen" (Dobson and Wells 12). Adaptations of *All's Well* extensively altered the Shakespearean text to "reconcile playgoers to … an unacceptably indecent plot-line" either by focussing "almost entirely on Paroles's gulling" or by offering "an idealized Helen … as its sentimental focus," as shown by eighteenth-century "promptbooks [illustrating] how productions eliminated parts of Helena's speeches that made her seem bold, independent and sexually aggressive" (Dobson and Wells 12, Waller 9). But this tendency to remove an excessively self-assertive Helen from the stage already seems intrinsic to the text.

Unlike other Shakespearean comedies, the most apparent manifestations of Helen's successful theatrical empowerment – the healing of the King, the wedding ceremony, and the bed-trick – neither occur onstage, nor rely on the heroine's cross-dressing. The audience merely witness the protagonist's endeavour to reject misogynist assumptions that equate female theatricality with an excessively liberated sexuality and, by extension, with prostitution. Presenting multiple male characters' alarmed responses to the protagonist's self-assertion, *All's Well* peculiarly illustrates that since within "phallogocentric language, women constitute the *unrepresentable,*" female theatricality is intrinsically subversive (Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 13). In this chapter, I will first argue that, almost mimicking the exclusion of actresses from the Renaissance professional theatre and the consequent relegation of female players to alternative forms of performance, the heroine's peregrinations connote her as an itinerant performer capable to transmute public environments into makeshift stages. The precarious empowering potential of these performances is nevertheless undermined by their temporary duration and never fixed

location. I will then examine how Helen's dramaturgical superiority and her acuity of reading enable her to textually appropriate her own body and rewrite the dominant misogynist discourse epitomized by male characters, repeatedly scripting her marriage with Bertram.

1.1 Female Theatricality and the Stage Spatial Metaphor

In the first act of the play, the Court of Roussillon is metaphorically connoted as a constrictive theatrical environment that severely limits the agency of the protagonist; when questioned about her feelings for Bertram, her inability to disguise the discrepancy between her verbal and nonverbal communication does not pass undetected by her mistress. During Bertram's farewell scene, the Countess already observes such disjunction in Helen, claiming that the "remembrance of her father never approaches her heart but the tyranny of her sorrows takes all livelihood from her cheek" and interprets her excessive display of sorrow as affectation:

> **Countess:** No more of this, Helena. Go to, no more, lest it be rather thought you affect a sorrow than to have –
> **Helen:** I do affect a sorrow indeed, but I have it too. (Shakespeare, *AW*, 1.1.47-52)

The heroine's reply ambiguously suggests that, unable to hide the physical manifestations of her woe at the prospect of Bertram's departure, she masks it behind the tears of an orphaned daughter.[6] Although the Countess rapidly drops the subject on this occasion, as soon as her steward Rinaldo reports that he heard Helen say that "she loved [her] son," she admits that "[m]any likelihoods informed [her] of this before" (1.3.108, 120-121). Throughout their interview, the Countess detect signs of unrealistic performance whenever Helen attempts to deny her passion for Bertram. Greeting her saying, "You know, Helen, I am a mother to you," the Countess closely examines the heroine's corporeal reaction to the word "mother" (1.3.135). She then pressingly asks her why she "start[s] at it" as if she "saw a serpent," inducing her to avow her feelings (1.3.138-139):

> Your salt tears' head, now to all sense 'tis gross:
> You love my son. Invention is ashamed

[6] Although Helen's affected and real griefs do not coincide, her reply to the Countess echoes Hamlet's indignant reaction as the Queen reprimands him for his excessive affectation of grief (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 1.2.76-86).

Against the proclamation of thy passion
To say thou dost not. Therefore tell me true,
But tell me then 'tis so – for look, thy cheeks
Confess it t'one to th'other, and thine eyes
See it so grossly shown in thy behaviours
That in their kind they speak it. (1.3.169-174)

While forcing Helen to confess that she loves her son, the Countess deliberately offers her training on how to act. As the personification of the heroine's cheeks and eyes highlights, nonverbal communication crucially contributes to the naturalness of any theatrical performance, and her lack of control over her body damaged the credibility of her denial.[7] Thus, as the Countess encourages Helen to set off for Paris, she is urging her to leave the Roussillon Court to fully develop her acting potential as an itinerant performer.

1.1.1 Make-shift Stages I: The Curing of the King

In Paris, the heroine's spectacular display of healing powers temporarily transmutes the Royal Court into a make-shift stage from which she reverses traditional power dynamics between subject and sovereign and between wife and husband. Assimilating Helen's curing of the King to the widespread Elizabethan practice of the female mountebank's performance, Lehnhof adopts a metatheatrical perspective to illustrate her trajectory of theatrical empowerment, arguing that her "performances invariably allow her independence and power, giving her a degree of agency typically reserved for men" (121). Invariably, male responses to Helen's subversive performances tend to diminish her, equating her forwardness as a healer and as a lover with an excessively liberated sexuality. Throughout her stay at the Court of France, "Helena, variously resembling the mountebank, the stage-player, and the prostitute, demonstrates the convergence of all these forms of transgressive female theatricality" and overcomes the King's initial reluctance to be cured by

[7] Cf. Hamlet's advice to the players (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 3.2.1-14): his indications to achieve "verbal and gestural" naturalness have been interpreted as reflecting "the regular Elizabethan rehearsal system whereby an actor would practise his part in the presence of an 'instructor' such as the author, prompter, manager or another actor" (Sterne 11, Thompson and Taylor, *Hamlet*, 325n3.2.1-2).

a female practitioner (Lehnhof 121). Her entrance on stage as a "Doctor She" is heralded by Lafeu's prologue-like praise of her healing powers and punctuated by sexual innuendos:

> **Lafeu:** I have seen a *medicine*
> That's able to breathe life into a stone,
> Quicken a rock and make you dance canary
> With sprightly fire and motion; whose simple touch
> Is powerful to araise King Pépin, nay,
> To give great Charlemagne a pen in's hand,
> And write to *her* a love-line.
> **King:** What '*her*' is this?
> **Lafeu:** Why, Doctor *She*! (Shakespeare, *AW*, 2.1.70-78, emphasis added)

The insistence on feminine inflected forms concurs to suggest that Helen's miraculous remedy will cure the King and that the sense of "admiration" and "wonder" inspired by the spectacle of her body will be sexually reinvigorating (2.1.86-87).[8] According to Lehnhof, the "insinuation that female empirics supplement their sham medicines with forbidden sexual favors expresses a standard Renaissance distrust of 'professional' women" who, like "the prostitute and the professional player," achieve "self-determination through theatrical performance" (115, 121). Helen's challenge as an actor therefore consists in the balanced calibration of the healer-character she impersonates, whose seductive rhetoric must be persuasive, but not threatening.

The private performance that Helen enacts during her interview with the King relies on her ability to exploit "language to compel belief in her own worth and ultimately to propose a new form of verbal authority" that allows her to designate Bertram as her future husband (Belton 126). Presenting herself as the daughter of the renowned doctor Gérard de Narbonne, she offers to treat the "malignant cause" afflicting the sovereign with one her father's "[m]any receipts" (Shakespeare, *AW*, 2.1.103-109). But the King's condescending reaction betrays a profound scepticism towards untrained practitioners, which is further "conveyed through his implied comparison of a quack doctor to a prostitute" (Gossett and Wilcox, *AW*, 183n2.1.119-120):

[8] "In Randle Cotgrave's French–English dictionary (1611), '*Medicine*' means both a '*medicine, or phisicke*' and a '*she Phisition*'" (Gossett and Wilcox, *AW*, 178n2.1.70).

> We thank you, maiden,
> But may not be so credulous of cure,
> When our most learned doctors leave us, and
> The congregated college have concluded
> That labouring art can never ransom nature
> From her inaidable estate. I say we must not
> So stain our judgement, or corrupt our hope,
> To prostitute our past-cure malady
> To empirics, or to dissever so
> Our great self and our credit, to esteem
> A senseless help, when help past sense we deem. (Shakespeare, *AW*, 2.1.113-123)

Helen's professionalism becomes threatening because, "as a doctor, she takes up a role that men, traditionally dominant in the learned professions, have assumed they were empowered to do" (Waller 20). The King accuses Helen of presumption and deceitfulness, implying that it would be unnatural for a woman to cure him when even his "most learned doctors" have resigned themselves to the fact that "labouring art can never ransom nature." Fully aware "that female participation in a profession aiming to 'cure the body with the body' is especially alarming in a culture committed to policing and preserving female chastity," Helen rapidly adapts her persuasive strategy to please him (Lehnhof 120).

Just as the "female mountebank … in the medicine show, [Helen] uses the power of performance to take control of the construction of her own person," manipulating her intended audience by feignedly humbling herself to a mere agent of divine will, while tempering – but still ambiguously retaining – her prostitute-like status (Lehnhof 121). Affecting an exaggerated modesty, she assures that she is "not an impostor that proclaim / [Her]self against the level of [her] aim," thereby inducing the King to re-interpret her self-confidence as divinely inspired (Shakespeare, *AW*, 2.1.153-154). Acting as a true *ciarlatana*, when the King incontrovertibly states, "what at full I know, thou knowst no part; / I knowing all my peril, thou no art," Helen condenses in a bewitching couplet her promise of hope (2.1.130-131). Both the chiastic structure of the first line and the parallelism of the second start to undermine the King's former adamantine assurance: "But know I think, and think I know most sure, / My art is not past power, nor you past

cure" (2.1.155-156). Eventually exploiting his prejudiced understanding of her "courtesan-like … corporeal craft" (Lehnhof 120), she declares herself ready to face

> Tax of impudence,
> A strumpet's boldness, a divulged shame;
> Traduced by odious ballads, my maiden's name
> Seared otherwise; nay, worse of worst, extended
> With vilest torture let my life be ended. (Shakespeare, *AW*, 2.1.168-172)

Venturing to accept the forms of public vituperation and capital punishment that a prostitute would suffer, Helen submits her body to male external inscriptions and "odious ballads" if her remedy revealed itself ineffectual. Stooping to the King's authority as her metaphorical patron, she eventually persuades him to undergo her treatment: "Sweet practiser, thy physic I will try, / That ministers thine own death if I die" (2.1.183-184). Cleverly avoiding negotiating her reward until she has won her spectator's trust, the protagonist now formulates her request:

> **Helen:** But if I help, what do you promise me?
> **King:** Make thy demand.
> **Helen:** But will you make it even?
> **King:** Ay, by my sceptre and my hopes of heaven.
> **Helen:** Then shalt thou give me with thy kingly hand
> What husband in thy power I will command. (2.1.188-192)

As the shift from the deferential pronoun "you" to the more familiar "thou" highlights, the social distance defining their subject-sovereign relationship is momentarily reduced, as the two become partners in a mutually profitable financial transaction; simultaneously, by claiming the authority to choose her life partner, Helen unsettles gendered power dynamics between husband and wife.

1.1.2 Make-shift Stages II: The Court of France and the Wedding Celebration

Acquiring the connotation of a new crucial manifestation of the self-empowering potential of female theatricality that marks an "initial inversion of traditional gender roles [that] is potentially threatening to audiences [who] accept them," the wedding celebration also takes place offstage (Desens 64). Once more serving as a prologue, Lafeu's implied stage direction introduces Helen's first entrance on stage after the King's recovery, presenting her as a heavenly directed "earthly actor" ready to perform her new role as a "social actor" (Shakespeare, *AW*, 2.3.24). Adequately

serving as her patron, the sovereign renews the "confirmation of [his] promised gift," and incites her to make her "frank election" (2.3.51, 56). As the "King, parading a contingent of eligible wards, formally confers on her the power of the gaze," Helen assumes a surprisingly submissive tone, which yet fails to win Bertram's affection (McCandless 453):

Helen: (*to* **Bertram**) I dare not say I take you; but I give
Me and my service, ever whilst I live,
Into your guiding power. – This is the man.
King: Why then, young Bertram, take her: she's thy wife.
Bertram: My wife, my liege? I shall beseech your highness
In such a business give me leave to use
The help of mine own eyes. (Shakespeare, *AW*, 2.3.102-108)

Immediately raising a linguistic barrier between himself and his future wife, Bertram avoids directly addressing his reply to her and, behaving like a spectator unwilling to witness female theatrical self-assertion, lays claim to the male prerogative to exert his own gaze upon eligible women. He also attempts to persuade the King that even though "she raised [him] from [his] sickly bed," he should not dispose such a disadvantageous match for his ward, emphasising the social cleavage separating him from a "poor physician's daughter" who "had her breeding at [his] father's charge" (2.3.111, 114-115). Bertram eventually stoops to the King's authority, submitting his own "fancy to [his guardian's] eyes," but he only reluctantly complies with his injunctions:

King: Take her by the hand,
And tell her she is thine; to whom I promise
A counterpoise, if not to thy estate
A balance more replete.
Bertram: I take her hand. (2.3.1-177)

Through his lapidary reply, "Bertram … complies with only the first of these directions… but refuses to speak the necessary words of consent" and carefully avoids signalling his "verbal agreement," thereby preventing the King from "completely perform[ing] the rite of betrothal" (Belton 131).[9] Significantly, rather than dramatizing the wedding ceremony, the text lingers over Bertram's refusal to consider his marital vows as binding and his arrangements for his flight.

[9] This episode constitutes a gender reversal of the strikingly similar marriage arrangement between the playwright figure of Petruccio and the silenced figure of Katherina in *The Taming of the Shrew*. This latter sequence also relies

1.1.3 Makeshift stages III: Florence and the Bed-Trick

Further strengthening the parallel with the figure of an itinerant performer, Helen follows Bertram to Florence, and transmutes its public squares and streets into temporary theatrical environments for the defence, arrangement, and enactment of her most subversive performance: winning her husband back through a bed-trick. In keeping with Desens' categorisation of women-contrived bed-tricks as a "last attempt to return to the previous social arrangements in which the husbands were faithful or the women safe from attack," the "injured heroine" presents her morally dubious stratagem as the only way to win "her rights against the man who ha[s] wronged her" (65, Bald qtd. in Desens 13). But "the bed-trick explicitly requires that at least one partner [does] not have informed consent to the sexual contact" (Desens 17). Therefore, it disturbingly appears as "a type of rape, in which Helena coerces Bertram into having sex with her against his will," or "as an act of prostitution, in which Helena services Bertram's lust and submits to humiliating anonymous 'use'" (McCandless 449-450). Just as the early modern "legal system … reflects its society's biases and fears in that it denies that a man could be sexually assaulted – particularly that he could be assaulted by a woman," the alleged unstageability of the bedtrick clearly betrays patriarchal concerns about female theatricality (Desens 153n21).

While in the first half of the play Helen mostly privileges solo performances, the efficacy of her theatrical stratagems in Florence rely on other female players' solidarity as well: upon her arrival, Helen soon "gets herself to a kind of secular nunnery, joining a confederacy of women who assist her in an intrigue that leads to her rebirth into patriarchal culture as wife and mother" (McCandless 49). Throughout their conversation in Act 3, Scene 7, the heroine wields her rhetorical persuasiveness to distract the Widow, but also "audiences, to some extent, from focusing on actions that could be considered sexually aggressive and, thus, inappropriate for a

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on the custom whereby a "precontract require[s] the presence and verbal consent of both parties" and, "since Katherina remains silent, the contract is not binding" (Shakespeare, *TS*, 213n2.1.322-3).

woman," as eighteenth-century adaptations of the play also attempted to do (Desens 65). As the *in medias res* opening of the scene suggests, the protagonist has already disclosed her identity to the Widow offstage, investing her with the role of a confidante who almost possesses the same degree of knowledge of the audience. Even the assurance that "the count he is [Helen's] husband" (Shakespeare, *AW*, 3.7.8) does not dissipate the doubts about the bed-trick's legitimacy legitimacy expressed by the Florentine, who declares herself "Nothing acquainted with these businesses" and much unwilling "to put [her] reputation now / In any staining act" (3.7.5-7). Ironically, the Widow's cooperation is only won through bribery; Helen's request for aid therefore soon transforms itself into a new financial transaction through which she purchases the Widow's trust and casts Diana in the role of Bertram's love conquest:

> Take this purse of gold,
> And let me buy your friendly help thus far,
> Which I will over-pay and pay again
> When I have found it. The count he woos your daughter,
> Lays down his wanton siege before her beauty,
> Resolves to carry her. Let her in fine consent,
> As we'll direct her how 'tis best to bear it. (3.7.14-20)

Acting more like a stage manager than a player, Helen outlines how she will guide Diana through the bed-trick performance she has scripted, closely directing her to delusively foster Bertram's conception of male achievement through warfare and sexual exploit. Her script involves both an exchange of rings, as she never doubts that Bertram will give up his own to "buy his will," and a "lawful" exchange of persons (3.7.27, 30):

> **Helen:** It is no more
> But that your daughter, ere she seems as won,
> Desires this ring; appoints him an encounter;
> In fine, delivers me to fill the time,
> Herself most chastely absent. After,
> To marry her, I'll add three thousand crowns
> To what is passed already.
> **Widow:** I have yielded. (3.7.30-36)

Helen's offer to pay for Diana's marriage dowry further persuades the Widow to consider "this deceit so lawful" that she cannot but yield (3.7.38). This implicitly invites the audience to share a

similar perspective and to acquiesce with the doubtful, blurred morality through which the heroine justifies and defends her 'unfeminine' romantic pursuit. Such phenomenon of blurring is also amplified by the versification, as the heroine's concluding riddling rhymed couplets illustrate:

> Let us assay our plot, which if it speed,
> Is wicked meaning in a lawful deed,
> And lawful meaning in a wicked act,
> Where both not sin, and yet a sinful fact. (3.7.44-47)

Questioning the possibility to operate a neat distinction between lawful and wicked conduct, the chiastic structure of the central lines and the contradictory statement formulated in the final one recodifies Bertram's prospect of unfaithfulness and Helen's deceitful, rape-like design as lawful on the grounds of conjugal debt. As the next section will examine, the incompatibility of Helen's and Bertram's conception of their relationship will become the source of a fierce negotiation through which they respectively attempt to appropriate or reject the other's body.

Similarly, erroneously thinking that he occupies the position of a male desiring subject during his wooing scene with Diana, Bertram fails to detect any sign of external authorship behind her replies and unconsciously adheres to a script forged by the very wife he rejected. Invisibly stage-managed by Helen, who models it after her exchange on virginity with Paroles, the scene deconstructs "the misogynist assumption that all women are alike" epitomized by the Count, whose "lust reduces Helena and Diana to interchangeable embodiments of *Woman*, functioning as passive, anonymous receptacles" of male pleasure (Adelman 158, McCandless, 59). Echoing Paroles' former arguments against chastity, Bertram teasingly urges the maid, "now you should be as your mother was / When your sweet self was got" (Shakespeare, *AW*, 4.2.9-10). Following Helen's directions, Diana feigns to hesitate before resigning to barter her chastity with his ring:

> Mine honour's such a ring.
> My chastity's the jewel of our house,
> Bequeathed down from many ancestors,
> Which were the greatest obloquy i'th' world
> In me to lose. (4.2.45-49)

The jewel metaphor temporarily reinforces the connotation of virginity as a valuable commodity acquirable by rich male purchasers; yet, Helen's arrangement for the midnight meeting through Diana reverses the male-as-subject and female-as-object equations. As the Florentine invites him, "When midnight comes, [to] knock at [her] chamber window," she imposes a series of restrictions that will ensure the fulfilment of Bertram's requirements to recognize Helen as his wife (4.2.54). These dispositions exemplarily conform to the defining features of the bed-trick trope, which Desens outlines as "a sexual encounter … in which at least one partner is unaware of the other partner's true identity" (11). Moreover, "because the couple meet in the dark, he or she fails to detect the substitution" with the partner that he or she was initially expecting (Desens 11):

> When you have conquered my yet maiden bed,
> Remain there but an hour, nor speak to me.
> My reasons are most strong, and you shall know them
> When back again this ring shall be delivered.
> And on your finger in the night I'll put
> Another ring, that what in time proceeds
> May token to the future our past deeds. (Shakespeare, *AW*, 4.2.7-63)

According to McCandless, "Helena effectively inscribes a condition of lack onto Bertram's body," since the "restrictions that she imposes – darkness and silence – deprive him of the two patriarchal capacities that define him as (masculine) subject: the gaze and speech" (463). While the critic suggests that the stratagem relies on Helen's "willingness to become *Woman*, to enter the bed-trick having assimilated the fantasy image of Diana that Bertram projects," its success rather depends on his interchangeable treatment of female bodies, as Diana later suggests (59):

> My mother told me just how he would woo,
> As if she sat in's heart. She says all men
> Have the like oaths. He had sworn to marry me
> When his wife's dead[.] (Shakespeare, *AW*, 4.2.69-72)

Arguably, as Bertram woos her by parroting the "oaths" of "all [other] men," he discursively constructs female bodies as indistinguishable facsimiles, while parallelly dooming himself to fail to read them. This view is further confirmed by the abundant antitheses structuring Helen's conflicting reaction to Bertram's behaviour after spending the night with him:

O, strange men,
That can such sweet use make of what they hate,
When saucy trusting of the cozened thoughts
Defiles the pitchy night! So lust doth play
With what it loathes for that which is away[.] (4.4.21-25)

The soliloquy-like quality of this introspective speech illustrates how "the mind can humiliate the body of the trickster as well as that of the victim" since Helen remains constantly "aware of the hatred for her in the man coupled in intimacy with her" (Doniger 81, Jagendorf qtd. in Doniger 81). The bed-trick itself "becomes the epitome not only of the dark waywardness of desire but also of its depersonalization" of the subjects involved (Adelman 158). The scene yet concludes on Helen's reinstatement of her assurance that "All's well that ends well" (Shakespeare, *AW*, 4.4.35). Determined to performatively turn her optimistic proverb into reality, the protagonist compromises with the pragmatic, but dubious morality of her dramaturgical strategy to rewrite Bertram's unfaithfulness as an incontrovertible proof to ensure their union.

1.2 Competing Textual Appropriations of the Female Body

In a specular operation to Petruccio's metatheatrical subjugation of Katherina in *The Taming of the Shrew*, which precedes Shakespeare's problem play in his First Folio, Helen's textual appropriation of her own body and her subversive rewriting of Bertram's in *All's Well* traces "a pattern of male subjection to female will" and dramaturgical agency (Smith 7). As Ellen Belton observes, the heroine successfully "establishes her own discourse of authority by demonstrating her mastery of imagery, rhetoric, and poetic form," thereby collapsing the dichotomic structure of a "masculine speech [that] is frequently characterized by anti-theatrical constructions in which notions of masculine plenitude, power and worth are contrasted with feminine deficiency, powerlessness and worthlessness" (127). Far from merely providing an ostentatious display of rhetorical virtuosity, I suggest that Helen's thoroughly planned script reshapes, through the performative power of language, the socially acceptable "feminine position of desired object" imposed upon her in Roussillon; the protagonist exploits male characters' inability to read her

body to assume instead the authorial, "masculine position of desiring subject" that they are erroneously persuaded to occupy by nature (McCandless 450). Displaying a pronounced dramaturgical inventiveness and a tireless determination to conjugate self-ownership and marriage, Helen subverts the dominant misogynist discourse epitomized by Paroles and Bertram, preventing them from rewriting her as a sexual object or as a social impostor and a parasite at the Court of Roussillon.

1.2.1 Commodification of Virginity and Subversion of the Traditional Marriage Market

In her introduction to the Penguin Classics edition of *All's Well,* Janette Dillon singles Helen out as "the only one of Shakespeare's comic heroines who is given – and who needs, in order to define herself – genuinely introspective soliloquies," two of which precociously appear in the play's opening scene (16). Framed between these two first soliloquies, Helen's discussion with Paroles about (loosing) virginity proleptically announces her willingness to emancipate herself from the condition of an exchange commodity, thereby becoming an independent subject who can freely dispose of her body, and an active purchaser within the marriage market. While this structural inclusion epitomizes the subversive potential offered by "rhetorical structures that evoke circularity, wholeness, and generativity," it also textually relegates male prevalent discourse within the boundaries of the protagonist's programmatic speeches (Belton 127). A close examination of the two soliloquies will highlight the seismic transition towards self-ownership arising from the acknowledgment that often, in Ann Marie Stewart's words, "a women's only power lies in *withholding* sex" or in her autonomous designation of her sexual partner (87).

Mostly delivered in blank verse and with the solemn tone of courtly love poetry, Helen's opening soliloquy may appear as a conventional profession of self-effacing affection for a more highly ranked lover; nonetheless, its imagery arguably foreshadows her gradual erasure of male inscription from her body. Initially resorting to the defining tropes of Petrarchan lyrism, the heroine professes herself "undone," declaring that "there is no living, none, / If Bertram be away"

(Shakespeare, *AW*, 1.1.84-85). The distance separating them, both geographically and hierarchically, is rendered through a diffused astronomical conceit:

> 'Twere all one
> That I should love a bright particular star
> And think to wed it, he is so above me.
> In his bright radiance and collateral light
> Must I be comforted, not in his sphere. (1.1.85-89)

Far from questioning Bertram's social unattainability, enhanced by his assimilation with a bright celestial body, Helen momentarily seems to resign to contemplate him at a distance, dwelling in a semi-obscurity only tempered by his "collateral light." As she recalls how she used "To see him every hour, to sit and draw / His arched brows, his hawking eye, his curls / In [her] heart's table," she implicitly obliterates her own persona, transmuting herself into as a literal *tabula rasa* engraved with an imperfect reproduction of Bertram's distinguishing attributes, which her fetishizing looks transmutes into "relics" (1.1.93-95, 98). However, she already assumes the objectifying gaze of the traditionally male poetic voice: from her position of speaking observer, she discursively constructs an idealized, unattainable beloved through the courtly love's celestial motif. Furthermore, the anomalous use of the adjective "hawking" reverses the parallel between hawking and wifely submission structuring *The Taming of the Shrew,* semantically equating Katherina's silencing through Petruccio's performance with Bertram's rewriting by Helen.

Only a hundred lines further, the heroine's former profession of "idolatrous fancy" for Bertram gives way to a proleptic "declaration of self-sufficiency" and fixity of intents that is metrically mirrored by the strict adoption of rhymed iambic pentameter (Shakespeare, *AW*, 1.1.97, Gossett and Wilcox, *AW,* 144n1.1.212). Giving origin to a new framed structure, Helen encloses the exposition of her personal designs – curing the king and marrying Bertram – between two personal pronouns referring to her independent agency, "Our" and "me" (1.1.212-225). Drastically recodifying the religious undertone of her previous speech, which connoted her sentimental and social aspirations as a form of heresy, Helen now ponders on how self-initiative and heavenly intervention concur in actively shaping the course of events:

> Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie
> Which we ascribe to heaven. The fated sky
> Gives us free scope, only doth backward pull
> Our slow designs when we ourselves are dull. (1.1.212-215)

The concomitant influence of human agency and divine will on reality already emerges from the polysemic term "remedies," which simultaneously alludes to Helen's self-contrived cure to love-sickness and to her miraculous prescription for the King. This ongoing process of negotiation between the two forces is further mirrored by the contrast between the metrical forward motion initiated by the enjambments and the semantic "backward pull" of dull humans' "slow designs." Yet, in the following couplet only a vertical rising motion persists, metonymically foreshadowing the successful outcome of Helen's attempt to bridge the social gap removing her from Bertram as she wonders, "What power is it which mounts my love so high, / That makes me see, and cannot feed mine eye?" (1.1.216-217). Her self-confidence reaches its peak towards the end of the soliloquy, as she forges a rhetorical question, to which she is evidently not truly seeking an answer, reminiscent of Lysander's hopeful assertion "The course of true love never did run smooth" in *Midsummer Night's Dream* (Shakespeare, *MND* 1.1.134): "Who ever strove / To show her merit that did miss her love?" (Shakespeare, *AW*, 1.1.222-223). Eventually, through the last couplet, "The King's disease – *my* project may deceive *me*, / But *my* intents are fixed and will not leave *me*" (1.1.212-225, emphasis added), Helen reiterates her self-assurance, repeatedly highlighted by the multiplication of personal pronouns, as well as the fixity of her intent to win Bertram by rewriting the King's incurable disease into a supernatural and spectacular recovery.

Helen's banter with Paroles about virginity constitutes the pivotal point of transition between the contrasting tones exhibited by the two soliloquies that frame it; their only feignedly naïve, witty exchange is permeated by innuendos emphasising the inextricability of the protagonist's sexual liberation from her deconstruction of male discourse. The accumulation of trade and warlike vocabulary or metaphors permeating the passage mutually concur to connote virginity as a commodity and, as such, as a seizable good that can be pillaged by a male aggressor.

Unwilling to comply with a discursive construction of female virginity that revolves around the male consumer-aggressor, the protagonist formulates the crucial question directing her entirely self-contrived script: “How might one do, sir, to lose it to her own liking?” (1.1.149-150). Early in the dialogue, the protagonist recurs to warfare vocabulary to convey the threatening societal sexual pressures faced by virgins, questioning Paroles about the most adequate precautions that a woman might take against male advances:

> **Helen:** [...] Man is enemy to virginity; how may we barricado it against him?
> **Paroles:** Keep him out.
> **Helen:** But he assails, and our virginity, though valiant, in the defence yet is weak. Unfold to us some warlike resistance.
> **Paroles:** There is none. Man, setting down before you, will undermine you and blow you up.
> **Helen:** Bless our poor virginity from underminers and blowers-up. Is there no military policy how virgins might blow up men?
> **Paroles:** Virginity being blown down, man will quicklier be blown up. Marry, in blowing him down again, with the breach yourselves made, you lose your city. (1.1.112-126)

The elaborate siege metaphor depicting sexual pressure endured by virgin women intertextually evokes the controversial sexual conduct of the heroine’s homonym Helen of Troy, establishing a parallel that is accentuated by Paroles’ opinion that every virgin will “lose [her] city “in the end. By infiltrating the male linguistic domain of warfare, Helen reduces Bertram’s companion to “some stain of [a] soldier” who runs “away when fear proposes the safety,” rhetorically dispossessing him of the agency that he arbitrarily believes to exert within the stereotypically male domains of war and sexual bravado (1.1.111, 1.1.199-200).

The latter section of the dialogue further illustrates the asymmetry between the two characters’ endeavours to linguistically appropriate the domain of the other; while Helen impeccably masters military vocabulary, Paroles’ wordy replies betray a certain uneasiness with the discursive construction of the female body that he attempts to undertake. As he vehemently exhorts her to consider virginity as a perishable commodity whose worth fluctuates depending on the gaze of its male purchaser, he continually forges new analogies:

> ’Tis a commodity will lose the gloss with lying; the longer kept, the less worth. Off with’t while ’tis vendible. Answer the time of request. Virginity, like an old courtier, wears her cap out of fashion, richly suited, but unsuitable, just like the brooch and the toothpick, which wear not now. Your date is better in your pie and your porridge than in your cheek. And your virginity, your old virginity, is like one of our French withered pears: it looks ill, it eats drily; marry, ’tis a withered pear. It was formerly better, marry, yet ’tis a withered pear. (1.1.151-162)

To obviate his linguistic deficiency, Paroles resorts to trade, fashion, and food imagery; the latter category specifically epitomises the inevitably perishable quality of a good that, “the longer kept, the less worth” becomes. The “date” metaphor relies on the term’s polysemy, potentially depicting loss of virginity as a life sweetener after a period of enforced abstinence, and maidenhead in old age as a visible source of bitterness inscribed on a wrinkled cheek. This second image is reinforced through the “withered pear” simile, which erases the woman’s sexual experience in favour of the male’s impression of deception, trivially depicted as the tasting of a fruit that “looks ill, ... eats drily” once it has passed its ripeness. Despite her questionings, though, Helen never genuinely needs Paroles’ guidance and resolves to overcome her social incompatibility with Bertram through her own body. “’Tis pity,” she insists,

> That wishing well had not a body in’t
> Which might be felt, that we the poorer born,
> Whose baser stars do shut us up in wishes,
> Might with effects of them follow our friends
> And show what we alone must think, which never
> Returns us thanks. (1.1.176-183)

While the re-emergence of the celestial metaphor highlights once again Helen’s social inferiority to her lover, his thanklessness, and his ruthlessness, these lines prefigure her attempt to provide her incorporeal wish with a body – her own – that might be felt, and notably by Bertram, through the bed-trick. Helen’s discussion of virginity with Paroles leads her to retract her former proclamation of self-abnegating love; faced with the commodifying male gaze that he embodies, she resolves to autonomously exchange her virginity with a husband of her own choice.

1.2.2 Dysfunctional Communication, Intermediaries, and Letter Writing

Unlike most of Shakespeare's romantic comedies, the plot of *All's Well* never erases the audience's perplexities about Helen and Bertram's (in)compatibility as couple, ceaselessly highlighting the dysfunctionality of their communication. Remarkably, the two never appear together alone on stage, and rarely engage in conversation. Their only proper dialogue occupies less than forty lines; moreover, Bertram's detached farewell to Helen, only serving to reinstate her inferior status and the protagonist's two only attempts to address him remain without reply (2.5.54-89, 1.1.76). But the two partners carefully avoid direct, intimate interaction and often rely on intermediaries such as the King and Paroles to arrange their wedding or their immediate separation. They also generally privilege the written word to negotiate their relationship as a married couple, thereby establishing an analogy between letter writing and bodily linguistic construction. Unwilling to acquiesce with the written rejection of her newly married husband, the protagonist exploits the young Count's unwillingness and inability to read her body and recognise her as his wife to rescript his trajectory of male self-assertion as "a military and sexual conqueror" (McCandless 450). Textually appropriating her own – but also her husband's – body, Helen "must undermine Bertram's syntax and subvert his meaning" to transmute his intendedly flat repudiation into a list of fairy-tale, fulfillable conjugal conditions (Belton 131).

Immediately after the wedding ceremony, the Count resorts to Paroles' mediation and to letter writing to enact his rejection of Helen and subtract himself from the husband role that she has ascribed to him against his will. During an exchange with his companion, he condenses in a few lines his frustration with his lack of agency, his preoccupation with compulsory conjugal sexuality and the idealisation of the Tuscan wars as an alternative, self-contrived path towards sexual emancipation and personal realisation as a warrior. Bertram's condition of powerlessness is mostly conveyed through the passive construction "they have married me," which syntactically defines him as an object upon which Helen and the King enact their will as free agents, while his attempt to undo his marriage vows arises from the repeated refusal of the marital bed:

"Although before the solemn priest I have sworn, / I will not bed her. ... I'll to the Tuscan wars, and never bed her" (Shakespeare, *AW*, 2.3.267-270). Bertram's immediate retraction to the solemn oath in the first line is highlighted in the second through a caesura clearly separating the warfare and married life options, a phenomenon that also recurs towards the end of the scene: "I'll to the wars, she to her single sorrow" (2.3.294). In a desperate attempt to reclaim agency through linguistic performativity, the recalcitrant husband declares his intention to – literally – script his and Helen's futures separately and avoids any sincere confrontation with her before his flight by drafting a series of letters:

> I'll send her to my house,
> Acquaint my mother with my hate to her
> And wherefore I am fled, write to the King
> That which I durst not speak. His present gift
> Shall furnish me to those Italian fields
> Where noble fellows strike. Wars is no strife
> To the dark house and the detested wife. (2.3.284-290)

Reinstating his resolution to call off the marriage vows and overtly uttering his hate for Helen, Bertram plans to break the financial contract he stipulated with his guardian, resolving to sponsor his military campaign on "the Italian fields" through the "present gift" he received from the King. The only rhymed couplet of the passage also reveals how threatening a "detested wife" appears to him compared to the "strife" of war. But the shortcomings of Bertram's arrangements are soon highlighted by Paroles, who labels them as a fleeting "capriccio" while still encouraging him "to leave her bravely," oxymoronically portraying his flight as an honourable exploit (2.3.291, 297).

In an equally cowardly move, Bertram resorts to Paroles' intermediary to inform Helen of his imminent departure and dispose for her return to Roussillon, limiting their interactions to a brief parting scene throughout which he consistently lies. As his name already evocatively suggests, Paroles resorts to an intricated, dilated syntax and prominently relies on periphrases to disguise his master's rejection as a mere postponement of conjugal duties that will "make the coming hour o'erflow with joy /And pleasure drown the brim" (2.4.35-47). Far from disclosing Bertram's prospect of joining the Tuscan military campaign, Paroles vaguely claims, "my lord

will go away tonight. A very serious business calls on him" (2.4.39-40). He also strongly nuances the count's former straightforward resolution "never [to] bed her," phrasing his sexual rejection of Helen ambiguously (2.3.270): "The great prerogative and rite of love, / Which as [her] due time claims, he does acknowledge, / But puts it off to a compelled restraint" (2.4.39-43). Since Helen initially complies with such design and assures him, "In everything I wait upon his will," Bertram seemingly manages to script his near future with the linguistic support of Paroles (2.4.54); this impression still subsists in the following scene, the only one where the two directly interact with each other. Offering a much drier repetition of Paroles' wordy instructions, Bertram urges her to "presently … take [her] way for home," deceivingly alluding to an imminent reunion (2.5.63): "'Twill be two days ere I shall see you, so / I leave you to your wisdom" (2.5.70-71). But the enjambment immediately preceding the verb "to leave" prefigures their separation, marking an emotional distance that very much emerges from his unwillingness to listen to her:

Helen: Sir, I can nothing say,
But that I am your most obedient servant –
Bertram: Come, come, no more of that.
Helen: – And ever shall
With true observance seek to eke out that
Wherein toward me my homely stars have failed
To equal my great fortune.
Bertram: Let that go.
My haste is very great. Farewell; hie home. (2.5.71-77)

Arguably, Bertram's repeated attempts to interrupt her and Helen's subsequent efforts to pursue the conversation, adapting her speech to fit the metre of their shared lines, mimics their respective aims of drifting apart and coming together as a couple. The Count also deliberately ignores the sexual innuendos permeating the lines preceding Helen's request for a kiss: as she reclaims "What law does vouch [her] own," that "Something, and scarce so much" which she expects as a payment for marital debt, suggesting that only "Strangers and foes do sunder and not kiss," he limits himself to dismiss her through an implied stage direction that forces her offstage praying her, "stay not, but haste to horse" (2.5.82-86). Only after her departure, Bertram can abandon his own performance and, still addressing her *in absentia*, eventually dares to utter: "Go thou toward home,

where I will never come / Whilst I can shake my sword or hear the drum" (2.5.90-91). Bertram's inexperience as a playwright yet transpires from his decision to delegate to Helen the creative act of forging a credible apology for her taking "instant leave o'th' King" (2.4.48); failing to exert a totalising textual agency over his wife's body or actions, he unvoluntary encourages Helen's creative reconfiguration of the content of his messages.

The content of Bertram's letters of rejection is not entirely disclosed until the second scene of Act 3, when the Countess and Helen read them aloud and share their content with the audience; faced with her husband's unambiguous reluctance to read her as his wife, "Helena's task is to find a way of re-reading these letters not as flat and final rejections but as riddles that the writer is challenging her to solve" (Belton 131). On the one hand, Bertram's letter to his mother exposes the antithetical relationship between the beneficial healing of the King and the harmful, disadvantageous marriage contract that followed, but also stresses the separation that the Count operates between the celebrated religious rite and the unperformed conjugal sexual duty: "*I have sent you a daughter-in-law. She hath recovered the King, and undone me. I have wedded her, not bedded her, and sworn to make the 'not' eternal*" (Shakespeare, *AW*, 3.2.19-22). Despite their semantic explicitness, these lines display a phonetic ambiguity that arguably provides Helen with indeterminacy – and consequent malleability – of meaning; indeed, she reshapes the oppositions between the (near) homophones *wedded-bedded* and between the explicit *not* and the implicit *knot* evoked by the context to support an interpretation that radically differs from their author's intended one. On the other, through his letter to Helen, Bertram "intends … to set an impossible task" (Gossett and Wilcox, *AW,* 41). He therefore performatively imposes two self-contradictory conditions whose non-fulfilment would jeopardise their union: "*When thou canst get the ring upon my finger, which never shall come off, and show me a child begotten of thy body that I am father to, then call me husband. But in such a* '*then*'*, I write a* '*never*'" (Shakespeare, *AW*, 3.2.57-60). Bertram's lines tentatively inscribe onto Helen's body two fundamental lacks that he considers

unamendable, and which she will yet compensate by jointly refining her interpretative skills as a reader and her inventiveness as a playwright.

In the latter half of *All's Well*, which celebrates "the craft of the dramatist in articulating … stories and drawing them out in our experience of the play," Helena becomes a surrogate dramatist, staging the miracle of her completing the tasks" by forcibly re-reading Bertram's script and rewrite their unconsummated marriage through the bed-trick (Waller 50). The heroine firstly appropriates Bertram's written medium of self-assertion, contriving a new series of fictional letters to fashion herself as a pilgrim, as dead, or as the pregnant Florentine Diana Capilet, allegedly seduced and abandoned by the Count. As a further reproof of the communicative dysfunctionality of the couple, Helen never addresses her messages to Bertram, preferring instead to designate an intermediary for each new role that she performs, progressively drawing the play towards her desired conclusion. Deliberately avoiding a direct confrontation with the Countess before her departure for Florence, perhaps fearing that she "could have well diverted her intents, / Which thus she has prevented," Helen takes her leave from the Court of Roussillon through a first letter (Shakespeare, *AW*, 3.3.21-22). The adoption of the English sonnet form for her "parting speech" already highlights its artificial and performative component (Styan 41). Helen announces that she is "*Saint Jacques' pilgrim, thither gone*" and prays her mother-in-law, "*Write, write, that from the bloody course of war / My dearest master, your dear son, may hie,*" almost compelling her to mediate between those two partners (Shakespeare, *AW*, 3.4.4, 8-9). Similarly, the audience only learn of Helen's supposed death, which she manages to stage through some additional counterfeited letters, thanks to Lord G.'s exchange with Lord E., but never properly witness Bertram's initial reaction to the news:

> Sir, his wife some two months since fled from his house. Her pretence is a pilgrimage to Saint Jacques le Grand, which holy undertaking with most austere sanctimony she accomplished. And there residing, the tenderness of her nature became as a prey to her grief; in fine, made a groan of her last breath, and now she sings in heaven. (4.3.45-51)

As it transpires from the combination of the ambivalent term "pretence" with conventional metaphors and euphemisms for sufferance and death, Helen successfully contrives and stages her pilgrimage and death according to the traditional dramatic conventions whereby a virtuous and yet rejected wife's inevitable fate is to die "a prey of her grief." As Lord G. claims that the reports of her pilgrimage are supported "by her own letters, which makes her story true even to the point of her death," and that her passing "was faithfully confirmed by the rector of the place," he proves himself a mediocre reader, unable to question the reliability of those writings (4.3.45-53).

The effectiveness of Helen's messages relies precisely on the permeability between fictional and factual writing, as it prominently emerges from the accusations against Bertram that she formulates in a petition to the King and from the riddling speech that she scripts for Diana. Writing in her name, Helen prepares the ground for her spectacular revelation in the final scene:

> **King:** (*Reads a letter.*) *Upon his many protestations to marry me when his wife was dead, I blush to say it, he won me. Now is the Count Roussillon a widower, his vows are forfeited to me and my honour's paid to him. He stole from Florence, taking no leave, and I follow him to his country for justice. Grant it me, O King! In you it best lies. Otherwise a seducer flourishes, and a poor maid is undone.*
>
> *Diana Capilet* (5.3.139-147)

By momentarily protracting Bertram's delusion following the bed-trick, Helen envisions its potential consequences in accordance with the conventional tale of the abandoned, poor pregnant maid, but she also fictionally recreates her experience of rejection after the wedding, when he "*stole from* [*France*]*, taking no leave,*" forcing her to "*follow him to* [*Florence*] *for justice,*" before publicly reshaping its outcome. Furthermore, she adequately responds to Bertram's riddle-like conditions, confronting him with Diana's equally enigmatic speech and then, triumphally appearing on stage, she

> defeats the phallocentric negation embedded in Bertram's text by offering the text of her own pregnant body as a proof of her indisposability, a text whose meaning exceeds the limits of the conditions it fulfills and the symbolic categories (wife, mother) to which it is subject. (McCandless 76)

Most credibly adhering to the role Helen scripted for her, Diana induces the King to ask Bertram "upon his oath, if he does think / He had not [her] virginity," but vehemently refuses to be labelled

as “a common gamester to the camp,” producing his ring as a first indisputable piece of evidence (Shakespeare, *AW*, 5.3.185-186, 188). Visibly irritating the King, who repeatedly threatens to imprison her as she claims that, despite losing her virginity, she “never knew man,” Diana produces a crescendo of contradictory statements in response to his enquires (5.3.285):

> **King:** Wherefore hast thou accused him all this while?
> **Diana:** Because he’s guilty, and he is not guilty.
> He knows I am no maid, and he’ll swear to’t.
> I’ll swear I am a maid, and he knows not. (5.3.287-289)

The paradoxical statement in her first line and the immediately following triple chiastic structure concur to blur the meaning of her speech even further, as does the concealment of Helen’s identity and gender when Diana informs the court that “The jeweller that owes the ring is sent for, / And he shall surety” her (5.3.294-295). Just before the heroine’s appearance on stage, the Florentine formulates her last riddle:

> He knows himself my bed he hath defiled,
> And at that time he got his wife with child.
> Dead though she be, she feels her young one kick.
> So there’s my riddle: one that’s dead is quick.
> And now behold the meaning. (5.3.298-302).

These lines arguably serve as a metatheatrical commentary on the mechanism underlying any *coup de théâtre*: the indispensable discrepancy between the dramaturgist’s omniscient power over the plot and the circumscribed knowledge of the audience which, in this case, leads the French Court to believe the heroine to be dead. Through Diana, Helen also confronts her husband with a riddle of her own contrivance; but since he shows himself still incapable to solve it and to retrospectively read Helen, and not Diana, as the woman with whom he had sexual intercourse, she is forced to provide “her visibly pregnant body” as “the incontrovertible evidence of a fulfilled, indomitable desire” and she “presents herself as an unknown body that speaks itself known” (McCandless 23). Helen theatrically exhibits Bertram’s ring, his rejection letter, and her pregnancy, which symbolically condense the restoration of conjugal life that she achieved by subverting Bertram’s text through the inscription of her own body:

Helen: O my good lord, when I was like this maid,
I found you wondrous kind. There is your ring,
And look you, here's your letter. This it says:
When from my finger you can get this ring
And are by me with child, etc. This is done.
Will you be mine, now you are doubly won?
Bertram: If she, my liege, can make me know this clearly,
I'll love her dearly, ever, ever dearly. (Shakespeare, *AW*, 5.3.307-314)

Neither the evocation of their sexual encounter, nor the fulfilment of the two conditions can compensate for the couple's dysfunctional communication and in fact, although Helen explicitly questions him, her husband addresses his dubitative and conditional reply to the King. The incredulity conveyed by the conjunction "if" further emphasises Bertram's deficiency as a reader, even when confronted with incontrovertible evidence provided in response to his former request, also formulated in a conditional form:

If you shall prove
This ring was ever hers, you shall as easy
Prove that I husbanded her bed in Florence
Where yet she never was. (5.3.124-127, emphasis added)

Helen's assured reply to Bertram, "If it appear not plain, and prove untrue, / Deadly divorce step between me and you," as well as the shift from blank verse to rhymed iambic pentameter, seems to sanction their union and the imposition of her self-contrived script over his attempt to conform to the chivalric path of male achievement through warfare and extramarital sexual intercourse (5.3.315-316). Although McCandless concludes that "Helen proves herself unreadable in the play's final scene," I would argue that she rather demonstrates Bertram's unwillingness and inability to read her, forcing him to peruse her bodily text as compatible with his requirements, now that the two fundamental lacks that he previously ascribed to her have been amended (23).

In conclusion, as she abandons the restrictive environment of the Roussillon Court, Helen spectacularly assumes the role of a social actor and desiring subject by healing the King, thereby gaining the authority to designate Bertram as her chosen partner. Unwilling to accept his rejection, she follows the young count to Florence and, thanks to the network of female solidarity that she establishes during her peregrinations, she rewrites him as her legitimate husband.

2. *The Convent of Pleasure*

In the abundant prefatory material accompanying *Plays* (1662) and *Plays, Never Before Printed* (1668), Margaret Cavendish ceaselessly reformulates her reasons for sending her texts "forth to be printed, rather than keep[ing] them concealed in hopes to have them first Acted," apparently discarding the prospect of any future public performance ("Epistle Dedicatory," 253). Douglas Grant's biographical study *Margaret the First* exemplifies a critical tendency to consider these paratexts as the author's own admission that her plays were "utterly undramatic" and "could never have been performed" (161). Yet, the Duchess of Newcastle was familiar with the "numerous masques" privately staged at the court of Queen Henrietta Maria and held a sufficiently favourable opinion of play-acting and theatregoing to assert that there is "no place, wayes or means, so edifying to Youth as publick Theatres, not only to be Spectators but Actors" (Ritchie 80, Cavendish, "To the Readers," 258). Far from being rooted in her aversion to the theatrical space, Cavendish's predilection for the closet drama genre might be dictated by the unfavourable material conditions of the public stage and, above all, the scarcity of trained players due to the theatre ban (1642-60). Her reticence to stage her plays might also stem from her awareness of the risk of "publick Condemnation" associated with "public exposure," since in early Restoration England "a woman writer was almost by definition [seen as] sexually immoral" (Cavendish, "Epistle Dedicatory," 253, Straznicky 376, Pearson 9). Emphasising both these factors, the Duchess's epistles serve as a precautionary justification for her pursuit of print publication.

Cavendish's rejection of public performance was likely influenced by the documented shortage of trained actors that ensued from the "18-year-lapse in theatrical tradition during the civil war period," but I would argue that the closet drama genre also afforded her greater political freedom (Williams and O'Connor, § 18). Although aware that "the printing of [her] Plays spoils them for ever to be acted" in her third epistle Cavendish presents publication as a calculated strategy to overcome the main "disadvantage of writing plays during the interregnum[:] the

impossibility of their being produced" while the "London theatres were closed" (Cavendish, "To the Readers," 255, Grant 161). She highlights unfavourable external factors that compromised the public staging of plays in general:

> The reason why I put out my Playes in print, before they are Acted, is, first, that I know not when they will be Acted, by reason they are in English, and England doth not permit, I will not say, of Wit, yet not of Playes; and if they should, yet by reason all those that have been bred and brought up to Act, are dead, or dispersed, and it would be an Act of some time, not only to breed and teach some Youths to Act, but it will require some time to prove whether they be good Actors or no[.] (Cavendish, "To the Readers," 254)

But her predilection for the closet drama genre can be best understood when one recognises that, between 1640 and 1737, Cavendish was

> almost the only writer of feminist plays, and she could probably dramatize unpopular views by confining herself to closet dramas, which allows her to break down conventional forms and concentrate to a remarkable degree on the dilemmas and language of women. (Pearson 23)

The enhanced freedom of composition offered by closet drama also accounts for the fact that her "plays have a high number of scenes in which only women appear and a high proportion of female characters to male" and are "much more likely than average to allow female characters to speak first and last" (Pearson 126-127). Publication thus enabled Cavendish to bypass adverse staging conditions whilst taking precautionary measures against a potentially unfavourable reception.

Throughout the epistles, the Duchess voices her concern that, "by the reason they are somewhat long," her "Playes would seem tedious upon the Stage," pointing out instead how, "for readers, the length of the Playes can be no trouble, nor inconveniency, because they may read as short or as long a time as they please" ("To the Readers," 255). Cavendish never denies her dramatic works' lack of adherence to contemporary dramatic conventions, admitting that they might not be "suitable to ancient Rules, in which [she] pretend[s] no skill; or agreeable to the modern Humor, to which she dare[s] acknowledg [her] aversion" (273). Eager to subtract herself from "the fear of having [her Playes] hissed off from the Stage," the author confesses: "it would have made me a little Melancholy to have my harmless and innocent Playes go weeping from the Stage, and whipt by malicious and hard-hearted censurers" ("Epistle Dedicatory," 253). As

Tomlinson and Straznicky respectively emphasise, "Cavendish imagines her plays receiving the punitive treatment of a prostitute or public woman" through a personification that "registers the aristocratic woman writer's perception of the hazards of public performance," those hazards which closet drama so reassuringly eliminates (143, 375). Her epistles thus ceaselessly negotiate her position as a woman dramatist whose pursuit of publication is dictated by the adverse staging conditions of the early Restoration and by her justified concerns for her plays' critical reception.

An analogous endeavour to resolve these two preoccupations emerges from Cavendish's self-conscious prose fiction *The Description of a New World, Called The Blazing World*, which also questions the non-dramatic nature of her plays. The narrative enables the author to discursively construct "a world of [her] own" through the performative power of her "Poetical Description" (124, 222). Cavendish features as a character within this work and the Empress of the Blazing World invites the soul of the fictional Duchess, whom she knows to be a playwright, to "give directions how to make plays" (220). Her reply echoes the stance voiced by the real Cavendish in her prefaces: "I intended them for Plays; but the Wits of these present times condemned them as uncapable of being represented or acted, because they were not made up according to the Rules of Art" ("To the Readers," 220). Cavendish consequently provides her fictional self with a world "framed and composed of the most pure, that is, the Rational parts of Matter, which are the parts of [her] Mind," so that the Duchess's "Playes may be acted in [the] Blazing-World, when they cannot be acted in the Blinking-World of Wit" (*Blazing World*, 224, 220). In this chapter, I will argue that the construction of an alternative, isolated, utopian theatrical space through the performative power of language also underlies Lady Happy's foundation of an all-female separatist community devoted to the pursuit of sensual delights and that the subversive potential of the Convent induces the cross-dressed Prince(ss) to infiltrate it and rewrite the protagonist as a melancholic, submissive wife to preserve the patriarchal *status quo*.

2.1 Female Theatricality and the Stage Spatial Metaphor

Lady Happy's Convent represents a discursively built, isolated, and auto-sufficient stronghold of female resistance against literary norms and gender expectations serving as a stage for the dramatization of the female condition of sorrow in marriage. The subversive potential of this environment is nevertheless undermined by its utopian, geographically isolated nature, which implies that its very preservation depends on the rigidity of its boundaries. Straznicky argues in fact that "while performance can be both harmful and beneficial, enclosure is invariably positive in Cavendish's plays, and in this light her choice of genre finds an additional rationale" (377). Just like closet drama, the Convent is a discursively built "retreat … for sensual delights" whose inhabitants lead "pleasurable, autonomous, and secure lives apart from the patriarchal world that enchains them" (Payne 25, Kellett 427). Such a parallel between the literary creation of the play's dramatic universe and the protagonist's building of an all-female space through the performative power of speech also evokes the Dedication opening her first collection of plays: "For all the time my Playes a making were, / My brain the Stage, my thoughts were acting there" (253). Within her "closet theatre of the mind" Cavendish "imagines a female convent within which there is a theatre in which women act out fantasy selves," and this concentric theatrical structure directly results from spatial isolation and linguistic performativity (Tomlinson 155).

Respectively set in outdoor and indoor locations, the opening scenes of *The Convent of Pleasure* juxtapose incompatible male and female views on marriage; this alternation parallelly exposes patriarchal anxieties about women's self-determination and Lady Happy's acknowledgment that, since "women's bodies are controlled by a language that excludes them as active participants in world-making," seclusion represents the most effective strategy to subtract herself from the marriage market (Moore 81). In Act 1, Scene 1, three unnamed Gentlemen discuss the protagonist's independent position as an "extream handsome, young, rich, and virtuous" heiress, suggesting that such a condition is "too much for one Woman to possess," unless one of

them was "to have her" as his wife (Cavendish, *CP*, 1.1, 217). The portrayal of marriage as a financial transaction induces the audience to better appreciate the heroine's resolution to withdraw from the world and performatively reconfigure her family estate into an all-female retreat. On her very first appearance, Lady Happy has already come to the realisation that "a Marry'd life ha[s] more crosses and sorrows then pleasure, freedom, or hapiness: nay Marriage to those that are virtuous is a greater restraint then a Monastery" (1.2, 218). As Madam Mediator inquires whether she truly intends "to live incloister'd and retired from the World," the protagonist depicts seclusion as the only path to preserve her reputation, evoking the author's portrayal of closet drama as a strategy to avoid "publick Condemnation" (1.2, 220, 218):

> Or, should I take delight in Admirers … I should lose more of my Reputation by their Visits, then gain by their Praises. Or, should I quit Reputation and turn Courtizan, there would be more lost in my Health, then gained by my Lovers, I should find more pain then Pleasure[.] (1.2, 218)

Syntactically, the anaphora structuring the passage and the two chiasmi "should I … I should" concur to mimic the inescapability of the damage, regardless of the available options. The increasingly explicit denunciation of the fact that "Men are the only troublers of Women; for they only cross and oppose their sweet delights, and peaceable life; they cause their pains, but not their pleasure" leads Lady Happy to resolutely conclude: "Men … make the Female sex their slaves; but I will not be so inslaved, but will live retired from their company" (1.2, 220). Here, the anaphoric recourse to the conjunction "but" mirrors the double act of resistance of the heroine, who simultaneously rejects the marriage institution and invites other women to emulate her.

Far from founding a religious community whose devotees "bar themselves from all other worldly Pleasures" Lady Happy envisions "the architectural space of the convent as a site of liberation" for women (1.2, 219, Chalmers 37):

> I intend to incloister my self from the World, to enjoy pleasure, and not to bury my self from it; but to incloister my self from the incumbred cares and vexations, troubles and perturbance of the World. … I will take so many Noble Persons of my own Sex, as my Estate will plentifully maintain, such whose Births are greater then their Fortunes, and are resolv'd to live a single life, and vow Virginity: with these I mean to live incloister'd with all the

> delights and pleasures that are allowable and lawful; My Cloister shall not be a Cloister of restraint, but a place for freedom, not to vex the Senses but to please them. (1.2, 220)

As Alexandra Verini points out, Lady Happy's speech abounds with "pairs of synonyms" that "proliferate the infinite possibilities and pleasures to be found in the convent," while also "recall[ing] the clerical doublets of Christine de Pizan's [allegorical] work *Le livre de la cité des dames*" (1). By repeatedly juxtaposing the hopeful prospect of self-realisation with the discarded, disadvantageous alternative usually reserved for women, this optimistic declaration of intents is reminiscent of Helen's second soliloquy in *All's Well*. Shifting from prose to verse, as Helen often does at crucial points in Shakespeare's play, Lady Happy pictures the pursuit of sensual "delights and pleasures" that her Convent will ensure:

> *For every Sense shall pleasure take,*
> *And all our Lives shall merry make:*
> *...*
> *Wee'l please our Sight with Pictures rare;*
> *Our Nostrils with perfumed Air.*
> *Our Ears with sweet melodious Sound,*
> *Whose Substance can be no where found;*
> *Our Tast with sweet delicious Meat,*
> *And savory Sauces we will eat:*
> *...*
> *Thus will in* Pleasure's Convent *I*
> *Live with delight, and with it die*. (Cavendish, *CP*, 1.2, 220-221)

The abrupt transition from prose to the pastoral register of these lines signals the performative transfiguration of the Convent's ideal into a tangible reality, physically separating Lady Happy's community from the world, but its last couplet also foreshadows its dissolution.

As a closed system excluding the male Courtiers, one of the Convent's most alarming features to outsiders resides in the precautions taken to minimize exchanges with the outer world, such as its impenetrable surrounding walls and the complete "self-sufficiency of the female community" inhabiting it, which "extends to their refusal to allow the male gaze to sanction their activities or constitute their identities" (Chalmers 40). Lady Happy's Convent is indeed depicted as a hermetically sealed, self-sustaining *locus amoenus*:

> her House, where she hath made her Convent, is so big and convenient, and so strong, as it needs no addition or repair: Besides, she has so much compass of ground within her walls, as there is not only room and place enough for Gardens, Orchards, Walks, Groves, Bowers, Arbours, Ponds, Fountains, Springs and the like; but also conveniency for much Provision, and hath Women for every Office and Employment: for though she hath not above twenty Ladies with her, yet she hath a numerous Company of Female Servants, so as there is no occasion for Men. (Cavendish, *CP*, 2.2, 223)

The vastness of the estate and the multiplicity of its residents, both of which are conveyed through a dilated syntax of accumulation, make male presence entirely superfluous. In this "alternative Utopia," women also practice as "Physicians, Surgeons and Apothecaries," and just as for Helen's self-proclamation as a healer in *All's Well*, their intrusion into the traditionally male realm of working professionals provokes patriarchal anxieties (Kellett 427, Cavendish, *CP*, 1.2, 223).

As Payne rightly observes, the Convent promises "rich and unusual fulfilment for women, frightening those outside by their potential for upheaving the social order" dictated by traditional gender roles (27). Unsurprisingly, as soon as Take-Pleasure, Adviser and Facil learn from Courtly that "Lady Happy hath incloster'd her self, with twenty Ladies more," they resolve to sabotage her designs (Cavendish, *CP*, 1.2, 222). Initially planning to "fee the Clergy to perswade her out," as Mediator clarifies that the protagonist "is not a Votress to the gods but to Nature," the Courtiers attempt to persuade the widow to help them infiltrate the Convent (1.2, 223):

> **Courtly*:*** If she be a Votress to Nature, you are the only Person fit to be Lady Prioress; and so by your power and authority you may give us leave to visit your Nuns sometimes.
> **Mediator:** Not but at a Grate, unless in time of Building, or when they are sick; but howsoever, the Lady *Happy* is Lady-Prioress her self, and will admit none of the Masculine Sex, not so much as to a Grate, for she will suffer no grates about the Cloister[.] (1.2, 223)

The architectural absence of "grates about the Cloister['s]" enclosure and the "Yard-thick" set of "Brick and Stone-walls" may here symbolise the Prioress's endeavour to prevent exchanges with the outer world (2.4, 223, 227). Thus, just as "Men are Obstructers" of female pleasure, she literally obstructs their passage (1.2, 223):

> Lady Happy's efforts are resilient to these men's gazes …, their physical violence…, and their sexual prowess (the impenetrability of the convent diffuses their "wills," rendering them, in other words, sexually impotent). (Kellett 426)

Confronted with the Convent's impregnability, the Courtiers speculate about potential strategies to cause its dissolution and its founder's fall. Adviser bitterly claims that Lady Happy's "Heretical Opinions ought not to be suffer'd, nor her Doctrine allow'd; and she ought to be examined by a Masculine Synod, and punish'd with a severe Husband, or tortured with a deboist" one, while Courtly readily accepts Mediator's suggestion to make their "Complaints, and put up a petition to the State, with [their] desire for a Redress" (Cavendish, *CP*, 2.1, 223). The exposition of these punitive measures does not merely acquire a proleptic function, but also illustrates that the clergy, marriage, and the State – three of the patriarchal institutions that the protagonist's community so vehemently rejects – actively cooperate to perpetuate female oppression.

Rather than providing elaborate stage directions as elsewhere in the comedy, Act 2 stands out for its succession of lengthy speeches describing the Convent for the audience's benefit; "Rejecting men's ability to define women absolutely," Kellett convincingly argues, "Lady Happy claims the capacity discursively to bring herself and her world into being and to recreate her subjectivity … through her performative utterances" (425). Momentarily suspending the action, Lady Happy delivers to the ladies a detailed account of the Convent's internal organisation: "Now give me leave to inform you, how I have order'd this our Convent of Pleasure; first, I have such things as are for our Ease and Conveniency; next for Pleasure, and Delight" (2.2, 224). In conformity with her resolution to "serve Nature," the heroine discursively builds the Convent as a "rapidly changing environment that transforms with the language that creates it" (1.2, 220, Kellett 421). Its spaces and features change "according to the four Seasons of the year," from the "Furniture" of their "Chambers" to "the Rooms [they] eat in; and the Vessels [they] feed withal," from the decoration of their "Galeries, Stair-cases, and Passages, [which] shall be hung with various Pictures," to the "Gardens" where "flourish, in every Season, all sort of Flowers, sweet Herbs and Fruits" (Cavendish, *CP*, 2.2, 224-225). Lady Happy finally assures to her followers,

> we will have the choisest Meats every Season doth afford, ... and our drink cooler or hotter according to the several Seasons; … Change of Garments are also provided, of the newest

> fashions for every Season, and rich Trimming; so as we may be accoutred properly, and according to our several pastimes[.] (2.2, 225)

By constantly adapting furniture, meals, fashion, and pastimes to the Season, the Convent-text displays a certain "resistance to stabilization" (Kellett 421); its nature-based internal configuration metonymically connotes as natural the ladies' attempt to resist the stabilization of socially constructed definitions of femininity.

The Courtiers' exclusion from the Convent is finally motivated by their unwillingness to abandon their essentialist conception of gender roles. Their reticence to adopt the Convent' ladies performative understanding of gender already arises when, after dismissing the drastic design to set "the *Convent* on fire … and smoak them out, as they do a Swarm of Bees," Courtly, Take-Pleasure, and Facil briefly ponder the option of putting them "selves in Womens apparel, and so by that means get into the *Convent*" (Cavendish, *CP*, 2.4, 227). Almost echoing "William Cavendish's plays, [where] women of the lower orders are represented as sexually interested," Courtly estimates that they might succeed in their design by cross-dressing as country maids (Wiseman 110): "we will go as strong lusty Country-Wenches, that desire to serve them in Inferiour Places, and Offices, as Cook-maids, Laundry-maids, Dairy-maids, and the like" (Cavendish, *CP,* 2.4, 227). Courtly's argument evidently relies on the engrained assumption whereby women from inferior social classes are more sexually available and less feminine, since "'immodesty' represents … something unnatural … in the behaviour of a woman" (Marsden 23). Nonetheless, as Facil urges them all to "put th[o]se designes into execution" Adviser resolutely refuses to masquerade, asserting that they would inevitably "discover [them]Selves" (Cavendish, *CP*, 2.4, 228, 227). While liminally acknowledging the gendered nature of manners and public behaviour, Adviser mostly justifies his reluctance to cross-dress through biological arguments:

> We cannot avoid it, for, our very Garb and Behaviour; besides, our Voices will discover us: for we are as untoward to make Courtsies in Petticoats, as Women are to make Legs in Breeches; and it will be as great a difficulty to raise our Voices to a Treble-sound, as for Women to press down their Voices to a Base; besides, We shall never frame our Eyes and Mouths to such coy, dissembling looks, and pritty simpering Mopes and Smiles, as they do. (2.4, 227)

Ironically, the Courtier assuredly denies that performance might compensate for the physical, allegedly unquestionable difference between male and female "Legs," "Voices," "Eyes," and "Mouths" which the Prince(ss) blurs to infiltrate the Convent by passing as a woman.

2.1.1 The Ladies' "recreations": Plays-within-the-play and Theatres within the Convent

So far, I have considered how Lady Happy's performative reconfiguration of her family estate into a single-sex retreat, as well as the establishment of its internal regulations, jointly depict the Convent as a metaphor for the circumscribed freeing potential of closet drama. But since the comedy's "central part is occupied by a long play within the play which graphically dramatizes the suffering of women within marriage," the Convent also becomes a subversive theatrical space exposing "the dramatic freedoms which the [aristocratic] households could offer as an arena for women's dramatic composition and performance" (Pearson 132, Chalmers 10). Serving as a stronghold of female resistance against marital oppression, the Convent offers the "twenty-one ladies … the means to repudiate compulsory heterosexuality and to enter into a realm of gender play" (Bowerbank and Mendelson 19). These private theatricals enable the community to share and dramatize experiences of sorrow arising from rape, adultery, conjugal violence, alcoholism, and gambling, but also from pregnancy, labour, childbirth and, finally, from death by childbirth, child-death, and children's ungratefulness.

In the third act of the play, the Convent ladies' "theatrical elaboration of the grotesqueness of the female condition in the workaday world" acts as a *mise en abyme* of Lady Happy's rejection of conjugal life in favour of seclusion, but also systematically deconstructs the deliberately self-deluding nature of patriarchal assumptions about femininity and marriage formerly exhibited by male Courtiers (Tomlinson 154). Throughout their exchange in Act 2, Take-Pleasure and his man Dick minimize the traumatic impact of the psychological and physical violence perpetrated by husbands against their wives on the grounds of women's inherent condition of unhappiness and dissatisfaction both inside and outside of wedlock:

Dick: Because Women never think themselves happy in Marriage.
Take-Pleasure: You are mistaken; for Women never think themselves happy until they be Married.
Dick: The truth is, Sir, that Women are always unhappy in their thoughts, both before and after Marriage; for, before Marriage they think themselves unhappy for want of a Husband; and after they are Married, they think themselves unhappy for having a Husband. (Cavendish, *CP*, 2.1, 221-2)

Echoing Cavendish's *CCXI Sociable Letters*, the ladies indirectly join the debate through theatrical performance, repeatedly demonstrating that "a Bad Husband is far worse than No Husband, and to have Unnatural Children is more Unhappy than to have No Children" (184). In the first playlet, which offers an unromanticized representation of marriage, two "*mean Women*" share their sorrows and resolve to join forces to "pull" their alcoholic, abusive husbands "out of the Ale-house" (Cavendish, *CP*, 3.2, 229). The former confesses that her husband "lies all day drinking in an Ale-house, like a drunken Rogue as he is, and when he comes home, he beats [her] all black and blew," while the second admits that hers "drinks that away, that should feed [her] small Children" (3.2, 229). Similarly, each lady featuring in Scene 4 complains about the fact that her husband "hath play'd all his Estate away at Dice and Cards" or "spent it amongst his Whores; and is not content to keep Whores abroad, but in [her] house, under [her] roof," neatly challenging the notion of martial happiness (3.4, 230).

Most of the other central scenes dramatize the suffering of women deriving from pregnancy and motherhood, displaying concerns that Cavendish also expresses in her *CCXI Sociable Letters* (*SL*), as she exposes universal longing for motherhood as socially constructed, arguing that "a Woman hath no such Reason to desire Children for her Own Sake" (*SL*, 184). In Scene 3, when a Lady complains of having "not one minutes time of health," her maid deduces that she feels "sick" because she is "breeding a Child," while Scene 5 shows another "*Lady, as almost distracted, running about the Stage*," desperately crying, "Who can have patience to lose their only Child?" (Cavendish, *CP*, 3.3, 230, 3.5, 230). Almost completing each other, Scenes 7 and 9 respectively portray a "*Lady big with Child, groaning as in labour*" as she waits for the Midwife, and three women-in-waiting who, suspecting that "the very fright of not being able to

bring forth a Child w[ould] kill" their own Lady, resolve to hide from her that her Midwife was previously attending another "Lady that hath been in strong labour these three days of a dead child … and so she died" (3.7, 231, 3.9, 232). The eighth scene further challenges artificial idealisations of motherhood by contradicting, through a brief exchange between "two Ancient Ladies," the assumption whereby grown-up children should be "a comfort and staff of [old] age" (3.8, 232). Bitterly evoking the fate of her son, the first Lady claims that "he is to be [her] ages affliction," as he "must now be hang'd for killing a man in a quarrel," to which the other replies:

> [H]aving had but two Daughters, and them fair ones, though I say it, and might have matched them well: but one of them was got with Child to my great disgrace; th' other run away with my Butler, not worth the droppings of his Taps. (3.8, 232)

While highlighting the double standards regulating the son's and the two daughters' responsibilities for making their respective families' fall in a state of "disgrace," the ladies' performance once more echoes *CCXI Sociable Letters*, where Cavendish contends that a mother "Hazards her Life by Bringing [children] into the World, and hath the greatest share of Trouble in Bringing them up" (184). Except for the Prologue, all the playlets hitherto examined only feature women characters, thereby offering an exclusively female perspective; yet, for a greater dramatic impact, the Convent ladies also occasionally "reiterate and reproduce male gender roles," as in the longer scene concluding the sequence (Kellett 429).

Disposed at the latter end of a crescendo, the last playlet dramatizes the scarcity of options available to a "*fair Young Lady*" to shun a Lord's unwanted advances and counteract unveiled threats of rape. Depicting seclusion as the only chance to "avoid [her] own ruin" the scene almost reproduces Lady Happy's speech in Act 1 (Cavendish, *CP*, 3.10, 232-233). By denouncing the justification of sexual harassment as the unavoidable consequence of male desire, the scene retrospectively comments on a previous exchange between Adviser and Courtly:

> **Adviser:** Why, so we do Nature good service, when we get a Wench with Child, but yet the Civil Laws do punish us for it.
> **Courtly:** They are not Civil Laws that punish Lovers.
> **Adviser:** But those are Civil Laws that punish Adulterers.
> **Courtly:** Those are Barbarous Laws that make Love Adultery. (2.3, 226-227)

This very form of reality distortion that turns rape into a "good Service" rendered to Nature and adultery into an unfairly punished manifestation of love also characterises the mediated exchange between a Lady and her undesired suitor:

Gentleman: Madam, my Lord desires you to command whatsoever you please, and it shall be obey'd.
Lady: I dare not command, but I humbly intreat, I may live quiet and free from his *Amours*.
Gentleman: He says he cannot live, and not love you.
Lady: But he may live, and not lie with me.
Gentleman: He cannot be happy, unless he enjoy you.
Lady: And I must be unhappy, if he should. (3.10, 232-233)

The increasingly sexually explicit nature of the dialogue immediately betrays the superficiality of the Lord's exhortation "to command whatsoever [she] please[s]," as he clearly refuses to free her "from his *Amours*." Furthermore, the parallelisms structuring the four final lines highlight the contrast between the Lord's hyperbolically seductive rhetoric and the Lady's pragmatic, unidealized analysis of his advances. Despite the consonance linking the two words, the woman clearly distinguishes between her suitor's chances to "live, and not *love*" her and his chances to "live, and not *lie* with" her. Even as the Gentleman assures her that his Lord would "part from his Lady" and "be divorced for [her] sake," the woman does not yield to his dubious promises and vehemently refuses to "be the cause of a Divorce between a Noble Pair" (3.10, 233). With a drastic change of tone, the Gentleman now unveiledly threatens her with rape intimating, "You had best consent; for, otherwise he will have you against your will" (3.10, 233). Swiftly adapting her replies to an interlocutor who is unwilling to accept a refusal, the Lady recurs to performance to suggest that she is not rejecting the Lord, but merely teasingly deferring her reply: "I will send his Lordship an answer to morrow; pray him to give me so much time" (3.10, 233). As soon as she remains alone, though, she discloses to the onstage audience that she will subtract herself from the Lord's unwanted advances "by going into a Nunnery; wherefore, [she]'le put [her] self into one [that very] night" (3.10, 233). The entire sequence leads to the consideration, expressed in the epilogue, that "*Marriage is a Curse … / Especially to Women kind*" (3.10, 233). The last playlet

thus condenses the whole comedy's celebration of seclusion and performance as paradoxically empowering tools allowing women to emancipate from patriarchal narrative by scripting alternative realities, albeit within the boundaries of a metaphorical theatrical space.

2.2 Competing Textual Appropriations of the Female Body

In her *CCXI Sociable Letters*, Margaret Cavendish reminisces about the irrational distress she felt at the discovery that the "Ship was Drown'd, wherein the man was that had the Charge and Care of [her] Playes, to carry them into *E.* to be Printed," before recalling that she used to "Commit the Originals to the Fire" and watch their "Paper Bodies" burn to ashes only after their publication (295-296). By coining the term "Paper Bodies," as Sylvia Bowerbank and Sara Medelson highlight, the Duchess implies that "her writings serve as surrogate bodies that will keep her identity and ideas alive" after her death (11). Conversely, thanks to the ubiquity of masquerade and gender performance in *The Convent of Pleasure,* Cavendish produces *body papers*, by which I mean that she actively transfigures her characters' gendered bodies into raw, inscribable paper surfaces in the attempt to temporarily subtract them from gender-normative authorship.

As Shawn W. Moore has shown, "[r]ecuperative and normalizing endings are a constant pattern in *Plays, Never before Printed*" and *The Convent of Pleasure* constitutes no exception, since the Prince(ss) joining Lady Happy's separatist community turns out to be a disguised Prince and the convent is eventually dissolved (75). The play's "conventional happy ending"– a wedding celebrating traditional gender roles within a heteronormative frame – prefigures Butler's claim that since "gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences … those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished" (Pearson 132, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," 522). The reestablishment of the patriarchal *status quo* fostered by Prince(ss) during various theatrical recreations entails in fact in Lady Happy's silencing. These competing forms of male (normative) and female (self-determining) authorship are reflected in the playtext by the alternation between Margaret Cavendish's and her husband William's textual sections.

2.2.1 Fashion and Literary Manipulations: Cross-dressing through Tailoring Metaphors

Cavendish's understanding of gendered bodies as textual, inscribable surfaces already emerges from her documented endeavours to forge her public figure through fashion and bodily self-display, as well as from her recourse to tailoring metaphors to shape her authorial persona as a writer who does "not keep strictly to the Masculine and the Feminine Genders, as they call them" ("To the Readers," 259). During her mundane appearances, her material manipulation of fashion conventions unsettled dichotomous gender categories; analogously, in her writings, her literary manipulation of tailoring metaphors deconstructs gender dichotomies that contemporary printed media contributed to reinforce.[10] While "[f]emale and male cross-dressing had been denounced in the pamphlets *Hic Mulier and Haec Vir* in 1620," Cavendish exploited both practices, cross-dressing as a woman to masquerade her male authorial persona "to normalise publishing by feminising the stereotypically masculine intellectual content of her books," and "cross-dressing [as a man] during her visit to London ... to flaunt the gender norms which should have prevented her from being considered an intellectual" (Morgan § 4, 2). For her visit at the Royal Society on 30 May 1667, the Duchess opted for a "*just-au-corps*," an "explicitly masculine outfit," to perform "the part of a woman who invades the forbidden masculine province of writing and publishing," transmuting her apparel into a superficial bodily inscription for dramatic effect (Mosher § 7.1).

This permeability between bodily and textual inscribable surfaces is brought to light in her writings by the adoption of tailoring imagery as a favourite trope to challenge gender-normative linguistic and literary conventions. In *The World's Olio*, Cavendish advocates for any author's or orator's freedom to adopt whatever form of individual expression is congenial to their wit. To support her view that "every one may be his own Grammarian, if by his natural Gramar he can make his Hearers understand his sense," she establishes an analogy between language and fashion:

[10] In *The Blazing World*, the fictional Duchess also takes delight "in being singular both in accoutrements, behaviour and discourse" (218).

> Language should be like Garments, for though every particular Garment hath a general Cut, yet their Trimmings may be different, and not go out of the fashion; so Wit may place Words to its own becoming, delight, and advantage, and not alter Langage nor obstruct the Sense; for the more liberty we have of Words, the clearer is Sense delivered. (n. pag.)

Just like customised adornments and decorations applied onto an ordinary garment convey their wearer's attitude to those who can decipher them, individualised forms of verbal expression deliver a "clearer ... Sense," even when their adoption entails a deviation from the linguistic norm. Cavendish resorts to a similar analogy in one of the epistles preceding her 1662 collection of *Plays* to justify her divergence from dramatic conventions:

> Poets that write Playes, seldome or never join or sow the several Scenes together; they are two several Professions, at least not usual for rare Poets to take that pains; like as great Taylors, the Master only cuts out and shapes, and his Journy-men and Apprentices join and sow them together; but I like as a poor Taylor was forced to do all my self, as to cut out, shape, join, and sow each several Scene together, without any help or direction. (261-262)

By insisting on the unique, handcrafted quality of her plays, the Duchess downplays potential criticisms stemming from the fact that "some of [her] Scenes have no acquaintance or relation to the rest of the Scenes, although in one and the same Play" ("To the Readers," 256). She also fashions herself both as the wearer of a "particular Garment" or literary creation and as its "Taylor," hinting that as a creator of *body papers* she unsettles gendered categories through textile / textual inscription. Cross-dressing emerges as one of Cavendish's favoured literary devices to produce such inscriptions in her plays, but while her own cross-dressed intrusion within the all-male realm of the Royal Academy gained her at least "an apparent recognition of her claim to be, in spite of her sex, a natural philosopher," the Prince(ss)'s adoption of a female disguise to infiltrate the Convent entails much more punitive consequences for Lady Happy (Grant 23).

2.2.2 From Incognito Spectator to Manipulative Performer: The Prince(ss)' Repressive Theatricals

Evoking an itinerant troupe's performance in Antwerp in her *CCXI Sociable Letters,* Cavendish praises the acting skills of an actress playing a breeches role; displaying a profound awareness of the performative component of gender and of the delusiveness of masquerade, she writes,

> she was the Best Female Actor that ever I saw; and her Acting a Man's Part, she did it so Naturally as if she had been of that Sex, and yet she was of a Neat, Slender Shape: but being in her Dublet and Breeches, and a Sword hanging by her side, one would believe she had never worn a Petticoat, and had been more used to Handle a sword than a Distaff[.] (406-7)

While the non-correspondence between the player's real and performed genders elicits Cavendish's admiration in Antwerp, the Prince(ss)'s successful transvestite intrusion within the Convent similarly relies on the verisimilitude of her cross-dressed performance, but both the internal and the external audience witness it unconsciously. According to Line Cottegnies, this unacknowledged recourse to disguise marks a pivotal distinction from the cross-dressing motif in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama; the critic suggests in fact that the disguised Prince(ss) of Cavendish's 1668 comedy reveals, on the one hand, the author's "familiarity with several of Shakespeare's comedies in which cross-dressing played a key role" (257). On the other, it constitutes a conscious departure from that dramatic tradition, since in "none of Shakespeare's comedies is the disguise used in this manner, unbeknownst to the spectator or reader," and Lady Happy's own ignorance of the Prince(ss)'s cross-dressing eventually results in the convent's dissolution (Cottegnies 265). As Tomlinson rightly observes, the Prince(ss)'s masquerade initially "functions simultaneously as a form of male sexual expediency and as a part of a feminine fantasy world" and "the male voyeurism made possible through the cross-dressing device is subordinated to the romantic perspective of Lady Happy, … who fully believes that she has fallen in love with a woman" (152). As the play progresses, though, the Prince(ss)'s heteronormative performances trigger repeated confrontations with Lady Happy which culminate as the intruder's identity is revealed, abruptly reinstating normative gender roles through patriarchal discourse.

While most of the male courtiers who fail to penetrate into the Convent never abandon their essentialist conception of gender, rapidly dismissing the option of cross-dressing as impracticable because of male and female too distinct natures, the Prince(ss)'s manipulative strategy relies on the constructedness of gender. Realising that the "convent is a place of shifting gender roles where individuals recreate their bodies through language," she gains admission to

the community by professing to be a "great Foreign Princess" who resolved, upon "hearing of the famous *Convent of Pleasure*, to be one of Nature's Devotes" (Kellett 429, Cavendish, *CP*, 2.3, 225). Anticipating Butler's notion of gender performativity, whereby "a body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time," the intruder performs both male and female roles to reinstate a dichotomous conception of gender categories ("Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," 523). Masquerading as "a Princely brave Woman truly, of a Masculine Presence" (Cavendish, *CP*, 2.3, 226) and alternatively wearing "*Masculine Shepherd's Clothes*" (SD 4.1, 234), a "*Sea-God Neptune*" (SD 4.1, 240) attire, or "*a Man's Apparel*" (SD 5.1, 243), the Prince(ss) gradually asserts her authority as a dominating male subject and re-establishes "the category of woman [a]s socially constructed in such a way that to be a woman is, by definition, to be in an oppressed situation" (Butler 523). Successfully inscribing her body through multiple layers of cross-dressing, the Prince(ss) gradually suffocates Lady Happy's strive to achieve self-determining bodily authorship; such adjustment of power dynamics, already starting as the two characters discuss the sequence of plays-within-the-play in Act 3, becomes prominent when they feature as leading actors in the pastoral and marine masques.

The nine playlets performed for Lady Happy's entertainment are structurally framed between the Prince(ss)'s first appearance and her later expression of disapproval of the Convent ladies' overt denunciation of marital abuse; from her privileged position of incognito player *and* member of the onstage audience, the intruder can "both performatively resist traditional sexual hegemony and reinscribe it" (Kellett 429). Upon her arrival, the Prince(ss) appears eager to rapidly reinstate the dichotomy between male desiring subject and female desired object codified by literary tradition through the adoption of an additional layer of cross-dressing:

Lady Happy: I should be ungrateful, should I not be not only your Friend, but humble Servant.
Princess: I desire you would be my Mistress, and I your Servant; and upon this agreement of Friendship I desire you will grant me one Request.
Lady Happy: Any thing that is in my power to grant.
Princess: Why then, I observing in your several Recreations, some of your Ladies do accoutre Themselves in Masculine-Habits, and act Lovers-parts; I desire

> you will give me leave to be sometimes so accoutred and act the part of your loving Servant. (Cavendish, *CP*, 3.1, 228-229).

Unwilling to comply with the reversal of gendered power dynamics implied by Lady Happy's self-fashioning as her "humble Servant," the Princess Explicitly rejects Lady Happy's textual authority over the definition of their relationship and recasts her in the part of the passive "Mistress," while reclaiming the male active role of "Servant" for herself. The intruder therefore only witnesses the nine playlets after being granted permission to "accoutre [herself] in Masculine-Habits, and act Lovers-parts" and, metonymically, to adopt a male spectator's gaze.

The Prince(ss)'s disapproving response to the ladies' univocal dramatization of "Marriage [a]s a Curse," constitutes a more sophisticated incursion of male discourse into the Convent's premises than the male Courtiers' previous expressions of patriarchal anxieties about female autonomous self-fulfilment (3.10, 233). By adopting a more moderate posture, the intruder progressively dismantles Lady Happy's separatist community from within. The tension between the former's heteronormative views and the latter's subversive subtraction from the marriage market already transpires from their contrasting responses to the ladies' playlets:

> **Lady Happy:** (*To the* **Princess**) Pray Servant, how do you like this Play?
> **Princess:** My sweet Mistress, I cannot in conscience approve of it; for though some few be unhappy in Marriage, yet there are many more that are so happy as they would not change their condition.
> **Lady Happy:** O Servant, I fear you will become an Apostate. (3.10, 233)

Unlike Dick and Take-Pleasure, the Prince(ss) manipulatively grounds her argumentation in favour of the patriarchal *status quo* on the nuanced admission that conjugal life can, exceptionally, make "some few" wives unhappy. Yet, she deliberately avoids enquiring about Lady Happy's response to the performance, imposing herself as a better-judging spectator, while the protagonist limits herself to signal her disagreement through the ironically proleptic epithet "Apostate."

As Hero Chalmers and Anne Shaver respectively underline, in "the impressive scene shifting of Act 4 Cavendish draws not only on Henrietta Maria's pastoral drama but on the staging conventions of court masques in the Jacobean and Caroline period," as illustrated by the two

masques "in which the 'princess' takes the main male role and Lady Happy the main but decidedly secondary female role" (41, 13). The pervasive gender-normative discourse underlying such role distribution physically and psychologically relegates Lady Happy's to the typified role of the melancholic mistress. Lady Happy now "looks not well, she is become pale and lean," suddenly keeps herself "solitary alone … and Musing like a disconsolate Lover," undergoing a change which she personally acknowledges in a soliloquy (Cavendish, CP, 4.1, 239):

> My Name is Happy, and so was my Condition, before I saw this Princess; but now I am like to be the most unhappy Maid alive: But why may not I love a Woman with the same affection I could a Man?
> No, no, Nature is Nature, and still will be
> The same she was from all Eternity. (4.1, 234)

Literally invested with the costume of the heroine of pastoral romance, Lady Happy admits that the Prince(ss)'s arrival disrupted the literal correspondence between her "Name" and her "Condition," rewriting her as "the most unhappy Maid alive." The excerpt echoes Dick's earlier consideration that whenever a woman marries, "she must change her Name; for the Wife takes the Name of the Husband, and quits her own" (2.1, 221) and even of Cavendish's own remarks upon the subject in her *CCXI Sociable Letters*, where she claims that "a Woman['s] … Name is Lost as to her Particular, in her Marrying, for she quits her Own, and is Named as her Husband" (183). Lady Happy also fleetingly contemplates same-sex desire, but soon banishes the thought of it because of its alleged unnaturalness, which is highlighted by the switch from prose to a rhymed couplet. Still unaware of the intruder's cross-dressing, the protagonist and the audience fail to detect the patriarchal threat lurking behind the Prince(ss)'s legitimation of her request "to discourse, imbrace and kiss, so mingle souls together" on the grounds that there is "Not any act more frequent amongst us Women-kind; nay, it were a sin in friendship, should not we kiss: then let us not prove our selves Reprobates" (Cavendish, *CP*, 4.1, 234). Only when the two eventually "*imbrace and kiss, and hold each other in their Arms*," the Prince(ss)'s lines truly seem to foreshadow the reinstatement of a heteronormative frame: "These my Imbraces though of Femal kind, / May be as fervent as a Masculine mind" (4.1, 234). Perhaps for the first time, the intruder

is not "marked in the text as a male body with a female gender," but as a discursively constructed female body brought to life by a male performer (Cottegnies 264). During the masques, the Prince(ss) prepares to reinscribe Lady Happy within the heteronormative marriage market through a second-degree cross-dressing.

The pastoral playlet originally constitutes a dramatized *mise an abyme* of Lady Happy's own attempt to lead a life of voluntary retreat from the world, but its setting proleptically announces her failure to resist gender-normative societal pressures since, during "the Maypole festivities," which constitute "a traditional celebration of fertility, heterosexuality, and virginal initiation into marriage, the characters present single life as despondent rather than pleasurable" (Kellet 431). In keeping with her own character, the protagonist impersonates a young shepherdess who "vows a single life, / And swears, she n're will be a Wife; / But live a Maid, and Flocks will keep, / And her chief Company shall be Sheep" and explicitly rejects her suitors, wishing "That no Love-Suit might enter to [her] Ear" (Cavendish, *CP*, 4.1, 235). Yet, the Prince(ss) progressively imposes her dramaturgical authority, rescripting the end to this pastoral adaptation of Lady Happy's story by forcing the character she impersonates to grant the shepherd's love suit. In this light, as the shepherdess celebrates the rhetorical skills of her lover, claiming that he is "born a Poet," Lady Happy also indirectly acknowledges male poetic authority and men's natural right to write female bodies (4.1, 237). The pervasive presence of male discourse is further strengthened through the inclusion of two poems by William Cavendish, whose content respectively sanctions the couple's union and celebrates "Hymen's Law" by inviting the shepherds to toast with "Jolly Wassel" and "fresher Syllibubs" (4.1, 238-239). Crucially, the alleged authorship of these passages is signalled, in the C3774 copy of the 1668 edition of *Plays, Never Printed Before* conserved at Chawton Library House, by two paper slips applied onto the page after publication, reporting the inscription "*Written by my Lord Duke*" (Moore, *Digital Cavendish Project*, Cavendish, *CP*, 4.1, 238-239). Providing "evidence that a man may have penetrated Cavendish's text," these two poetical – and materially signalled –

incursions at the end of the first masque prefigure the incontrovertible reassertion of the heteronormative marriage institution occurring in the play's two final scenes, which are also significantly attributed to William Cavendish (Tomlinson 157).

While the pastoral playlet assumes a bridging function between Lady Happy's self-determining authorship and the Prince(ss)'s dramaturgical appropriation of her story, the marine masque featuring them respectively "*as a Sea-Goddess*" and "*as the Sea-God Neptune*" univocally restores "patriarchal authority" through "the male language of property ownership" (Cavendish, *CP*, 4.1, 240, Kellet 431). Throughout this second performance, the Prince(ss) seems to dramatize the imminent abandonment of her female disguise and the reassertion of patriarchal power that she still postponed in the immediately preceding soliloquy:

> What have I on a Petticoat, Oh Mars! thou God of War, pardon my sloth; but yet remember thou art a Lover, and so am I; but you will say, my Kingdom wants me, not only to rule, and govern it, but to defend it: But what is a Kingdom in comparison of a Beautiful Mistress? (Cavendish, *CP*, 4.1, 239)

By only pronouncing these lines for the audience's benefit, the intruder forcibly turns them into a witness and an accomplice of her own designs, while simultaneously reducing them to a position of impotent acceptance that prefigures Lady Happy's dubious consent in the final act. After connoting her performance in "a Petticoat" as an impediment to rule over her Kingdom, the Prince(ss) still paradoxically resorts to drama to reclaim her original position as a male ruler, as if her two cross-dressing layers mutually neutralised themselves. The masque performatively "assert[s] monarchal power, but also usurp[s] the female autonomy gained in the convent" by dispossessing Lady Happy of her previous authoritative role as "Lady-Prioress" (Kellet 431, Cavendish, *CP*, 2.1, 223) and by neatly separating the male, public sphere of politics from the female, private sphere of domestic life. The stage directions already operate a hierarchical distinction among the sea-deities through their spatial disposition, since Neptune and the Sea-Goddess sit together on "*a Rock as in the Sea,*" while "*the rest of the Ladies sit somewhat lower,*

drest like Water-Nymphs" (4.1, 240). Neptune fashions himself as the "sole Monarch of the sea," establishing absolute authority over the Seas as a male prerogative (4.1, 242):

> I Am the King of all the Seas,
> All Watry Creatures do me please,
> Obey my Power and Command,
> And bring me Presents from the Land; …
> Besides, my Kingdom's richer far
> Then all the Earth and every Star. (4.1, 240)

The Prince(ss) impersonates a King who defends the legitimacy of his claim to the throne as directed "by Nature's hand alone," declaring that "No base, dissembling, coz'ning Art / Do[es he] imploy in any part," but simultaneously adopts multiple cross-dressing layers to impose herself as a player and stage-manager over Lady Happy's ladies (4.1, 241). As Kellet points out, the "convent women, who previously performed the cruel role of men in women's lives, now play the sea nymphs who pay the sea king homage by subjecting themselves to his magnificence" (432): in turn, the "*Watery Nymphs Rejoyce and Sing / About God* Neptune *[their] Sea's King*" and "*With Acclamations do attend him, / And pray's more Riches still to send him*" (Cavendish, *CP*, 4.1, 242-243). Lady Happy's character also belongs to the "watry creatures" subjected to Neptune's "Power and Command" since, rather than dwelling in the "hollow Rocks" where he keeps his "Court," she is confined to stereotypically feminine duties and occupations (4.1, 242). The Sea-Goddess is first portrayed as a mother who ensures patrilineal succession by breastfeeding a male-personified Sun: "Moist vapours from my breast I give, / Which he sucks forth, and makes him live, / Or else his fire would soon go out, / Grow dark, or burn the World throughout" (4.1, 240). In her second speech, she enumerates her domestic pastimes, describing how with "Orient-Pearls [she] Crowns do[es] make," or how "sitting on a Rocky stone, / [she] comb[s] her Hair with Fishes bone" before letting it dry in the sun, using "the large Sea [as her] Looking-Glass" (4.1, 241). Just like Neptune's characterisation foreshadowed the Prince(ss)'s reassertion of patriarchal authority, the Sea-Goddess's stereotypically feminine features proleptically announce Lady Happy's relegation to the role of a submissive wife; paradoxically though, the Prince(ss)'s reestablishment

of dichotomous gender categories relies on the parts that she scripts for female characters and, therefore, on the implicit acknowledgment of the discursive-performative construction of gender.

2.2.3 "Paper Bodies," Body Papers: The Duchess and the Duke as Lady Happy and the Prince(ss)

The Prince(ss)'s cross-dressed intrusion within the convent unsettles Lady Happy's ability to performatively script her story through language and, while her "succulent speech once dominated the play," in the last two acts "her voice is more and more subsumed within the increasingly male voices that emerge from the female characters" (Kellett 431). An analogous adjustment of contrasting voices results from the growing textual space attributed to William Cavendish in the last two scenes, which are also "headed with a pasted-in slip reading 'written by my Lord Duke' … but with no indication about where 'my Lord Duke's' ends" (Tomlinson 157). In this light, the scenes where Lady Happy is forced into wedding that reinstates traditional gender roles may have not been written by Cavendish. Examining this "textual anomaly," Tomlinson contends that

> either Cavendish lost interest after the disclosure of the Princess as a man and left the writing of the rest of her play to her husband, or she did write the final two scenes, … but suspected they would be thought unseemly coming from a woman[.] (157)

Although the actual authorship of the last two scenes remains difficult to ascertain, their advertisement as (supposedly) male-authored inevitably affects the audience's response to the Duke's textual incursion into his wife's play and to the Prince(ss)'s spatial incursion into Lady Happy's Convent. The third paper slip (Moore, *Digital Cavendish Project*) attributing these two passages to Cavendish's husband becomes the material manifestation of the author's inability or unwillingness to resist the two intruders, and "*kill* [*them*] *with her Pen*" (*CP*, Epilogue, 247). It is not the purpose of this paper to determine whether the Duchess curiously lost interest in her play at a pivotal point or suddenly hesitated about the adequateness of an ending whose "unseemly" component is often outshined by the previous, much more subversive all-women scenes. Regardless of their (im)plausibility, both these hypotheses seem to neglect the significance of Cavendish's endeavour to inscribe, within her text, a (fictitious) marker of male authorship that

reflects Lady Happy's silencing by the Prince(ss). Some critics account for the protagonist's sudden taciturnity claiming that, after realizing that "her desire of freedom must give way to a man's superior will," she simply "remains silent in the end because she has fallen in love with her Prince / Princess" (Cottegnies 262). Other, more nuanced arguments highlight that "[b]efore Lady Happy succumbs to the role of wife, she assures herself that her mate will be able to join in the life of women and treat her properly," contending that she "will marry the prince … only after he has gradually won her esteem and love while masquerading as a woman" (Mosher § 7.25, Payne 24). However, while the protagonist admits her physical difficulty to resist same sex-desire, she never explicitly yields to a male, supposedly more enlightened worldview, and her fear that the Prince(ss) might become an "Apostate" hardly suggests that the intruder has smoothly joined "in the life of women" and absorbed the community's values (Cavendish, *CP*, 3.10, 233).

Once the Prince(ss)'s cross-dressing has been discovered, his linguistic appropriation of Lady Happy's body to suit the heteronormative marriage institution becomes incontrovertible; the almost voiceless protagonist succumbs to his self-assertion as a male subject, a military and sexual conqueror, and a perpetrator of socially constructed gender norms. Crucially, though, she does not suddenly fall speechless in the Duke's section, but already remains disturbingly silent in the previous scene, when Madam Mediator announces that a man has penetrated into the convent:

> O Ladies, Ladies! You're all betrayed, undone, undone; for there is a man disguised in the Convent, search and you'l find it. *They all skip from each other, as afraid of each other; only the Princess and the Lady Happy stand still together.* (5.1, 243)

While the protagonist's immobility might be interpreted either as a marker of connivance with the Prince(ss)'s gender performance or as a sign of complete confidence in her innocence, Madam Mediator singles the intruder out as the one who is "most to be suspected," regardless of his sneering objection that the infiltrated "Man is disguised like a Woman, and [he is] accoustred like a Man" (5.1, 243). Even as the arrival of an ambassador to the Prince(ss) further discloses his identity, Lady Happy does not vocally react to his threat of military invasion:

Embassador: [Y]our Subjects are so discontented at your Absence, that if your Highness do not return into your Kingdom soon, they'l enter this Kingdom by reason they hear you are here; and some report as if your Highness were restrained as Prisoner.

Princess: So I am, but not by the State, but by this Fair Lady, who must be your Soveraigness. (5.3, 245)

The Prince(ss) semantically recodifies his subjects' suspicions about his potential captivity in conformity with the traditional Petrarchan representation of lovers as prisoners of their mistresses. He thereby rewrites Lady Happy as his future wife and "Soveraigness," reshaping her former authoritative role as the head of the Convent. Finally, the protagonist does not attempt to verbally resist the Prince(ss)'s rape-like threat to enforce their marriage through military violence:

Princess: But since I am discover'd, go from me to the Councellors of this State, and inform them of my being here, as also the reason, and that I ask their leave I may marry this Lady; otherwise, tell them I will have her by force of Arms. *Exit Embassador.*

M. Mediator: … I hope you will not bring an Army, to take away all the Women; will you?

Princess: No, Madam Mediator, we will leave you behind us. (5.1, 243-244)

Once again, only Madam Mediator dares to voice her concerns about the potential dissolution of the Convent, while the protagonist neither objects nor consents to the prospect of elopement hinted by the Prince(ss)'s project to "leave" the convent ladies "behind" them. Lady Happy's trajectory from an independent heiress and Prioress to a silent bride becomes increasingly compatible with "the common practice of exogamy, which forces women at marriage to leave their native home and move away to live with their husbands" in "a place where a different dialect is spoken, so that [the bride] literally loses her voice, her native language" (Doniger 188). Similar concerns for the silencing, objectifying influence of geographical displacement due to marriage also arise from a botanic metaphor in Cavendish's *CCXI Sociable Letters*:

> Daughters are but Branches which by Marriage are Broken off from the Root from whence they Sprang, & Ingrafted into the Stock of an other Family, so that Daughters are to be accounted but as Moveable Goods or Furnitures that wear out. (184-185)

Mimicking through language the consequences of the voice deprivation and commodification suffered by young brides, this excerpt depicts them as a rootless, ingrafted branches, before gradually shaping them it into wooden pieces of moveable furniture. In *The Convent of Pleasure,*

Lady Happy's analogous experience of silencing and self-erasure is further confirmed as the Courtiers discuss rumours about her wedding with the Prince(ss), rewriting it as a mutual decision.

Since neither the marriage proposal nor the wedding ceremony are staged, the audience cannot witness the protagonist's verbal – and performative – assent, which automatically casts doubt upon the accuracy of the rumours spreading outside the convent walls. In the penultimate scene, Adviser and Mediator's exchange about the Prince(ss) and Lady Happy's union epitomize the process whereby patriarchal discourse absorbs and suffocates female subversive voices:

> **Adviser:** [I]t is said, the Prince and she [Lady Happy] are agreed to Marry; and the State is so willing, as they account it an honour, and hope shall reap much advantage by the Match.
> **M. Mediator:** Yes, yes; but there is an old and true Saying, *There's much between the Cup and the Lip.* (Cavendish, *CP*, 5.2, 245)

Not only is the sole report of Lady Happy's agreement to marry the Princess doubly mediated through word of mouth and through Adviser's male voice, but its relevance is immediately undermined by the political and financial advantageousness of the match. Furthermore, Madam Mediator's bleak commentary "*There's much between the Cup and the Lip*" seems to provide a female response to William Cavendish's second poem, where the shepherds toasted with wassail and syllabub to celebrate the marriage institution. The proverb may be simply meant to convey uncertainty about conjugal happiness, but its imagery evokes a form of silencing, since an enforced sip from a cup stifles words even before they can reach the drinker's lips. This ambiguity inevitably shapes the audience's response to the wedding celebrations, casting a woeful shadow on the festive, theatrical entrance on stage of "*the* Prince *as Bridegroom, and the Lady* Happy *as Bride, hand in hand under a Canopy born over their heads by Men*" (SD5.3, 245). Strictly adhering to her husband's script, Lady Happy, now surrounded by men, dances and stands still at his command, only uttering brief remarks about Lady Virtue's Mimick and rapidly changing her interlocutor. In contrast with the previous masques, the striking prevalence of male characters connotes the bridal couple's final appearance as a last heteronormative playlet stage-managed by the Prince(ss) to permanently restore patriarchal authority.

In keeping with the new, asymmetrical power dynamics established through marriage and the heroine's reduction to a male-owned commodity, the end of the comedy prefigures the imminent dissolution of the Convent as an exclusively female-managed separatist community. Payne embraces this transition as natural, arguing that once "Lady Happy assumes her new position as princess, the Convent is, *of course*, forgotten" (27, emphasis added). But the play rather seems to denounce the seventeenth-century legal practice whereby a "woman could not own property and anything she owned prior to her marriage automatically became her husband's," which automatically excluded her "from participation in the economy" (Young 12, Brown 438). In response to the Mimick's "Petition … to divide the Convent in two equal parts, one for Fools, and th' other for Married Men, as mad Men," the Prince(ss) resolutely seizes hold of his newly conquered estate (Cavendish, *CP*, 5.3, 245). Performatively reconfiguring the Convent's purpose, he resolves to "divide it for Virgins and Widows," consequently "excluding his wife from the institution she founded" (5.3, 245, Verini 176). While usurping Lady Happy's former authoritative role as the (discursive) founder of the convent, the Prince(ss) transmutes her into the very character that *he* was formerly playing, as confirmed by the stage direction referring to "*Lady Happy, as now Princess*" (5.3, 246). By the end of the play, the silenced protagonist has been rewritten as a Princess who not only complies with traditional gender norms and patriarchal structures, but also reinforces them through marriage. As the Fool suggests, Lady Happy has "now a *Mimick* of [her] own, for the *Prince* has imitated a Woman," but she has also become one herself, faithfully following her husband's stage-directions to perform her gender right (5.3, 246).

To conclude, not unlike a subversive performance enacted during the theatre ban, Lady Happy's foundation of a separatist, all-female community within the theatre like environment of the Convent of Pleasure reveals itself to be an ephemeral experiment. Failing to recognise the signs of the Prince(ss)'s performative endeavour to reinscribe her within the heteronormative marriage institution, the protagonist is deprived of any authorial agency, as Margaret Cavendish's explicit indications of the sections of the play supposedly written by her husband highlight.

3. *The Tempest, or The Enchanted Island*

First staged at Lincoln Inn Fields on 7 November 1667, Davenant and Dryden's *Enchanted Island* was "the most performed play of the Restoration, and constituted a tenth of all live performances" both at the Duke's and King's Theatres "in its first season" (Shanahan 91). The play's overwhelming popularity with audiences even encouraged further adaptations, such as Thomas Shadwell's operatic *Tempest* (1674) or Thomas Duffet's parody *The Mock-Tempest, or The Enchanted Castle* (1674), the latter of which shifted the action to Bridwell Prison and a London "brothel populated by pimps and prostitutes" (Scheil 72). This enthusiasm for *The Enchanted Island* also transpires from Samuel Pepys' responses to the play along his seven recorded attendances (Foster 7). While after the opening night he only cautiously acknowledged, the "play [has] no great wit, but yet good, above ordinary plays," his appreciation considerably increased in just a week (Pepys, 7 November 1667):

> I and my wife and Willet to the Duke of York's house, and there saw the Tempest again, which is very pleasant, and full of so good variety that I cannot be more pleased almost in a comedy, only the seamen's part a little too tedious[.] (13 November 1667)

As Pepys' praise of the play's "variety" suggests, Davenant and Dryden extensively reshaped *The Tempest* to suit contemporary audiences' demands for "large amounts of music or spectacle," retaining "only about a third of … the original play, displacing and rearranging the Shakespearean material to serve the demands of a substantially new plot" (Scheil 16, Maus 191). Offering a prime example of the way in which Restoration (adaptations of pre-existing) plays introduced additional female body / characters to satisfy the contemporary audiences' expectations, their rewriting multiplied both "the number of women characters" and of female bodies on the stage (Quinsey 2). As Lori Leigh remarks, however, this "did not lead to the representation of the … absent women in Shakespeare's play: Sycorax (Caliban's mother), Claribel, or Miranda's mother," as the dramatists rather preferred to introduce "Dorinda, Miranda's sister, Sycorax, Caliban's twin sister[,] … Milcha, Ariel's partner," and Hippolito, a breeches part (67).

Whilst criticism often diminishingly dismissed the impact of actresses' professionalization on the characterisation of female parts, reading them as mere extensions of the actresses' public personae, I align myself with views of academics who instead recognise the potential for irony afforded by the permeability between players and characters. Discussing the potential impact of actresses' public image on the composition process and on the Restoration audience's response to their performances, R. H. Wilson argues that a playwright had to "suit his roles to their abilities, their types, and worst of all, to their personal reputations" since "in the small, intimate theatrical world, it was difficult for an audience to separate a stage character of an actress from her real character" (108, 105). Therefore, the critic concludes, a "writer avoided those unfortunate lines which could suddenly expose the incongruity between stage character and actual character and arouse a 'Horse-laugh'" (106). But this approach fails to consider the possibility that "a dramatist might create a role for an actress that was purposely at variance with her public persona" and deliberately prompt "metatheatrical mocking depending on the casting" (Howe 106, Leigh 76). As Matthew Wikander has argued, the Restoration audience was "always sensitive to the disparity between the moral status of characters and the reputation of actresses" (96). In this chapter, I will first examine how the markedly metatheatrical connotation of the Restoration *Tempest* transmutes Prospero's Island into a metaphor for the theatrical space, thereby maximizing the permeability between the female characters / bodies on stage and the actresses; I will then contrast Prospero's manipulative effort to linguistically construct Miranda, Dorinda, and Hippolito's bodies to suit his political agenda with Trincalo's ruinous attempt to gain political authority over the island by imposing a Eurocentric, patriarchally convenient definition of femininity over Sycorax.

3.1 Female Theatricality and the Stage Spatial Metaphor

The Enchanted Island subtly reinforces the denigrating prejudice that professional actresses were sexually "exploited on and off the stage, promoting gratuitous titillation in the drama and prostitution behind the scenes" at their stage-manager's discretion (Howe 171): its emphasis on

the fundamental discrepancy between the (reputation of the) female players and their roles constantly breaks the dramatic illusion, downplaying potential anxieties about the empowering potential of female theatricality through an exacerbated spectacularisation of the actress's sexual availability. On the one hand, the Restoration *Tempest* constantly allows actresses' dubious respectability to show through during the performance, establishing a parallel between Miranda and Dorinda's deficient education and their spatial confinement within the stage-like environment of the Island. On the other, exploiting Hippolito's breeches role, it invites audiences to reject the notion that a female performer might credibly embody a male character and, by extension, it reassures them about the unlikelihood of such a phenomenon to extend to the offstage reality.

In his *Amusements Serious and Comical* (1700), British satirist Tom Brown echoes the spatial analogy contained in the subtitle of Dryden's and Dryden's rewriting, portraying the "*Play-House* [a]s an inchanted Island, where nothing appears in Reality what it is, nor what it should be" (48). Indeed, the Shakespearean source's "archetypal utopian location – an unnamed, uncharted island"– already acquires a markedly theatre-like connotation through the spectacular displays of Prospero's magical illusions (Jackson 2); the Restoration *Tempest* retains the pre-existing stage metaphor and further amplifies it by actively inscribing the physical space of the Restoration theatre into the playtext. Playing on the fact that "the distinction between the people on stage and those in the playhouse was often – deliberately or not – blurred," the comedy seems to dramatize the real audience's experience of the play through the Courtiers' initial explorations of the Island (Ogée 86). After their entrance on stage during the sea storm, Alonzo, Antonio, and Gonzalo reappear in Act 2, Scene 1, and witness a series of brief playlets and dances enacted by spirits "*in the shape of Devils*," "Pride," "Fraud," "Rapine," and "Murther" illustrating the notion of poetic justice underlying Prospero's revenge plot (Davenant & Dryden, *EI*, 2.1.72-85). As soon as the first two devils rise through the trapdoors, placing "*themselves at two corners of the Stage,*" Antonio frightenedly exclaims, "Sure Hell is open'd to devour us quick" (2.1.SD72-73). As Jocelyn Powell pointed out, "the episode is a cunning way of 'rationalising' the holes made by

the trap doors while they descend to be loaded," but such reference also indirectly celebrates the new forms of spectacle offered by mechanical innovation (77). The analogy between Courtiers and audience is further strengthened through the reproduction of accessory activities that belonged "to the ritual of playhouse attendance," such as "the consumption of fruit" (Bellamy 105). Liz Bellamy suggests in fact that Restoration comedies' representation of "onstage … consumption of fruit replicat[ed] the activities of the audience," thereby increasing their awareness of the theatrical experience (117). Having sought out food for a while the Noblemen unexpectedly run into a "Table… set out and furnisht / With all varieties of Meats and fruits" by "*eight fat Spirits, with Cornu-Copia in their hands*" (Davenant & Dryden, *EI*, 3.2.42-43, SD35).[11] These "plump shapes sent to deride [the Courtiers'] hunger" might ironically allude to the "orange girls, who stood in the pit with their backs to the stage and cried their wares between the acts" (3.2.36, Wilson 2). While favouring the audience's identification with the Courtiers, these references to the space of the stage stimulates their perceptiveness about the permeability between characters and players.

3.1.1 "It is within our bounds": Space and Knowledge Restrictions in the "Land of Enchantment"

Symbolically, the spatial restrictions that Prospero imposes upon Miranda, Dorinda, and Hippolito – within the already circumscribed environment of the Enchanted Island – parallel the deliberately deficient education that he imparts to his daughters and ward to make their respective discovery of *Man* and *Woman* converge towards the recovery of the Dukedom of Milan. As clarified by the characters' list, Miranda and Dorinda "never saw man," just as Hippolito "never saw Woman" and the three characters preserve a certain naivety until the end of the play (Davenant & Dryden, *EI*, 8). As the arrival of the Courtiers forces him to lodge his ward closer to his own cave, though, Prospero starts wondering how to keep Hippolito and his two daughters apart, as the accumulation of references to confinement and boundaries betrays:

[11] The table was placed offstage in dramatic productions (cf. SD3.2.41), but it was visible in operatic productions.

For I have been constrain'd to change his
Lodging From yonder Rock where first I bred him up,
And here have brought him home to my own Cell,
Because the Shipwrack happen'd near his Mansion.
I hope he will not stir beyond his limits,
For hither to he hath been all obedience[.] (2.4.79-88)

The protagonist's concerns that the youth will transgress the new geographical "limits" imposed upon him is not entirely unjustified, considering how Hippolito comments on the displacement: "Since I knew life, you've kept me in a Rock, / And you this day have hurry'd me from thence, / Only to change my Prison, not to free me. / I murmur not, but I may wonder at it" (2.4.14-17). But Prospero also displays anxieties about the autonomy of movement of his two daughters and, as Leigh rightly remarks, his very opening lines consist of a "question to Miranda" about the "whereabouts of her sister" (70). Indeed, since Prospero does not consider it "fit yet to let [his] Daughters know [he] kept / The infant Duke of *Mantua* so near them in this Isle" he enforces symmetrical measures of spatial confinement upon them too (Davenant & Dryden, *EI*, 2.4.1-2):

Prospero: How, my daughters! I thought I had instructed
Them enough – Children! retire;
Why do you walk this way?
Miranda: It is within our bounds, Sir.
Prospero: But both take heed, that path is very dangerous. (2.4.89-93)

Unwilling to comply with these ulterior restrictions, Miranda counters that they have merely been walking "within [their] bounds." This brief exchange arguably constitutes an initial attempt for the two sisters to challenge Prospero's authority out of sexual curiosity, but its subversiveness is severely downplayed by their exacerbated, ludicrous naivety.

Although Pepys judged *The Enchanted Island* "the most innocent play that ever [he] saw," since Miranda and Dorinda's roles are played by actresses whom the audience perceived "as sexually experienced and available, [their] purity and ignorance of the male sex become a huge suggestive joke" (7 November 1667, Howe 63)[12]. Laughter mostly arises when the two sisters are

[12] Howe suggests that the two sisters were probably played by Mrs Jennings and Anne Gibbs Shadwell (198n49).

left alone together on the stage, which provides "opportunities for the women to comically explore sexuality since they know nothing of men other than what Prospero has taught them," reshaping reality to suit his purpose (Leigh 74). While the implausibility of Miranda and Dorinda's naivety might varied depending on the personal reputation of the actresses playing the two roles, their repartees are clearly designed as an "opportunity for innuendo" regardless of the casting process (Howe 63). Early in the play, the sisters confusedly wonder how they were born and how it comes that they "two are not Brothers then, and have not Beards like" their father:

Dorinda: How did he come to be our Father too?
Miranda: I think he found us when we both were little, and grew within the ground.
Dorinda: Why could he not find more of us? pray Sister let you and I look up and down one day, to find some little ones for us to play with.
Miranda: Agreed; but now we must go in. This is the hour
Wherein my Father's Charm will work,
Which seizes all who are in open Air:
Th' effect of his great Art I long to see,
Which will perform as much as Magick can.
Dorinda: And I, methinks, more long to see a Man. (1.2.328-342)

If the audience perceived the two actresses on stage as sexually experienced and, as Powell assumes for most performances of the operatic version, "the more improper lines were given in open invitation to the nearest gentleman" sitting in the auditorium, the sisters' understanding of conception and birth as an unproductive tuber crop would have prompted laughter, while Dorinda's final line might have been perceived as an indirect sexual advance (72). Analogously, in the last scene of the play, the sisters resume their initial discussion about conception, acknowledging their former naivety without yet fully mastering the subject:

Miranda: (*To* **Dorinda**.) If Children come by lying in a Bed, I wonder you And I had none between us.
Dorinda: Sister it was our fault, we meant like fools
To look 'em in the fields, and they it seems
Are only found in Beds. (Davenant & Dryden, *EI*, 5.2.182-186)

Inevitably, the implicit association between actress and prostitute shapes the audience's response to this pretendedly naïve allusion to the bed where, as advertised in the Prologue, the theatregoer might join the actress after the performance.

3.1.2 Breeches Roles, Breaches of Dramatic Illusion: Permeable Character-Player Boundaries

The "Preface to the *Enchanted Island*" justifies the introduction of Hippolito's character as an "*excellent contrivance*" ensuing from Davenant's intuition that "*somewhat might be added to the Design of* Shakespear" by providing a "*Counterpart to* [his] *Plot, namely that of a Man who had never seen a Woman*" (4-5). Dryden cautiously avoids presenting the part as a breeches role, connoting symmetry as the paramount reason for this addition; however, this omission seems at variance with the prominence that the casting process acquires in the Prologue. As Katharine Eisaman Maus underlines, "[p]rologues and epilogues, with their ambiguous position between the fictional and the real, provided ideal opportunities to exploit the relation between the player and the part" (599). Far from favouring a smooth transition into the dramatic world, the final lines of the Prologue emphasise the disjunction between the actress and the male role that she is to enact, warning the audience that her offstage reputation is likely to infiltrate the performance and shape its meaning:

> But, if for *Shakespear* we your grace implore,
> We for our Theatre shall want it more:
> Who by our dearth of Youths are forc'd t'employ
> One of our Women to present a Boy.
> And that's a transformation you will say
> Exceeding all the Magick in the Play.
> Let none expect in the last Act to find,
> Her Sex transform'd from man to Woman-kind.
> Whate're she was before the Play began,
> All you shall see of her is perfect man.
> Or if your fancy will be further led,
> To find her Woman, it must be abed. (Davenant & Dryden, *EI*, 6-7.27-38)

By increasing "audience awareness of the real woman behind" Hippolito's character, the dramatists simultaneously exploited the popularity of the breeches role, "which reversed the popular transvestite convention of early seventeenth-century drama and had women dressed as boys," and distanced themselves from it, by not having "Her Sex transform'd from man to Woman-kind" in the final act (Howe 91, 56): the actress playing Hippolito, either Jane Long (Avery and Scouten 123) or Moll Davis (Summers xlviii-xlix), was to enact her male role

throughout. The peculiar declination of the breeches role here advertised constituted "quite an uncommon practice" considering that, according to Wilson's calculations, eighty-nine out of "the some three hundred and seventy-five plays first produced in the London public theatres between 1660 and 1700 … contained one or more roles for actresses 'in Boy's Clothes,'" but in only fourteen other plays "women were assigned to don breeches and play parts originally written for men, not for female impersonators" (Murray 30, Wilson 74). Dryden and Davenant seemingly apologize for the fact that by "dearth of Youths [they] are forc'd t'employ / One of [their] Women to present a Boy." However, since most Restoration "plays had two or three times more parts for men than for women," their casting choice might have also been aimed at increasing "opportunities for the display of actresses' legs in tight-fitting breeches" in a plot that could not have offered this kind of spectacle otherwise (Howe 11, Dobson 45).

"Exceeding all the Magick in the Play," the truly "magical metamorphosis that occurs on stage is that of a woman" (Leigh 84) turning to "a perfect man" through performance, "[w]hat e're she was before the Play began;" teasingly alluding to the association between actresses and prostitutes, the last couplet assures to the audience that "To find her Woman, it must be abed," rather than on the stage. On the one hand, this invitation, "which can promise real 'knowledge' of Hipolito / [Moll] Davis's sex only to someone willing to act as a keeper," Michael Dobson argues, "was in fact taken up within a month of *The Enchanted Island*'s première – by Charles Stuart, King of England" (56) and "by the end of May 1668 Moll Davis had left the stage to become one of [his] mistresses" (Howe 73). On the other, this invitation to discover the gender hiding behind the actress's costume between the bedsheets at the end of the play metonymically evokes the motion of the theatre curtain, which was usually "drawn back after the prologue was finished to reveal the stage behind the proscenium" and "was not drawn again until the whole performance, even the epilogue, was finished" (Howe 3): the actress's metamorphosis into a male agent is thereby neatly circumscribed to the stage space and to the duration of the performance. Similarly, the comedy's metatheatrical references to the female body enacting Hippolito constantly remind

the audience that they might later witness the "sexual nature of [the actress's] offstage transformation" from Man to Woman by joining her "abed" after the performance (Leigh 85).

Almost paradoxically, in "the context of a sex / gender system increasingly grounded in biology" that characterised the early Restoration, Phyllis Rackin argues, "the spectacle of the woman's body in male attire reassuringly emphasized that the sexed body persisted beneath the otherwise gendered clothes" of the actress (129). This apparently contradictory mechanism also potentially underlies the multiplication of "metatheatrical references to Hippolito's true gender" that punctuate the text, since "Dryden and Davenant work hard to depict Hippolito as a man and at the same time never let the audience completely forget that a woman is underneath the costume" (Leigh 88). While the audience already identifies the Mantuan heir as the breeches part announced in the Prologue – and easily so if the very actress playing the role delivered it – during his first exchange with Prospero, Miranda and Dorinda only gaze on him for the first time at the end of Act 2. The two sisters' entrance on stage "*peeping*" as the *"Scene changes, and discovers Hippolito in a Cave walking, his face from the Audience,*" reproduces the real audience's initial excitement at his identification (Davenant & Dryden, *EI*, 2.5.SD0-5). Assuming that "Hippolito's cave would have been painted in perspective on a shutter upstage with Prospero's daughters located somewhere on the forestage," Leigh suggests that seeing Miranda and Dorinda "engaging in a voyeuristic, illicit," homoerotic moment induces the audience "to join the activity of looking on Hippolito" and, by extension, on the performer (91). Simultaneously, their allusions to his physical features ironically hint at the actress's legs, revealed by the breeches:

> **Dorinda:** O Sister, there it is, it walks about like one of us.
> **Miranda:** I, just so, and has legs as we have too. (Davenant & Dryden, *EI*, 2.5.7-6)

Both comments literally denote Hippolito as human because of his ability to walk, but their ambiguity does not preclude ironical allusions to the actress's gender arising from the pronoun *us*, which could also stand for *us women,* and from a "metatheatrical reference to those legs being the same as theirs, or in other words, female legs" (Leigh 92). The innuendo persists throughout

the scene, growing increasingly explicit when the two sisters agree that he "is just like one of" them and must be "a tame man," and when Prospero questions Miranda about her first impression of the youth (Davenant & Dryden, *EI*, 2.5.11,18):

> **Prospero:** [D]id you not see the man whom I commanded you to shun?
> **Miranda:** I must confess I saw him at a distance.
> **Prospero:** Did not his Eyes infect and poyson you?
> What alteration found you in your self?
> **Miranda:** I only wondred at a sight so new.
> **Prospero:** But have you no desire once more to see him?
> Come, tell me truly what you think of him?
> **Miranda:** As of the gayest thing I ever saw, so fine that it appear'd more fit to be belov'd than fear'd, and seem'd so near my kind, that I did think I might have call'd it Sister. (3.1.7-17)

Miranda's response to the spectacular sight offered by Hippolito further mimics the audience's experience, as they also "saw him at a distance" and "wondred at a sight so new." Indeed, although Prospero has taught her that when she refers to "young" men she "must call them Brothers," the young woman significantly admits that he "seem'd so near [her] kind" that she "Might have call'd it Sister," hinting at the non-correspondence between the character's and the actress's bodies (3.1.26-27). These obvious breaches of dramatic illusion seemingly reassure the audience that there is "no question of the actress truly impersonating a man," severely undermining the empowering potential that a breeches role could offer to a female performer (Howe 56). From its very onset, the play continually highlights that even though an actress can fleetingly appear as a "perfect man" and infiltrate the male sphere of independent action during the performance, this kind of agency will be precluded to her, by virtue of her gender, as soon as she leaves the stage.

While Leigh rightly contends that "sword fighting and other 'masculine' activities that breeches roles permitted women to assume – though limited to the world of the playhouse – offered a considerable sense of liberation," this form of empowerment is ambiguously portrayed in *The Enchanted Island* (13). Rather than celebrating Hippolito's manliness, his duel with Ferdinand confirms his inadequacy to the standards of masculinity embodied by the Savoyard, while also metatheatrically exposing the fundamental discrepancy between the player's and the

character's gender. On the one hand, Ferdinand's instructions to the unexperienced fighter Hippolito, "Provide your self a Sword; … You must stand thus, and push against me, till one of us fall dead," carry obvious sexual innuendos (Dryden and Davenant, *EI*, 4.1.308-313). On the other, as Hippolito is hurt and "faint[s] for loss of blood," Ariel's supernatural intervention to revive him thanks to the "healing juice of vulnerary Herbs" constitutes a "theoretical demonstration … of the notion, reassuring to many in 1667, that a woman cannot really play a man's part; she may mimic masculine autonomy, but her femaleness cedes it" (4.3.17, 5.2.73, Murray 32). While Ariel treats Hippolito's substantial bleeding with "Moly," "trickling Balm," and "purple Panacea," in reality, "for the highly experienced young woman playing the role, a debilitating and noxious flow of blood would be caused by such a herbal concoction," as the three plants share the property "of 'procuring the woman's courses' or menstruation" (Dryden and Davenant, *EI*, 5.1.52-55, Culpeper qtd. in Murray 32). On the one hand, the leaky body *double entendre* is strengthened by the fact that, after collecting those herbs, Ariel is surprised by a violent "Storm," inevitably reminiscent of the opening tempest contrived by Prospero during which, only 30 lines before the Courtiers' shipwreck, Gonzalo confidently claims that they will not drown, "though the Ship were no stronger than a Nut-Shell, and as leaky as an unstanch'd Wench" (Dryden and Davenant, *EI*, 5.1.52-55, 1.1.83-85). On the other, the masturbation innuendo underlying the sequence in which Miranda "*wipes and anoints* [*Hippolito's*] *Sword*" with Ariel's "Weapon-Salve" invites readings that associate leakage with ejaculation and waste of male semen (5.2.SD69, 5.1.79). This brief portrayal of the Mantuan heir as male-gendered is sufficient for Leigh to assert that, at "the end of the *Enchanted Island* Hippolito remains a man" (95). However, rather than providing a conclusive statement on his gender identity, the last scene further complicates its indeterminacy, emphasising once more the confusing coexistence of the performer's and of the character's genders.

3.2 Competing Textual Appropriations of the Female Body

The Prologue to the *Enchanted Island* does not fail to acknowledge Shakespeare's authorship, nor to praise his allegedly natural poetic genius; however, in keeping with Jean I. Marsden's view whereby "appropriation's central tenet is the desire for possession," it primarily celebrates Davenant and Dryden's successful endeavour to appropriate and suitably reshape the original text for the Restoration stage (1). The process of textual adaptation yet necessarily entails an act of severance from the original author which the opening botanic simile vividly pictures:

> As when a Tree's cut down the secret root
> Lives under ground, and thence new Branches shoot
> So, from old *Shakespear's* honour'd dust, this day
> Springs up and buds a new reviving Play. (Davenant & Dryden, "Prologue," *EI*, 6.1-4)

Although the "new reviving Play" partly cut some of the "Legends," "Magick" and "supernatural things" that punctuated the Shakespearean source, further occurrences of botanic imagery hint at the intertwinement of the text's remodelling with its multiplication of female characters / bodies (6.19-24). Not haphazardly, in Davenant and Dryden's rewriting, Dorinda and Miranda believe that children "gr[o]w within the ground" and the young Hippolito is depicted, just like the comedy itself, as an "op'ning bud" (1.2.332, 3.1.35). This florilegium of female figures arguably inscribes itself within the ongoing shift in gender configurations that characterised the Restoration period:

> Rather than being considered merely inferior to man, woman began to be defined as the opposite, yet indispensable sex, excluded from the male spheres of public and professional life but vital in the field of domestic management – her own private sphere of home and children. (Howe 21)

Seemingly, by increasing the amount of female characters who are subjected to male discursive authority, *The Enchanted Island* both illustrates the "paradoxical reduction of … independent agency for Shakespeare's female roles as they started to be played by actresses rather than boy players" and reproduces a social "system which defines [a] wom[a]n not in terms of inferiority, but in terms of her seductive difference from the man," where "her personality is fundamentally determined by its gender" (Leigh iv, Maus 613). Dryden and Davenant's textual appropriation of the Shakespearean source and its adaptation to the Restoration audience's taste is symbolically

mimicked by Prospero and Trincalo's discursive constructions of the female characters / bodies to suit their political agenda. Prospero rewrites Hippolito's, Miranda's, and Dorinda's bodies according to his essentialist, dichotomic conception of gender, directing their interactions to recover his dukedom through their marriage. On the subplot level, the Eurocentric, socially constructed notions of femininity exposed by Trincalo are instead subverted by Sycorax, who successfully opposes the sailor's attempt to gain political control over the island by marrying her.

3.2.1 Prospero's Bodily Inscription of Gender Polarities

In his analysis of Restoration and eighteenth-century adaptations of *The Tempest*, Dobson claims that "*The Enchanted Island* sets out to prove, in a manner half way between that of a court masque and a Royal Society experiment, that patriarchal authority can be rationally deduced from nature" (100). While Prospero's manipulation of the young lovers unquestionably aims at the reestablishment of his rule over Milan, his resolution to inscribe Miranda, Dorinda and Hippolito's bodies according to his own "definition of gender in terms of polarities" rather suggests that patriarchal authority needs to be performatively enforced through discourse precisely because its exertion does not stem from rational deduction (Maus 613). The artificiality of such an imposition is further enhanced by the meticulously designed, factitious environment where Prospero separately grows his daughters and ward, never allowing them to meet before the Courtiers' arrival. As Sandra Clark points out, though "less powerful than Shakespeare's character[,] he appears more repressive" and mostly behaves as "an anxious father trying, unsuccessfully, to control the sexual behaviour of his daughters and his ward, and feeding them misinformation" (lv). Indeed, since his secret designs rely on his daughters' and ward's initial ignorance of the other sex, Prospero arguably imparts gender roles as an over-controlling stage-manager would distribute the various parts of a play. Apart from their own lines, in fact, Restoration actors probably had "very little idea of what the rest of the play was like" before collective rehearsal, since each "part consisted of a roll of paper containing just the player's own lines and sufficient

words from each preceding speech to make the cues recognisable" (Howe 12). Thanks to his superior dramaturgical knowledge and agency, Prospero's patriarchal authority is never irremediably threatened, even though his children's questioning the naturalness of gender dichotomies do result in Hippolito's near death.

Prospero's separate tuition of his daughters and ward about man's and woman's essential features well epitomizes how "seventeenth-century thinking about women" often tended to be, as Maus argues, "less committed to the definition of a set of particular gender traits, than committed to the conception of dichotomies and oppositions in the abstract" (613). Having seen by "calculation of his birth … death threat'ning" Hippolito if "he should behold the face of any Woman," the Prospero momentarily refuses to impart any knowledge of the female sex to Hippolito, hoping thereby to rescript his horoscope (Davenant and Dryden, *EI*, 2.4.6-8). Even when the Courtiers' shipwreck yet forces him to admit to his ward that there "are creatures which [he] nam'd not to" him before, Prospero discursively constructs female bodies in such a way to persuade Hippolito, who had "never heard of them before," of their dangerousness (2.4.27, 32). Because of the audience's awareness of the female performer playing the role of the Mantuan heir, the ensuing discussion inevitably gives rise to laughter and ironically exposes the constructedness of gender categories. In response to Hippolito's enquiry "What are women like?" Prospero ambiguously constructs them as threatening "enemies of men," at once "dangerous and fair," whose "fury falls / Alone upon the young" (2.4.44, 31, 68, 41-42). Then, he provides a purposedly abstract, artificial description which he punctuates with Petrarchan conceits:

> Imagine something between young men and Angels:
> Fatally beauteous, and have killing Eyes,
> Their voices charm beyond the Nightingales,
> They are all enchantment, those who once behold 'em,
> Are made their slaves for ever. (2.4.43-47)

Prospero combines hyperbolic similes equating women to "Angels" and "Nightingales" with more negatively connoted tropes of enchantment, enslavement, and killing culminating in their hyperbolic depiction as "fatally beauteous." Metatheatrically alluding to the seductive fascination

exerted on the audience by the Restoration actress, this ambivalent portrayal of women as deceivingly angelic-looking creatures highlights the discrepancy between the characters' roles and the actresses' offstage personae. Pepys also evokes such disparity in his diary, as he wonders at "how fine they show on the stage by candle-light, and how poor things they are to look now too near hand" (Pepys, 19 March 1665/66). Furthermore, it betrays Prospero's own concerns about female agency as a threat to patriarchal authority, as his previous acknowledgement that women "share man's soveraignty by Nature's Laws, / And oft depose him from it" already foreshadowed (Davenant and Dryden, *EI*, 2.4.28-29). This blazon-like description is further expanded through an additional accumulation of similes forged by literary tradition, which Prospero consciously reiterates and which the young Hippolito starts imitating:

Hippolito: Are they so beautiful?
Prospero: Calm sleep is not so soft, nor Winter Suns,
Nor Summer Shades so pleasant.
Hippolito: Can they be fairer than the Plumes of Swans?
Or more delightful than the Peacocks Feathers?
Or than the gloss upon the necks of Doves?
Or have more various beauty than the Rain-bow?
Prospero: All these are far below 'em[.] (2.4.60-67)

The increasingly conventional nature of these anaphorically rephrased comparands indicates that since Prospero cannot or does not aim to overcome women's "linguistic absence and opacity," he merely describes what Woman is not, in an implicitly oppositional manner to what Man is, inducing Hippolito to adopt the same linguistic attitude (Butler 13). After briefly envisioning to "fight with 'em," the youth seemingly stoops to his guardian's injunction, assuring to him, "since you say they are so dangerous, / I'le … shun 'em" (2.4.50, 71-72). Despite Hippolito's promise to shun women, which the player's female gender ironically undermines, the revelation of women's existence starts eroding his blind confidence in Prospero's linguistic authority.

Towards the end of the scene, Prospero imparts an almost specular definition of Man's allegedly essential features to his daughters and, "[k]nowing that the children will take metaphor for literal fact, [he] employs satiric tropes which betray his own state of mind" about gender

dichotomies (Maus 196). As a previous dialogue between the two already clarified, Miranda and Dorinda initially ignored the existence of men apart from their father (and Caliban):[13]

Miranda: [S]hortly we may chance to see that thing,
Which you have heard my Father call, a Man.
Dorinda: But what is that? for yet he never told me.
Miranda: I know no more than you: but I have heard
My Father say we Women were made for him. (1.2.316-320)

Clark suggests that the scene illustrates the sisters' readiness to "accept patriarchal authority as necessary" (liv). However, Miranda is merely reporting her father's words which, unsurprisingly, reflect his – but not necessarily hers – conception of female bodies as blank, inscribable surfaces "awaiting signification from an opposing masculine subject" (Butler 50). Moreover, as he describes Man's nature, Prospero resorts to purposedly intimidating analogies with "the curled Lion, and the rugged Bear" to portray the "wild / Young man," interspersing his warning with sexual innuendos that his daughters ironically fail to grasp (2.4.96, 104-105):

Dorinda: Do they run wild about the Woods?
Prospero: No, they are wild within Doors, in Chambers,
And in Closets.
Dorinda: But Father, I would stroak 'em and make 'em gentle,
Then sure they would not hurt me.
Prospero: You must not trust them, Child: no woman can come
Neer 'em but she feels a pain full nine Months:
Well I must in; for new affairs require my
Presence: be you, *Miranda*, your sister's Guardian. (2.4.106-112)

While mostly arousing laughter through the discrepancy between the audience's assumptions about the actresses' reputation and the sisters' ignorance about sexual intercourse and pregnancy, Prospero's depiction of Man soon proves less dissuasive than his former speech to Hippolito. On the one hand, hardly intimidated, Dorinda bluntly challenges the authority of her father's word by envisioning intimacy with Man, as she also later admits: "I confess I would fain see him too. I find it in my Nature, because my Father has forbidden me" (2.4.132-133). On the other, Prospero

[13] Miranda defines Ferdinand as "the third man that e're [she] saw" and, since Prospero is said to be the first one, she implicitly does not consider either Hippolito or Caliban as such (Davenant and Dryden, *EI*, 3.5.33).

seemingly delegates his authoritative role as a "Guardian" to Miranda too precociously, still hoping to contain Dorinda's sexual curiosity, although the elder daughter's comment, "if I can but scape with life, I had rather be in pain nine Months, as my Father threatn'd, than lose my longing," casts doubt on the successfulness of such a precaution (2.4.140-141). Henceforth, as suggested by the structural alternation of successive scenes between him and either Miranda or Dorinda, Prospero will only manage to exert his dramaturgical agency over his daughters by inscribing their bodily surfaces separately.

3.2.2 Miranda's, Dorinda's, and Hippolito's Questioning of Prospero's Bodily Authorship

The increasingly frequent interactions among the four lovers inevitably confront Miranda, Dorinda, and Hippolito with the discrepancy between their guardian's discursive construction of Man and Woman and their own perception of gender identity, leading them to the realisation that, since "acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body," Prospero's inscription of their own bodies as male or female is not necessarily incontrovertible (Butler 184). Unable to resist their mutual attraction, Dorinda and Hippolito soon disregard their guardian's injunction to shun each other's sight and their first illicit interaction induces them to question the truthfulness of his gender configurations. After peeping on the youth for a while from a distance, longingly claiming "Though I dye for 't, I must have th' other peep," Dorinda approaches to him, while he still briefly hesitates before questioning her:

> What thing is that? … my sight is dazl'd, and yet I find I'm loth to shut my Eyes.
> I must go nearer it — but stay a while;
> May it not be that beauteous murderer, Woman,
> Which I was charg'd to shun? Speak, what art thou?
> Thou shining Vision! (Dryden & Davenant, *EI*, 2.5.33-41)

Having safely gazed on each other without excessive damage, they start realising the constructedness of Prospero's conception of gender polarities, as well as the unfoundedness of the fear that he instilled in them:

> **Dorinda:** Alas I know not; but *I'm told* I am a Woman;
> Do not hurt me, pray, fair thing.

Hippolito: I'd sooner tear my eyes out, than consent to do you any harm; though *I was told* a Woman was my Enemy.
Dorinda: I never knew what 'twas to be an Enemy, nor can I e're prove so to that which looks like you: for though *I have been charg'd by him* (whom yet I never disobey'd) to shun your presence, yet I'd rather dye than lose it; therefore I hope you will not have the heart to hurt me: though I fear you are a man, that dangerous thing of which I have been warn'd; pray tell me what you are?
Hippolito: I must confess, *I was inform'd* I am a man,
But if I fright you, I shall wish I were some other Creature.
I was bid to fear you too. (2.5.42-55, emphasis added)

Curiously, both Dorinda and Hippolito alternatively recur to multiple passive constructions, first as they attempt to define their gender identity, thereby implicitly connoting it as a superficial inscription imposed upon their bodies by an exterior agent, then as they evoke and deliberately resolve to transgress Prospero's restrictions. Paradoxically though, by challenging him "whom yet [they] never disobey'd," the two unconsciously adhere to his script, which prefigures their union as a fundamental premise for the reestablishment of his political authority.

Until the discovery of Woman's existence, Hippolito's self-identification as a man is entirely reliant on Prospero's manipulative and partial pieces of information. His interview with Dorinda yet disrupts this *status quo* and, as the Mantuan heir encounters Ferdinand, he truly starts "questioning his gender – wondering if Prospero has told him a lie – with a nod and wink to the audience at herself as the actress wearing the breeches" and merely acting as a man (Leigh 89):

Ferdinand: But gentle youth, as you have question'd me,
So give me leave to ask you, what you are?
Hippolito: Do not you know?
Ferdinand: How should I?
Hippolito: I well hop'd I was a man, but by your ignorance
Of what I am, I fear it is not so:
Well, *Prospero!* this is now the second time
You have deceiv'd me.
Ferdinand: Sir, there is no doubt you are a man. (Davenant & Dryden, *EI*, 3.6.9-17)

Wrongly interpreting his interlocutor's enquiry about his identity and title as an expression of confusion about his own gender, Hippolito assumes to be lacking those male-defining features that Ferdinand possesses and, even though the latter reassures him that "there is no doubt [he is] a man," the youth concludes that Prospero must have "deceiv'd" him. This assumption also

potentially underlies his concerns that Dorinda might fall in love with another man. As he meets her again, Hippolito consequently reproduces Prospero's rhetorical speech to conflate Ferdinand's portrayal as "the man of whom [her] Father warn'd" her, a terrible, huge, monstrous creature," persuading the girl that he is "but a Woman to him" (4.1.223-225). These explicit allusions to the discrepancy between the character's and the actress's gender concur to expose the artificiality of Prospero's (and of the playwrights') imposition of a male gender onto Hippolito's body.

Alarmed at the prospect that Miranda might interfere with the development of an affection between Dorinda and Hippolito, Prospero admits that his portrayal of Man was inadequate. After ascertaining that Miranda did not fall in love at first sight with Hippolito, he theatrically discloses to her that she will soon meet her predestined partner: "I will unfold / A secret to your knowledge. / That Creature which you saw, is of a kind which / Nature made a prop and guide to yours" (3.1.23-26). Inevitably identifying a disjunction between this new revelation and Prospero's previous behaviour, Miranda raises an objection that betrays her sudden mistrust towards him: "Why did you then propose him as an object of terrour to my mind? you never us'd to teach me any thing but God-like truths, and what you said I did believe as sacred" (3.1.27-29). The switch to the past tense further emphasises the breach with her former confidence in Prospero's teachings; neither his promise to reward her obedience with "a nobler Guest" for her "tender breast," nor the prospect of a meeting with Ferdinand truly mitigates her disenchantment (3.1.21-22).

After cunningly arousing their curiosity, Prospero only accords his daughters to meet Ferdinand and Hippolito on the condition that they will faithfully follow his directions, which enables him to inscribe their bodies with women's allegedly inbred deceitfulness and disparity between affected behaviour and unexpressed desire. Rightly suspecting that Dorinda's first encounter with Hippolito led her to ponder the accuracy of his own former teachings about Man, and that "unartful truth lies open / In her mind," Prospero comes to realisation that she "now must be examin'd too concerning this / Late interview" (3.1.38-40). Persuaded that for his plot to succeed, he "must take care her love grow not too fast, / For innocence is Love's most fertile soil,"

he still resorts to threatening imagery to portray the youth as a "horrid creature" belonging to "such a Salvage race, / That no mild usage can reclaim his wildness" (3.1.41-42, 99, 89-90). Reprimanding his daughter for having "been too fond" of Hippolito, and too soon, he urges her to "bear [he]r self reserv'dly to him," and to "keep at distance from him," because he will "despise [her] if [she] grow[s] too kind," while if she uses "him ill … he'll be [hers] for ever" (3.1.118, 132-142). Through these directions, Prospero artificially induces Dorinda to display a certain "opacity of … desire," fostering the socially engrained assumption that women's refusal or affectation of disinterest should be interpreted as a marker of their availability (Schwarz 108).[14]

In a similar endeavour to inscribe Miranda's body with socially constructed feminine features, Prospero prevents her first meeting with Ferdinand from protracting itself too long by imprisoning him and carefully scripts their later interactions. As soon as he notices that the two lovers "are in each other's powers," in fact, he resolves: "this swift / Bus'ness I must uneasie make, lest too light / Winning make the prize light" (Davenant & Dryden, *EI*, 3.5.39-41). At the opening of Act 4, he charges his elder daughter to pay a visit to Ferdinand and to "insinuate into his mind / A Kindness to" Hippolito, so that "friendship [might] grow betwixt 'em," a request which will yet turn into a source of rivalry between the two (4.1.6-7). As Miranda urges him to "love him for [her] sake," the Savoyard frustratingly expresses his jealousy in an aside, presenting "a culturally constructed stereotype of femininity … as inherent and natural" (4.1.92, Clark liii):

> It is too plain: like most of her frail Sex, she's false,
> But has not learnt the art to hide it;
> Nature has done her part, she loves variety:
> Why did I think that any Woman could be innocent,
> Because she's young? No, no, their Nurses teach them
> Change, when with two Nipples they divide their
> Liking. (Davenant & Dryden, *EI*, 4.1.105-111)

[14] Cf. the Gentleman's threat of rape portrayed in the Ladies' last playlet of Cavendish's *Convent of Pleasure* (Act 3, Scene 10) and Willmore's unwillingness to accept Florinda's rejection in Behn's *Rover* (Act 3, Scene 5).

Almost echoing Prospero's essentialist arguments, which define deceitfulness as intrinsic to the "frail Sex," Ferdinand asserts that Nurses' "breasts, their very bodies, instruct other women in the art of inconstancy" and that "Miranda, by virtue of her female gender, cannot be trusted" (Leigh 81). Resorting to the image of breastfeeding, he actively engraves Miranda's bodily surface with falsity and inconstancy, metrically reproducing through enjambments her changing nature.

The consequences of this inscription already manifest themselves when, failing to interpret Ferdinand's "displeas'd" reaction as a mark of jealousy, Miranda resolves to "conceal it from [her] Fathers knowledge" (Davenant & Dryden, *EI*, 4.1.119-121). Erroneously believing that if she "can make him think [she] do[es] not love the stranger much, he'll let [her] see him oftner," she repeatedly lies to Prospero as he questions her about Ferdinand's reaction to his temporary imprisonment (4.1.162-153). But as his aside reveals, the protagonist knows that "she loves him much because she hides it" and teasingly leads her to contradict herself multiple times (4.1.132):

Prospero: But tell me, dear *Miranda,* how does he suffer
His imprisonment?
Miranda: I think he seems displeas'd.
Prospero: O then 'tis plain his temper is not noble,
For the brave with equal minds bear good
And evil fortune.
Miranda: O, Sir, but he's pleas'd again so soon
That 'tis not worth your noting.
Prospero: To be soon displeas'd and pleas'd so suddenly again,
Does shew him of a various froward Nature.
Miranda: The truth is, Sir, he was not vex'd at all, but only
Seem'd to be so.
Prospero: If he be not and yet seems angry, he is a dissembler,
Which shews the worst of Natures. (4.137-150)

While her replies in Ferdinand's defence grow increasingly inconsistent and implausible, Miranda unconsciously conforms to both her father's and her suitor's inscriptions of deceitfulness, which Prospero does not fail to highlight in a new aside, seeking the complicity of the audience: "How she excuses him, and yet desires that I should judge her heart indifferent to him?" (4.1.153-154). However, since Miranda has been induced to act deceitfully by her father, the comedy connotes

her unconvincing performance as unthreatening to patriarchal authority, while it also implicitly denounces female duplicity as socially constructed through the male gaze.

Miranda's most radical attempt to compete with her father's authority does not in fact rely upon her deceitfulness, but upon her recourse to logical argumentation against death penalty when, in Act 5, the rivalry between Hippolito and Ferdinand culminates in the former's apparent death in duel and in the latter's condemnation to death by Prospero. The girl induces her father to admit that if he condemns Ferdinand "for shedding blood," then he "must be condemn'd for shedding his, / And he who condemns [him] for shedding / [His], and that's the way at last to leave none living" (5.1.14-18). As Prospero dismisses her objections, merely replying, "[t]he Argument is weak, but I want time / To let you see your errors," Miranda confronts him with the paradoxical nature of capital punishment by drawing from contemporary debates upon the subject (5.1.18-19, Novak and Guffey, *EI*, 373-374n5.1.16). Accusing Prospero of acting simultaneously as Ferdinand's "Judge" and "Executioner," she argues: "then all men may declare their / Enemies in fault; and Pow'r without the Sword / Of Justice, will presume to punish what e're / It calls a crime" (5.1.24-30). Although Miranda's vehement argumentation is mostly dictated by her determination to suspend Ferdinand's execution, it also challenges the naturalness of the authority that Prospero embodies as an over-controlling father and as the tyrannical ruler of the Island.

Hippolito's miraculous revival by the hands of Ariel and Prospero's subsequent retraction of Ferdinand's sentence to death yet rapidly redirect the plays' denouement towards the (artificial) reinstatement of patriarchal authority on the Continent. As Jackson points out, "Dryden and Davenant's adaptation multiplies the number of marriages in Prospero's plot to gain dynastic power" (11). After oppressively scripting Miranda's, Dorinda's and Hippolito's gender identities to suit his political agenda, Prospero eventually reclaims his lost Dukedom through the arrangement of the unions between Miranda and Ferdinand, as well as Dorinda and Hippolito. Significantly though, the two couples will not "be joy'nd in marriage / To each other" on the Island, but on the Continent (5.2.168-169). In the meanwhile, Prospero confines their sexual

curiosity within the marriage institution through a final stage direction that confirms Dorinda's suspicion that he "will conjure them together" 5.2.171): "you, *Miranda*, must with *Ferdinand*, / And you, *Dorinda*, with *Hippolito* lye in / One Bed hereafter" (5.2.176-178). Rather than exclusively confirming that "gender roles as enacted in Restoration society take their origins from inherent human nature," *The Enchanted Island* connotes the artificial imposition and enactment of those roles as strategic tools to artificially preserve patriarchal authority (Clark liv).

3.2.3 Sycorax's Impermeability to Eurocentric Inscriptions of Femininity

Davenant and Dryden's introduction of a sister to Caliban in the parodic subplot further challenges the notion that, within the utopian space of the Island, "patriarchal authority can be rationally deduced from nature" (Dobson 100). As Trincalo attempts to gain political control over the island by marrying her, Sycorax "becomes another female body / character to resist the patriarchal plot," refusing to be "easily subsumed into this narrative" (Jackson 14). Her subtraction from gender-normative bodily inscriptions corroborates Butler's claim that the "power of language to work on bodies is both the cause of sexual oppression and the way beyond that oppression" (*GT*, 33). In addition to the text's insistence on the character's "monstrous" features, depending on the director's staging choices, Sycorax's subversiveness as a female independent subject might have been undermined by her hypothetically "original transvestite casting," which would have hinted at the inadequacy of a female body to stage a self-assertive character (Davenant & Dryden, *EI*, 3.3.6, Dobson 101). Indeed, Sycorax repeatedly proves herself impermeable to the sailors' endeavour to appropriate her body and, almost metonymically, her island. Far from recognizing Trincalo's godlike superiority, as Caliban does, or from submitting to his marital authority, as Caliban prompts her to do, she readily exacts mutual benefits from marriage, seeking sexual gratification outside of wedlock when Trincalo denies it to her before eventually rejecting him.

Unlike Cavendish's Prince(ss), who progressively rewrites Lady Happy, silencing her to seize and repurpose her Convent, Trincalo's project to "lay claim to th[e] Island by Alliance" with

Sycorax collapses precisely because she voices her unwillingness to comply with the unfavourable conditions of an entirely male-scripted marriage (Davenant & Dryden, *EI*, 2.3.222). Caliban is much more rapidly reduced to servile devotion by Trincalo than his sister, and as soon as the sailor "[*p*]*ours Wine down his throat,*" he assumes that the stranger must be "a brave God" and "kneel[s] to him," willing to "swear upon that bottle to be true" to him (2.3.SD175-180): "I'le shew thee every fertile inch I'th'Isle, and kiss thy foot: I prithee be my God, and let me drink" (2.3.185-186). While acknowledging his inferiority to Trincalo, Candy B. K. Schille points out, "Caliban seems to recognize that females may be currency in power negotiations among men" (282). Through the mention of his "lovely Sister, beautiful and bright as the full Moon," he induces Trincalo to envision Sycorax as an advantageous match and to assume that she will be just as easily subjugated through liquor (2.3.201): "She shall swear upon the Bottle too. / If she proves handsom she is mine" (2.3.206-207). However, none of Trincalo's expectations – Sycorax's willingness to swear allegiance to him, her beauty, and her reduction to a commodity in his possession – will be fulfilled.

The boatswain's inability to exert any scriptorial agency over Sycorax is firstly symbolically emphasised the fact that she does not taste, nor experience, the effects of the "coelestial Liquor" that transmuted her brother into a devoted servant, since "*Ariel (invisible) … changes the Bottle that stands upon the ground,*" substituting wine with water (2.3.176, SD57-58).[15] As she believes to taste it, Sycorax seriously challenges the stranger's authority and godlike status, asserting that she could also easily provide his "drink of Frogs" on the island: "Is this your heavenly liquor? I'le bring you to a River of the same" (3.3.67, 62-63). Secondly, Trincalo resigns to marry her even though she is "*monstrous* fair," remembering that his ancestors, "like other wise men, have anciently us'd to marry for Estate more than for beauty" (3.3.6-9, emphasis added).

[15] Ariel is another female body on stage, probably played by Mary Davis (Wilson 140).

Lastly, the sailor realises that Sycorax resists commodification and, far from conceiving herself as his property, she expects to benefit from community of goods:

> **Sycorax:** I prithee let me have the gay thing about thy neck, and that which dangles at thy wrist. (**Sycorax** *points to his Bosens Whistle, and his Bottle.*)
> **Trincalo:** I prithee sweet Babby do not play the wanton, and cry for my goods e're I'm dead. When thou art my Widow, thou shalt have the Devil and all.
> **Sycorax:** I shall have all his fine things when I'm a Widow. (*Pointing to his Bottle, and Bosens Whistle*.) (3.3.10-31)

Looking forward to widowhood as an empowering condition enabling her to inherit Prospero's belongings, Sycorax resists Trincalo's attempt to rewrite her to fit the Eurocentric marriage institution, and starts envisioning polygamy, incest and divorce as means to achieve self-gratification.

Evidently dissatisfied with Trincalo's sexual rejection and with his insulting comments, Sycorax pursues sexual gratification outside of wedlock, and as "she offers to couple with all the sailors and does, reportedly, couple with her own brother," she prepares "to remove [herself] from imposed patriarchal control" through divorce (Schille 278, Jackson 16). The incompatibility of the couple's views on sexuality prominently emerges when Caliban remarks that "she would be loving to [Trincalo], and [he] wilt not let her" on the pretext that "fair Maids must not be too forward" (Davenant and Dryden, *EI*, 3.3.47-50). Analogously, as Sycorax repeatedly attempts to resolve the sailors' quarrel by "marry[ing] that other King and his two subjects, Trincalo energetically refuses (3.3.154-155): "No, that's against the fundamental Laws of my Dukedom: you are in a high place, Spouse, and must give good Example" (4.2.10-14). Moreover, unaware of the incest taboo that horrifies the sailors, Sycorax seeks sexual gratification with Caliban, as Trincalo implies when he reveals that he found her "under an Elder-tree, upon a sweet Bed of Nettles, singing Tory, Rory, and Ranthum, Scantum, with her own natural Brother" (4.2.107-109). Growing increasingly frustrated at Trincalo, she rapidly disentangles herself from male linguistic authority by divorcing him upon learning that he insulted her "beauty" and "behaviour,"

incautiously confiding to the other sailors that he only "Espous'd the lawful Inheritrix of th[e] Island, / Queen *Blouze* the first" to "claim a lawful Title to" her land (4.2.99-101, 3.3.118-122):

> **Stephano:** He said you were as ugly as your Mother, and that he Marry'd you only to get possession of the Island. ... *Trincalo* was but my man when time was.
> **Sycorax:** Wert thou his God, and didst thou give him Liquor?
> **Stephano:** I gave him Brandy and drunk Sack my self; wilt thou leave him, and thou shalt be my Princess?
> **Sycorax:** If thou canst make me glad with this Liquor. (4.2.120-134)

Enraged at the discovery, Sycorax prevents Trincalo from inscribing ugliness onto her body, threateningly asserting, "Be gone! thou shalt not be my Lord, thou say'st I'm ugly," while simultaneously considering a new relationship with Stephano to benefit from his provisions of Liquor (4.2.141). The scene significantly closes with Sycorax subsequently fighting with the two male characters who attempted to script her marriage: first, she angrily "*Flies at Trincalo*" as he "[*s*]*trikes Stephano*" and then, realising that it was Caliban's "doing that [she] had such a Husband," she starts "*beating him off the stage*" (4.2.SD147, SD148, 158-SD159). In keeping with Schille's view, whereby Sycorax is ultimately "less subsumed into the patriarchal order than abandoned by it" as the Courtiers set sail, this newly introduced female character rejects male authorial hegemony and produces through her body a competing script that not only challenges the supposed naturalness of patriarchal authority, but erases it from her island by literally beating it off the stage (278).

In conclusion, apart from Sycorax, most female characters / bodies remain subjected to Prospero's authorial agency and their attempts to emancipate from his bodily inscriptions remain confined to the circumscribed, theatre-like environment of the Island. Eventually, the young lovers prepare to return to the Continent and, thus, to adhere to the socially constructed gender roles that the Duke of Milan scripted for them.

4. *The Rover; or, The Banish'd Cavaliers*

In her Preface to the *Lucky Chance* (1686), Aphra Behn condemns the gender double standards underlying the charges of "indecency" brought against her comedy, often deemed "not fit for the ladies" by contemporary criticism, as if "the ladies were obliged to hear indecencies only from their pens and plays" (189, 191, 188):

> [H]ad the plays I have writ come forth under any man's name, and never known to have been mine; I appeal to all unbiased judges of sense, if they had not said that person had made as many good comedies, as any one man that has writ in our age; but a devil on't the woman damns the poet. (190)

The author poignantly rejects the notion that she should expunge all forms of "scandal" from her plays while, in male-authored texts, those same (supposed) obscenities "are never taken notice of, because a man writ them" (188). After fashioning herself as a male author in the Prologue to *The Rover* (4.37-38), Behn claims in this preface "the privilege for [her] masculine part the poet in [her] … to tread in those successful paths [her] predecessors have so long thrived in," provocatively declaring herself ready to "lay down [her] quill" if she "must not, because [her] sex, have this freedom," for she is "not content to write for a third day [i.e. payment] only" and values "fame as much as if [she] had been born a hero" (191). Behn's dismantling of the gender-biased mechanisms regulating the public reception of women's writings already emerged, in *The Rover,* from the juxtaposition between women's theatrical self-advertisements and men's endeavours to repress them. Despite their markedly different social standing, most female characters similarly resort to performance to emancipate from pre-scripted patriarchal narratives. On the one hand, the Spanish noblewomen and the Neapolitan jilting wench, Lucetta, privilege the crowded streets of Naples to pursue their romantic interests unnoticed or to select the victim to be robbed. On the other, the self-employed Paduan courtesan Angellica Bianca proclaims her inability to love – at least before being seduced by the titular character Willmore – and spectacularly advertises her services by exposing large pictures of herself out of her balcony.

Building on from Heidi Hutner's claim that Behn's comedy collapses the distinction between virginal, virtuous noblewomen and sexually experienced, threatening courtesans (106), in this last chapter I will argue that both categories of female characters exploit the liberating potential of the carnival celebrations to blur the permeable boundary separating them, manipulating the male gaze either by theatrically directing it at them, or else by shielding themselves from it through masquerade, becoming undecipherable texts.[16] I will then suggest that in *The Rover* Behn anticipates potential accusations of plagiarism that will indeed be brought against her adaptation of Thomas Killigrew's closet drama *Thomaso* by multiplying episodes in which male characters exploit the anonymity afforded by their disguises to violently repress female empowerment. Arguably dramatizing Behn's own condition as a female author facing detractors' criticisms, the play repeatedly portrays male characters' endeavours to rein women back into more patriarchally convenient scripts by distorting the notion of consent. In the second part of the chapter, I will therefore contrast Hellena's appropriation of her own and Willmore's bodies with Angellica Bianca's attempt emancipate herself from the role of a discarded mistress by the Rover. Finally, I will examine the repeated episodes of attempted rape undertaken against Florinda, focussing on male characters' effort to rewrite her rape narratives.

4.1 Female Theatricality and the Stage Spatial Metaphor

In his exploration of the carnivalesque in *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin argues that since "carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators," the mere presence of "[f]ootlights would destroy carnival, as the absence of footlights would destroy a theatrical performance" (7). Nonetheless, carnival builds an ephemeral "second world and a second life outside officialdom," exhibiting "a series of unrestrained physical and sensual pleasures in the form of food, sex and laughter" which very

[16] I jointly intend masquerade as the adoption of a carnival mask or disguise and "as the performative production of a sexual ontology, an appearing that makes itself convincing as a 'being'" (Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 64).

much resembles a theatrical experience (Bakhtin 6, Taylor 58). A Restoration performance also relies on the audience's willing suspension of disbelief in favour of the dramatic reality and either offers a dramatization of those pleasures on the stage or provides them in the pit, boxes, and galleries, presumably resounding with the "constant noise from the orange-ladies and prostitutes selling their wares… and a clamor of wits loudly criticizing the play or the actors" (Beach 4). I wish to suggest that the permeability between players and audience in the Restoration theatre invites interpretations of *The Rover*'s carnival setting as a metaphor for the stage. The parallel is further strengthened by the omnipresence of masks and disguise in the play, which mimic the widespread habit whereby "the women in the boxes and the pit" attended performances "wearing masks that covered the whole face" (Maus 609). As Laura J. Rosenthal observes, this practice

> tended to blur the vast social differences between the women onstage and the women in the audience, creating for the elite spectatrix opportunities for identification with the subjectivity of the figure onstage but at the same time vulnerability to forms of aggression from which her status might otherwise insulate her. (203)

Doubtlessly, the synecdochical designation of audience members as *masks* "calls attention to women specifically as spectators by naming them after an accessory that covers the area around their eyes but not the eyes themselves" while shielding "its wearer[s] from too discerning a gaze" (Rosenthal 206-7). In *The Rover*, however, masks also enable female characters to undisturbedly exert their own gaze, transmuting them into independent social actors since, as Jane Spencer suggests, Behn specifically "uses the carnival atmosphere of comedy, which briefly licenses role reversal, to allow her audience glimpses of female power" (100). Venturing out in the public streets of Naples during carnival, just as actresses would tread upon a stage, asserting themselves through their acting skills, Hellena, Florinda, Angellica Bianca and Lucetta take advantage of male characters' inability to read through their disguises to gain temporary freedom from the pre-scripted patriarchal narratives that constrain them. As with Behn's authorial self-fashioning, the female characters also attempt to increase their agency through forms of self-advertisement, assuming the role of author of their own destinies to escape the life trajectories set out for them.

4.1.1 Carnivalesque Self-Advertisement I: Hellena's Masquerade and Florinda's Miniature

While *The Enchanted Island*, which conflated the figures of actress and prostitute through the multiplication of sexual innuendos, *The Rover* ambiguously exploits "the supposed link between women and deceit" to both reinforce and challenge the engrained assumption that "in the Restoration, a courtesan was a mask" and, therefore, "an actor" (Spencer 98). Systematically suggesting that the "women in her play are the better actors in all senses – better at dissembling than the men and more actively shaping the plots of their lives," Behn metatheatrically advertises her comedy by punctuating it with players / playwright-like figures (Spencer 96). From its opening, female-only scene, in which Florinda and Hellena express their frustration with the respective lives that their male guardians scripted for them and envision how to transgressively rewrite them, the comedy celebrates the empowering potential of theatricality, performance, and masquerade. The sisters' conversation in their chamber outlines the limited lifepaths available to Restoration women: the nunnery, where female sexuality is utterly suppressed, arranged marriage, which precludes the choice of one's sexual partner, and prostitution, in which female sexuality is commodified and subordinated to male pleasure (Hutner 106). Hellena, who was "bred in a nunnery," is "designed for a nun" against her will; Florinda, who is in love with the English Colonel Belvile, is either destined to marry "rich old Don Vincentio" or "Don Antonio the viceroy's son" (Behn, *Rov.,* 1.1.1, 29, 15-16). As it transpires from the double recourse to the verb "design," neither of the two women have actively participated in the shaping of their destinies so far. Nevertheless, knowing that "by suspending and / or inverting social hierarchies carnival provide[s] an alternative construction of social relations" and of identity, both are now willing to claim greater authorial agency (Taylor 20).

The choice of an interior setting for Don Pedro's exposition of the pre-forged narratives imposed upon the sisters also betrays patriarchal society's perception of female "[m]obility, whether geographical or social," as disruptive of "the established order … since women were

closely connected with the (immobile) household" (Morris 67). The unattractiveness of spatial confinement is not fortuitously at the heart of Hellena's argument with her brother:

> **Hellena:** … Is't not enough you make a nun of me, but you must cast my sister away too, exposing her to a worse confinement than a religious life?
> **Pedro:** The girl's mad. It is a confinement to be carried into the country, to an ancient villa belonging to the family of the Vincentios these five hundred years, and have no other prospect than that pleasing one of seeing all her own that meets her eyes – a fine air, large fields and gardens, where she may walk and gather flowers! (Behn, *Rov.,* 1.1.90-98)

At first unwilling to acknowledge the alienating implications of exogamy, which he minimizes on the grounds of the financial advantageousness of the match, Don Pedro eventually discloses to Florinda that he also hopes to sabotage her union with Vincentio in favour of his friend Antonio. Conversely, he categorically refuses to rescript his sister's future as a nun and, as Julie Nash remarks, since he "recognizes the potential liberating forces of the carnival [he] attempts to prevent Hellena from participating" (84) by instructing her governess to "lock her up" (Behn, *Rov.,* 1.1.137). Exploiting Callis' "youthful itch of" attending herself "the divertissements of a carnival," the two sisters induce her to grant them permission to join the masquerade (1.1.181, 171). Hellena and Florinda thus successfully circumvent Don Pedro's interdiction, identifying the carnival celebrations as a privileged environment for them to rewrite their pre-scripted life narratives through visual, written, or theatrical self-advertisement.

Hellena's theatrical trajectory, Hutner claims, well illustrates how "masquerade gives young women freedom … to leave the house, to speak their minds, to approach men of their choice" (107). As I have previously suggested, in *All's Well,* Helen's early soliloquies prefigure her creation of adequate make-shift stages to enact her mountebank performances in Paris; similarly, in *The Rover*, the homonymous heroine's self-fashioning as a desirable woman excluded from the marriage market against her will acquires the connotation of a strategic speech announcing her masked or cross-dressed performances in the streets of Naples. Her "self-advertisement" reverses the "commercial character of the blazon" whereby, conventionally, both the seller and the buyer "are male, while the 'passive object' is the woman whose body is

described" (Vickers qtd. in Copeland 22). Evidently dissatisfied with her brother's irrevocable statement that she is "not designed for the conversation of lovers" – the passive construction highlighting once more her lack of participation in the shaping of such a prospect – the noblewoman declares herself "resolved to provide [her]self this carnival, if there be e'er a handsome proper fellow of [her] humour above ground, though [she] ask[s] first" (Behn, *Rov.,* 1.1.88-89, 35-37). Portraying reclusion in a nunnery as particularly unsuitable for her, she composes her first "self-blazon … in the privacy of her home" by accumulating a series of rhetorical questions to which she eventually provides a lapidary reply (Copeland 22):

> Prithee tell me, what dost thou see about me that is unfit for Love? Have not I a world of youth? A humor gay? A beauty passable? A vigour desirable? Well shaped? Clean limbed? Sweet breathed? And sense enough to know how all these ought to be employed to the best advantage? Yes, I do and will. (Behn, *Rov.,* 1.1.40-45)

While advertising her own youth and beauty, Hellena justifies her deviation from her pre-scripted narrative through a rational evaluation of her potential, assuming the role of a clever seller willing to invest in herself, which might be intended as a metatheatrical reference to the daring attitude exhibited by the female author of the play or by the actress playing the role. Just as Shakespeare's Helena wishes to lose "virginity to her own liking" (*AW*, 1.1.149-150), Behn's heroine resolves not "to take an eternal farewell of the world, but to love and to be beloved," determined to choose her own partner: "I don't intend every he that likes me shall have me, but he that I like" (3.1.40-41, 37-38). Offering endless possibilities for self-advertisement and performance in masquerade, carnival becomes the most appropriate environment for the staging of Hellena's subversive script.

The noblewoman realises that "maintaining control over her image allows [her] to maintain control over her body" and, by disguising herself as a gypsy, she successfully "preserves her freedom of movement while avoiding the loss of her private identity" (Bender 39). The first opportunity for self-display offers itself as she catches sight of Belvile's companion Willmore and instantly resolves, "I'll to him, and instead of telling him his fortune, try my own" (Behn, *Rov*.,

1.2.123-124). Hellena's strategic and theatrical hegemony already transpires from her superior knowledge about the Rover, who appears, on the contrary, unable to decipher her:

> **Willmore:** Gipsies, on my life. Sure these will prattle if a man cross their hands. (*Goes to Hellena*) – Dear pretty, and I hope, young devil, will you tell an amorous stranger what luck he's like to have?
> **Hellena:** Have a care how you venture with me, sir, lest I pick your pocket, which will more vex your English humour, than an Italian fortune will please you.
> **Willmore:** How the devil cam'st thou to know my country and humour?
> **Hellena:** The first I guess by a certain forward impudence, which does not displease me at this time; and the loss of your money will vex you, because I hope you have but very little to lose. (1.2.123-135)

Willmore's interpretation of Hellena's body / text remains quite limited, and although he comments on her beauty and young age, he fails to dissociate her gipsy disguise from her identity. This reading deficiency could be explained by contending, as John Franceschina does, that "since the women proceed to behave as courtesans, … in the ontologically ambiguous environment of the carnival, the mask is equivalent to essence" (31). Nevertheless, the noblewoman's theatrical strategy precisely relies on her superiority of knowledge, which allows her to pretend to guess Willmore's origin and finances, or to infer that he would willingly part with his "inconstant English heart" (Behn, *Rov*., 1.2.141). Determined to prove that her qualities can "be employed to the best advantage," Hellena astutely reconfigures the prospect of joining a nunnery into a seductive tool of self-advertisement, confessing that she "could be inclin'd" to love him "but for a foolish vow [she is] going to make – to die a maid" (1.2.150-151). Half rejecting and half yielding to Willmore's advances, the heroine further tests his ardour:

> **Hellena:** If you should prevail with my tender heart – as I begin to fear you will, for you have horrible loving eyes – there will be difficulty in't that you'll hardly undergo for my sake.
> **Willmore:** ... Name the danger; let it be anything but a long siege, and I'll undertake it.
> **Hellena:** Can you storm?
> **Willmore:** Oh, most furiously.
> **Hellena:** What think you of a nunnery wall? For he that wins me must gain that first.
> **Willmore:** A Nun! Oh, how I love thee for't! there's no sinner like a young saint. (1.2.156-168)

Since nunneries are mostly portrayed in *The Rover* as religious institutions that reinforce patriarchal social structures,[17] Hellena's agenda radically differs from Cavendish's Lady Happy: while the former explicitly incites Willmore's intrusion into the monastery, the latter strives to make her secular Convent impenetrable by male attackers. As Willmore becomes increasingly impatient and repeatedly asks her how to find her "lodgings" though, Behn's heroine abandons her flirtatious attitude.[18] Interestingly, Hellena's pun strikingly echoes the words of refusal pronounced by the Lady featured in the tenth playlet of Cavendish's comedy, "he may live, and not lie with me" (*CP,* 3.10, 231): "Why must we be either guilty of fornication or murder if we converse with you men? And is there no difference between leave to love me, and leave to lie with me?" (Behn, *Rov.,* 1.2.189-191). Through this piercing commentary, Hellena defers any further interaction with Willmore until their next encounter. Exploiting the liberating potential of carnival, the noblewoman hinders Don Pedro's design to confine her to her apartments during the celebrations and to a religious life immediately afterwards. As she joins the masquerade, she transmutes the streets of Naples into theatrical environments allowing her to access the marriage market and to advertise herself to her designated partner.

While "Hellena ironically collapses the distinction … between virgin" and courtesan through her sexual forwardness and her disguised appearances (Hutner 106), Florinda also blurs that boundary by scripting her elopement and future married life with Belvile through visual and written forms of self-advertisement typically adopted by other prostitute-like figures in the play. Proving herself a more acute reader and a more inventive author than the English Colonel, she easily detects him among the masked crowd and exploits her gipsy disguise to test his faithfulness and arrange their flight incognito. After approaching him under the pretence of reading his palm,

[17] As opposed to the communities of "galloping nuns" presented in other works, like Behn's *Fair Jilt*, where women have far greater freedom, engage in relations with the opposite sex, and have the opportunity to leave once married.
[18] The recourse to food imagery makes the objectifying, almost predatory subtext arising from the description of Willmore's sexual drive even more threatening: alluding to her virginity, he claims that he "long[s] to come first to the banquet of love," which he would eagerly attend with "a swinging appetite" (1.2.185-186).

teasingly asserting, "by this line you should be a lover," she retains him till he has "confessed whether the passion that [he] vowed Florinda be true or false" and urges him to meet her that very night (Behn, *Rov.,* 1.2.205-210). Before leaving, she also "[*g*]*ives him a letter*" with further directions: "At ten at night – at the garden gate, of which, if I cannot get the key, I will contrive a way over the wall – come attended with a friend or two" (1.2.258-260). By providing these written instructions, Florinda resorts to a form of self-advertisement very much resembling that of the "*women dressed like courtesans, with papers pinned on their breasts, and baskets of flowers in their hands*" offering "Roses for every month" to potential customers (1.2.SD76-80).

Analogously, Ashley Brookner Bender suggests, as the couple meet again in the street, Florinda provides Belvile with a miniature of herself "enclosed in a jewel, resorting to a form of self-advertisement that mimics on a minor scale the pictures hanging on Angellica's balcony: "Behn's use of miniatures as stage properties … criticizes the commodification of women by linking the movement of her props to the movement of the[ir] bodies" (27). By implying that men can "control the movement of female bodies by controlling the movement of miniatures that depict those bodies" (27), however, Bender's reading fails to distinguish between Angellica's picture, which Willmore seizes without her consent, and Florinda's miniature, which she willingly puts into circulation by entrusting it to Belvile. As the second interaction between the two lovers illustrates, the noblewoman exerts full control over her image and, thanks to her costume, she can conceal her identity or reveal it to Belvile at leisure:

> **Florinda:** … I'll tempt him farther. – Believe me, noble stranger, I'm no common Mistress. And for a little proof on't – wear this jewel. Nay, take it, sir, 'tis right, and bills of exchange may sometimes miscarry.
> **Belvile:** Madam, why am I chose out of all mankind to be the object of your bounty? …
> **Florinda:** Sir, from my window I have often seen you, and women of my quality have so few opportunities for love, that we ought to lose none. …
> **Belvile:** You tempt me strangely, madam, every way.
> **Florinda:** So, if I find him false, my whole repose is gone. (*Aside*.)
> **Belvile:** And but for a vow I've made to a very fine Lady, this Goodness had subdued me.
> **Florinda:** (*To* **Belvile)** However, sir, I'll leave this with you – that when I'm gone, you may repent the opportunity you have lost by your modesty. *Gives him the jewel, which is her picture, and exits. He gazes after her*[.] (3.1.204-SD258)

Contriving a deliberately ambiguous script that enables her to speak freely without disclosing her identity, Florinda takes precautions against the Colonel's potential infidelity by exploiting his inability to decipher her body / text. Even when Don Pedro confines her to her lodging, the heroine manages to send Belvile a note, determined to elope with him on that same day. Just as she independently disposes of her image, exhibiting it or concealing at will, Florinda scripts their flight entirely by herself, refusing to delegate any authorial agency to the Colonel.

4.1.2 Carnivalesque Self-Advertisements II: The "Sign of Angellica" and Lucetta's Alcove Bed

As already evoked above, in her analysis of the metonymical relationship between the circulation of Florinda's and Angellica's miniatures and of their bodies, Bender contends that "once a woman makes her picture public, she loses her freedom of movement because she, like her picture, becomes a commodity consumption" (Bender 29). But this statement overlooks the empowering, liberating potential of self-advertisement, establishing an univocal, causal relationship between public display and the punitive consequences of commodification. In fact, Angellica does not lose her autonomy of movement or self-determination because *she* exposes her portrait, letting Willmore gaze on it, but because *he* seizes it, unwilling to accept her unattainability, and then seduces her. Early in the play, though, Angellica subverts gendered power relations through public performance and spectacular self-display, momentarily enjoying complete body ownership, while her economic autonomy as a self-employed courtesan assimilates her to the professional author / actress. Emphasising how "the seventeenth-century ear heard the word *public* in *publication* very distinctly, and hence a woman's publication automatically implied a public woman … trading in her *sexual* property," Catherine Gallagher argues that the "poetess like the prostitute is she who 'stands out,' as the etymology of the word *prostitute* implies, but it is also she who is masked" and, consequently, an actress (69, 68-69). Behn's readiness to "hang out the sign of Angellica" to signal her borrowings from Killigrew's *Thomaso* also inevitably fosters parallels between the author's self-defence and the courtesan's bodily display (*Rov.,* "Postscript," 133.11-12).

However, I share the same perplexity that Jean I. Marsden expresses in *Fatal Desire* towards the recent critical tendency to "align writing for the stage with sexual impurity and to imply that the women writers saw themselves and were seen as somehow tainted" (104). Far from reducing professional writing or acting to denigrating, prostituting practices, the multiplicity of female voices and forms of self-display dramatized in *The Rover* chorally celebrate the author's own self-advertisement as a successful subtraction from patriarchally-contrived narratives.

Such re-evaluation of the playwright's or actress's reputation challenges univocal interpretations of "the commodification of Angellica's sexuality [a]s analogous to the way actresses were commodified" (Nash 78). Indeed, these readings are mostly grounded on the claim that the professional player also "'belongs' to the spectator for a few hours (the duration of the play) in exchange for the spectator's admission fee" (Nash 78); however, most occupations rely on the retribution of workers who accomplish – through their bodies – a particular task during a specific timespan, but this does not automatically foster the parallel with prostitution. Furthermore, Angellica is not characterised as a common prostitute: she ostentatiously exhibits her power to lease her body "out to men at her discretion," thereby subtracting herself from the marriage market (Bender 37). As it transpires from her conversation with Moretta, the courtesan intrudes patriarchal economy as a performer who willingly commodifies her own body: "I'm not displeased with their rallying; their wonder feeds my vanity, and he that wishes but to buy gives me more pride than he that gives my price can make my pleasure" (Behn, *Rov.,* 2.1.123-125). Similarly, as her lady-in-waiting asks her, "what has kept you from that general disease of our sex so long; I mean that of being in love," Angellica declares herself "resolved that nothing but gold shall charm [her] heart" and prepares to "spread [her] nets" for Don Antonio (2.1.137-138, 148). As visually suggested by her sign, Angellica clearly cherishes self-display and meticulously fashions her public persona, seeking the audience's approbation or striking them with wonder at the discovery of her exorbitant price.

Adopting a more explicitly public and visually impactful form of advisement than Florinda's miniature, Angellica has a "*great picture of*" herself hung up "*against the balcony, and two little ones at each side of the door* (*stating her terms*)" (2.1.SD94). While the "paintings are materially and metonymically linked to the painted scenes of a theatre" (Diamond 532), Angellica also employs them as Restoration playbills, which typically listed the "titles of the play and entertainment, … the name and character of every performer for the night" and, occasionally, the ticket price (Marshall and Phillips qtd. in Bellamy 108). Additional spatial metaphors concur to strengthen the parallel, since Angellica enters in her stage-like "*balcony, and draw[s] a silk curtain*," waiting for her audience to take place in the street before singing a "*Song to a lute*" (2.1.SD118, SD166). Eventually, she "*throws open the curtains and bows to Antonio*" to conclude her performance (2.1.SD183). As Dagny Boebel rightly observes, this "'sign' in song, doubtless sung to arouse potential customers, supports the male-constructed narrative, or myth, of the naturalness of rape" by romanticizing Damon's sexual assault against Caelia (63): "the bashful Youth all Transport grew, / And with kind Force he taught the Virgin how / To yield what all his Sighs cou'd never do" (2.1.181-183). Despite its seemingly idyllic, pastoral tone, the oxymoronic phrasing of Damon's recourse to "*kind Force*" foreshadows the theft of Angellica's sign, which occurs just thirty lines later as Willmore, "*having gazed all this while on the picture, pulls down a little one*" (2.1.SD211). Almost echoing the song's poetic voice, which inscribes Caelia's bodily surface with "guilty smiles and blushes dress[ing] her face," the Rover also reads Angellica's picture before stealing it, stating: "[t]his posture's loose and negligent, / The sight on't would beget a warm desire / In souls whom impotence and age have chilled. / This must along with me" (2.1.180, 212-215). Overcoming Angellica's unattainability through theft, Willmore starts reversing their asymmetrical power relation in his favour, preparing to inscribe her body with a convenient patriarchal narrative to satisfy his sexual drives, rewriting her as a discarded mistress.

If Angellica Bianca's recourse to visual self-advertisement eventually reveals itself ro be more objectifying than liberating, Lucetta's theatrical seduction and humiliating treatment of

Blunt constitutes an alternative, successful manipulation of the male gaze that subverts traditional gender power relations. Taking advantage of the same authorial and theatrical superiority displayed by Florinda and Hellena, the Neapolitan prostitute designates the unsophisticated, inexperienced country gentleman as the perfect victim. Nash contends that by "controlling the gaze and initiating the relationship with Blunt, Lucetta has moved into the realm of the active male," thereby accomplishing a transgression of gender roles whose threatening potential is only undermined by its relegation to the farcical subplot of the comedy (83). Ironically, the woman manages to captivate the Englishman's interest only two hundred lines after he has scornfully boasted for his own unconcerned, denigrating attitude towards women with the lovesick Belvile:

> Fred, what the Devil are we made of, that we cannot be thus concerned for a wench? 'Sheartlikins, our Cupids are like the cooks of the camp – they can roast or boil a woman, but they have none of the fine tricks to set 'em off – no hogoes to make the sauce pleasant, and the stomach sharp. (Behn, *Rov.,* 1.2.21-36)

Whilst Blunt's objectifying gaze on women as interchangeable commodities, only meant to satisfy his sexual appetite, transpires from his recourse to culinary imagery, his disinterest in them is merely performative, as Lucetta does not fail to notice. After perusing Blunt's easily decipherable body / text, the prostitute exposes the strategy of seduction that she has scripted to her pimp Sancho:

> **Lucetta:** This is a stranger, I know by his gazing; if he be brisk he'll venture to follow me, and then, if I understand my trade, he's mine. He's English too, and they say that's a sort of good-natured loving people, and have generally so kind an opinion of themselves that a woman with any wit may flatter 'em into any sort of fool she pleases. *She often passes by Blunt and gazes on him; he struts and cocks, and walks and gazes on her*[.]
>
> **Blunt:** 'Tis so, she is taken – I have beauties which my false glass at home did not discover. (1.2.195-202)

The disparity between the length of the characters' replies, as well as the depth of their reciprocal readings, already betray the more penetrative and manipulative quality of Lucetta's gaze, which alone suffices to induce Blunt to adapt his walk, return her look, and assume that "she's a person of quality" (2.1.50). His reading deficiency is further exposed as he denies that a woman "with such clothes, such jewels, such a house, such furniture, and so attended" might be, as his fellow

Englishmen suggest, "some common whore" (2.1.68-70). Failing to recognize those signals as tools of Lucetta's deceitful self-advertisement, Blunt confidently follows her to her house, which will serve as a stage for her seductive performance.

Provocatively fostering contemporary antitheatrical "[c]omplaints about the evil of deception" characterising "women and the theater … alike" (Spencer 95-96), Lucetta transmutes her chamber and alcove bed into a theatre-like environment, where she can strip Blunt "of his clothes / costume, reversing the traditional seduction … in which the woman, as the object of desire, is seduced and abandoned" (Hutner 109). After leaving him alone while she supposedly undresses herself, Lucetta admits Blunt to "*a chamber with an alcove bed*," induces him to "*undress*[] *himself"* and approach "*the bed in his shirt* [*and*] *drawers*" (Behn, *Rov.,* 3.3.SD0, SD6, SD15). She then asks him to "put out the light," and as soon as he does "*the bed descends* (3.3.16-SD18). Blunt barely has time to realise that he has "been round the chamber and can find neither woman, nor bed" before the trapdoor on which he stands "*is let down*" and he falls into a "common sewer" (3.3.23-24, SD27, 49). Since he "knows neither [her] name, nor that of the street where [her] house is," Lucetta will not be persecuted for her trickery and cheerfully passes in review the items of her booty with her gallant (3.3.51-52):

> **Lucetta:** [L]et's see what we have got by this.
> **Philippo:** A rich coat – sword and hat! – These breeches, too are well-lined. – See here, a gold watch! A purse, ha! Gold! At least two hundred pistoles! A bunch of diamond rings, and one with the family arms! A gold box, with a medal of his king, and his lady mother's picture! (3.3.35-40)[19]

The anonymity afforded by carnival allows Lucetta to escape punishment for failing "to do [her] gender right" after subverting gender power relations through self-advertisement (Butler 522). However, Blunt has already shown that he conceives of women as interchangeable bodies and this meticulous catalogue of the pieces of clothing stripped from him arguably prefigures his rancorous design to inflict the same treatment on Florinda and "strip [her] stark naked" (4.5.55).

[19] The passage also echoes Sycorax's line "I shall have all his fine things when I'm a Widow" (*EI*, 3.3.31).

4.2 Competing Textual Appropriations of the Female Body

Answering the allegations of plagiarism that diminishingly labelled *The Rover* as "*Thomaso* altered," in the Postscript Aphra Behn minimises her debt to Thomas Killigrew's closet drama, exhorting her readers to consider the two comedies as independent works:

> That I have stolen some hints from it, may be a proof that I valued it more than to pretend to alter it. Had I had the dexterity of some poets, who are not more expert in stealing than in the art of concealing, … I might have appropriated all to myself; but I, vainly proud of my judgement, hang out the sign of Angellica (the only stolen object) to give notice where a great part of the wit dwelt; … I will only say the plot and business (not to boast on't) is my own; as for the words and characters, I leave the reader to judge and compare 'em with *Thomaso*, to whom I recommend the great entertainment of reading it. (133.6-18)

Although Behn denies having merely altered Killigrew's text, as she vehemently asserts her authorship in terms of plot originality, characterisation, and poetic composition, she also indirectly admits that she did appropriate *Thomaso*, making it her own through an extensive remodelling of its female characters. If the source play primarily features "two kinds of women: angelic women, and courtesans, with the latter class subdivided into good courtesans and bad courtesans," Behn's adaptation collapses such dichotomies through her insistence on the dramatization of female vulnerability (Harbage qtd. in De Ritter 87). According to Umberto Eco, comedy and carnival can "represent paramount examples of law reinforcement [because they] remind us of the existence of the rule" (6). In keeping with this claim, the prominence of the carnivalesque setting in *The Rover* denounces how the anonymity and social levelling afforded by masquerade paradoxically reinforce patriarchal rule by increasing women's cross-class exposure to sexual violence. The play juxtaposes in fact a "feminist concept of carnival that liberates women from the patriarchal system of signification" with "the libertine concept of carnival as another form of patriarchal hierarchy brutally oppressive of female subjectivity" (Quinsey 5). Once deprived of the protection afforded by nobility, all female characters in the play are potentially exposed to a male gaze that attempts to reduce them to interchangeable bodily surfaces, inscribing them with a misogynist rhetoric that denies their agency, distorts the notion of consent, and legitimizes rape.

4.2.1 Hellena Rewriting Willmore Rewriting Angellica

The success of Hellena's theatrical self-advertisement is mostly determined, in the second half of the play, by her growing ability to control her image, alternatively attracting the male gaze by unmasking herself and shielding herself from it through disguise. In Act 3, while denouncing the gender double standards that condemn female desire but celebrate male sexual forwardness, the heroine briefly removes her vizard, allowing Willmore to inscribe her body and praise her beauty as far as he adopts the blazon-like register she already scripted for him:

> **Hellena:** Well, I see our business as well as humours are alike: yours to cozen as many maids as will trust you, and I as many men as have faith. See if I have not as desperate a lying look as you can have for the heart of you. (*Pulls off her vizard: he starts*) How do you like it, captain?
>
> **Willmore:** Like it! By Heaven, I never saw so much beauty! Oh, the charms of those sprightly black eyes! That strangely fair face, full of smiles and dimples! Those soft, round, melting cherry lips and small, even, white teeth! Not to be expressed, but silently adored! (*She replaces her mask*) Oh, one look more, and strike me dumb or I shall repeat nothing else till I'm mad!
> *He seems to court her to pull off her vizard: she refuses*[.] (3.1.181-SD191)

Triggering the Rover's flattering speech by explicitly asking, "How do you like it, captain?" Hellena provides herself with a set of exclamative replies to the rhetorical questions she formulated during her previous self-advertisement. She then immediately "*replaces her mask*," refusing to pull it off as he requests. Further shielding herself from Willmore's gaze, the heroine cross-dresses as a page after over-hearing that he slept with Angellica and resolves that "something [she]'ll do to vex him for this" (4.2.204). Momentarily separating herself from her Spanish kinswomen under the pretence of a visit to the nunnery, "she dresses as a boy, thus attaining the freedom of movement normally associated with men" (Bender 39). The male attire allows her to intrude on Willmore and Angellica's conversation, simultaneously advertising herself again and unveiling his inconstancy to the courtesan:

> **Hellena:** I am related to a lady, madam,
> Young, rich, and nobly born, but has the fate
> To be in love with a young English gentleman.
> Strangely she loves him: at first sight she loved him,
> But did adore him when she heard him speak;
> For he, she said, had charms in every word,

That failed not to surprise, to wound and conquer.
Willmore: (*Aside*) Ha! Egad, I hope this concerns me.
Angellica: 'Tis my false man he means: would he were gone.
This praise will raise his pride, and ruin me. (Behn, *Rov.,* 4.2.231-240)

Angellica easily deciphers the text and immediately grows suspicious, but Willmore interprets Hellena's words literally, looking forward to a new potential conquest. Further proving himself a mediocre reader, ignorant of both the aim and the author of the message, the Rover formulates two equally erroneous hypotheses: "this is some dear Rogue that's in love with me, and this way lets me know it; or if it be not me, she means some one whose place I may supply" (4.2.260-262). Ironically persuaded of the fact that the page does "not know [he is] a stranger to his lady," he urges him to reveal "her name" (4.2.307, 305). Hellena's interference momentarily reduces Willmore to a condition of speechless inferiority and, while the two women respectively accuse him of inconstancy, he remains "silent" as if "guilt ha[d] struck [him] dumb" (4.2.296). Even when he eventually recognizing his "little gipsy," the heroine prevents him from vowing that he "will not marry her" and induces him to acknowledge that he might envision marriage (4.2.323, 361): "If it were possible I should ever be inclined to marry, it should be some kind young sinner; … one that has wit enough to manage an intrigue or love" (4.2.372-375). Shielding herself from the male gaze through disguises that make her unreadable, Hellena provides Willmore with self-scripted bodily inscriptions that liberate her from the patriarchally-contrived narrative that would have secluded her in a nunnery. A diametrically opposed power dynamic characterises instead Willmore's deceitful seduction and rewriting of Angellica as the archetypal discarded mistress.

"Acting on the miniature" that she hung on her balcony, Bender convincingly argues, "Willmore is able to transfer his actions from Angellica's picture to her body," first seducing her through a barter-like rhetoric and then confining her to the role of a seduced and cast-off mistress (28). As he joins her in her chamber and she reproaches him for "pull[ing] down [her] picture," rather than apologizing, the Rover attacks her for the immorality of her trade (Behn, *Rov.,* 2.2.1):

Willmore: Rather, how durst you set it up, to tempt poor amorous mortals with so much excellence? ...

Angellica: I sent for you to ask my pardon, sir, not to aggravate your crime. I thought, I shou'd have seen you at my feet imploring it.

Willmore: You are deceived. I came to rail at you, and talk such truths, too, as shall let you see the vanity of that pride which taught you how to set such a price on sin. (2.2.2-12)

Far from stemming from a genuine disdain for the sinfulness of prostitution, the Rover's attack is merely orchestrated to help him satisfy his lust and bolster his self-esteem. As suggested by the evocative components of his own name, *Will-more* cannot be discouraged by the price that Angellica set for her services and, like "a clever merchant, he wants to get the most from the female goods with as little out of his own pocket as possible" (Hutner 107). He consequently fashions himself as a "merchant[] of love," admitting, "I am studying, madam, how to purchase you, though at the present I am unprovided of money" (Behn, *Rov.,* 2.2.41, 44-45). He then attempts to compensate for his scant financial resources through his persuasive, seductive rhetoric:

Yes, I am poor – but I'm a gentleman,
And one that scorns this baseness which you practise.
Poor as I am, I would not sell myself.
… See here
The only sum I can command on earth;
I know not where to eat when this is gone.
Yet such a slave I am to love and beauty
This last reserve I'll sacrifice to enjoy you.
Nay, do not frown; I know you're to be bought,
And would be bought by me (2.2.49-62)

Unable to detect the deceitfulness of Willmore's text, Angellica eventually admits that, while she "never loved before, though oft a mistress," she does love now, and accordingly adjusts the terms for her body's purchase to suit his finances, deluding herself that he will commit to the conditions of her transaction (2.2.111):

Angellica: The pay I mean is but thy love for mine.
Can you give that?

Willmore: Entirely. Come, let's withdraw where I'll renew my vows – and breathe 'em with such ardour thou shalt not doubt my zeal.

Angellica: Thou hast a power too strong to be resisted. (2.2.149-153)

Angellica's theatrical self-advertisement initially challenged the notion that prostitutes "can never achieve power with a man because a women's only power lies in withholding sex" (Stewart 87).

However, by accepting the Rover's (merely performative) profession of love as a payment, she loses all the power she had previously achieved. Corroborating Ann Marie Stewart's claim that courtesans "are objects of desire and cease to hold a man's interest after being possessed," Willmore very soon proves himself unfaithful (87). Coming to this realisation, Angellica refuses to passively conform to the role of cast-off mistress and attempts to recover her former autonomy in the spectacular pistol scene that marks her last appearance on stage.

After learning of Willmore's inconstancy through Hellena's cross-dressed performance as a page, Angellica resolves to take physical revenge on him: she dresses herself in a masking habit and a vizard for the first time in the play, follows him to Blunt's apartment and threatens him with a pistol to recalibrate their asymmetrical power relation in her favour. As soon as Willmore addresses her, mistaking her for his "pretty gipsy," Angellica "*draws a pistol, and holds* [*it*] *to his breast*," chasing him around the chamber (5.1.198, SD201). Hardly intimidated, the Rover pursues his endeavour to reinscribe her within his own disempowering narrative:

> This old general has quite spoil'd thee. Nothing makes a woman so vain, as being flatter'd; your old lover ever supplies the defects of age, with intolerable dotage, vast charge, and that which you call constancy; and attributing all this to your own merits, you domineer, and throw your favours in's teeth, upbraiding him still with the defects of age, and cuckold him as often as he deceives your expectations. (5.1.264-270)

Reducing Angellica's financial independence and her autonomy from the marriage market to an excess of self-confidence that she developed through her customers' flattery, Willmore undermines both her agency and her merits, inducing her to reconsider her former "security" that "all men were born [her] slaves" as a distorted truth to which *he* holds an "undeceiving glass," reflecting her true image: that of a discarded mistress, of a woman who lost her "richest treasure," her "honour" (5.1.274-280). Since Willmore eventually escapes the ambush unhurt, Derek Hughes contends that the courtesan "lacks the killer instinct … and cannot pull the trigger" (35). But this is not what Behn wrote: Angellica is prevented from firing her shot because Don Antonio "*lays hold on the pistol,*" disarming her, and when he "[*o*]*ffers to shoot him*" in her stead, she contemptuously refuses (Behn, *Rov*., 5.1.SD309, SD322):

But now, to show my utmost of contempt,
I give thee life – which if thou would'st preserve,
Live where my eyes may never see thee more,
Live to undo someone, whose soul may prove
So bravely constant to revenge my love. (5.1.343-347)

Having been already dispossessed of her former agency through Willmore's radical rewriting of her body, Angellica refuses to reclaim her original position of autonomy within the patriarchal economy by letting Don Pedro shoot for her.

4.2.2 Distortions of Florinda's Rape Narratives I: Willmore

Robert A. Erickson contends that the "ideal woman in early modern England was a silent text – fixed, written, layered, [or] covered" (94): indeed, "writers of this period pervasively trope the text as a female body and publication as an exposure and invasion of that body akin to rape" (Catty 1). As Stewart remarks, "[a]ttempted rape tends to occur in Behn's scenes in response to female defiance of male authority" (22); therefore, the comedy's repeated dramatization of women's experience of sexual violence and of male characters' distortions of women's rape narratives might arguably mimic Behn's own exposure to a potentially unfavourable reception of her play and the accusations of plagiarism brought against her. By designating Florinda – the only female character who relatively conforms to the trope of the virtuous, chaste, angelic woman crystallised by patriarchal rhetoric – the comedy emphasises the pervasiveness of male voice in the shaping of female accounts of rape and the gender bias characterising its legal definition. As Anita Pacheco points out, rape laws underwent significant alterations during the Restoration: while "medieval rape law perceived rape as a crime against male-owned property, the legal focus shifted in the late sixteenth century from property to person, … and the crime itself came to be seen not as a property violation but as the ravishment of a woman against her will" (324). However, as the seventh edition of *Roscoe's Digest of the Law of Evidence in Criminal Cases* (1868) well epitomizes, up to the nineteenth century, definitions of rape still betray victim-blaming biases that legitimize and naturalise sexual aggression. For instance, whenever "the man

is led from the conduct of the woman to believe that he is not committing a crime known to the law, the act of connection cannot under any circumstances amount to a rape" (Stephen 853).[20] Willmore, Blunt, and Frederick exploit a similarly manipulative rhetoric to silence Florinda and distort the notion of consent to legitimize rape, violently inscribing her body with sexual availability.

As the opening conversation between the two sisters discloses to the audience, Florinda already experienced a rape attempt during the siege of Pamplona, when Belvile's intervention sufficed to fix her affection upon him; while "identifying rape as an integral component of war and therefore as an expression of male violence and rivalry," her account "strongly implies that not all women are considered deserving of th[e] protection" assured by her rank (Pacheco 326). When her siblings question her about her blushing at the simple mention of the English Colonel, Florinda justifies her inclination out of thankfulness, reminding them that he "nobly treated [her] brother and [her]self, preserving [them] from all insolences" (Behn, *Rov*., 1.1.49-50):

> I'll not deny I value Belvile: when I was expos'd to such dangers as the licens'd lust of common Soldiers threatened … then Belvile, this criminal for my sake, threw himself into all dangers to save my honour, and will you not allow him my esteem? (1.1.70-74)

In Naples, though, Florinda evidently loses the protection assured by her noble origins because, although carnival momentarily blurs class boundaries, it cannot erase gender double standards. While men primarily profit from disguise and, as Belvile himself remarks, whatever extravagances [they] commit in th[o]se faces, [their] own may not be obliged to answer 'em," women do gain freedom of movement by hiding their face behind a vizard, but also rapidly lose it by concealing their social status (2.1.1-3). As the attempted rape scene in the garden well

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[20] The victim's condition is made increasingly vulnerable by the scarce credibility she enjoyed at the trial since,

> if she concealed the injury for any considerable time, after she had an opportunity to complain; if the place, where the fact was supposed to have been committed, was near to inhabitants, or the common recourse or passage of passengers, and she made no outcry when the fact was supposed to be done, where it was probable she might have been heard by others; such circumstances carry a strong presumption that her testimony is false. (Stephen 855)

exemplifies, Florinda's anonymity is read by her rapist as a sign of her interchangeability with women from the lower social classes and, therefore, more sexually available – that is, more easily silenced due to their lack of legal credibility.

As Willmore first catches a glimpse of Florinda, waiting alone for Belvile at the appointed time of the night, he immediately approaches her and, further exhibiting his conception of women as interchangeable, helpless receptacles of his lust, he repeatedly dismisses her rejections, unwilling to accept them, just as he previously refused to accept Angellica's unattainability. Insistently rewriting her refusal as an expression of her unintelligible consent, he seemingly adopts the groundless logic outlined by Slavoj Žižek whereby

> woman is a whore because we never know what she means – for example, she says "No!" to [male] advances, but [men] can never be sure that this "No!" does not really mean a double "Yes!" – an appeal to an even more aggressive approach; in this case, her real desire is the very opposite of her demand. (112)

The Rover clearly embodies the Restoration libertine stance towards rape, which "saw no basic contradiction in saying women 'consented' to violence" and implied, "first, that violence was merely one … technique of seduction and second, that a woman's [assumed] reputation as chaste or unchaste defined others' perceptions of her consent" (Clark 16). As Florinda appears in the "*garden in the night*" wearing "*an undress, with a key and a little box,*" Willmore fails to recognize her as the same person portrayed in Belvile's jewel (Behn, *Rov.,* 3.5.SD0). His recourse to three synonyms to define her gender already betrays the complete interchangeability of female bodies to his eyes: "A female – by this light, a woman! I'm a dog if it be not a very wench!" (3.5.15-16). The Englishman, "who immediately sees sexual availability written all over this woman," urges her to "kiss" him without "play[ing] the fool," intimating her to "lose [no] time, precious time" (Pacheco 327, Behn, *Rov*., 3.5.22, 26-27). Corroborating Žižek's claim about the increase of aggressiveness triggered by each refusal, as Florinda unequivocally rejects him, Willmore's advances grow more threatening:

Florinda: Heavens! What a filthy beast is this?

Willmore: I am so, and thou ought'st the sooner to lie with me for that reason. For look you, child, there will be no sin in't because 'twas neither designed, nor premeditated. 'Tis pure accident on both sides – that's a certain thing now. Indeed, should I make love to you, and you vow fidelity – and swear and lie till you believed and yielded – that were to make it wilful fornication, the crying sin of the nation. Thou art, therefore – as thou art a good Christian – obliged in conscience to deny me nothing. Now – come, be kind without any more idle prating. (3.5.32-41)

The disparity of textual space afforded to their respective replies already hints that Willmore charges himself with the narration of the events, textually erasing Florinda's experience to legitimize rape and thereby "defining [it] as a failure of her eloquence" (Catty 3). Now rejecting the rhetoric of seduction that he formerly exploited to lie with Angellica Bianca as a sinful form of "wilful fornication," he envisions sexual intercourse with Florinda as a non-punishable, "pure accident" which was "neither designed, nor premeditated" and seizes hold of her:

Florinda: Oh, I am ruined! – Wicked man, unhand me.
Willmore: Wicked! Egad, child, a judge, were he young and vigorous, and saw those eyes of thine, would know 'twas they gave the first blow – the first provocation. Come, prithee, let's lose no time, I say. This is a fine, convenient place.
Florinda: Sir, let me go, I conjure you, or I'll call out. (Behn, *Rov*., 3.5.42-47)

Resorting to the stereotypical "troping of female beauty as responsible for rape," Willmore tentatively appropriates Florinda's body, blaming her eyes as the attackers who hurt him first to romanticise his sexual assault (Catty 11). Merely because, in a hypothetical rape trial, the "verdict depends on the judge's being a real man – 'young and vigorous,'" Pacheco contends that this passage of the comedy does not constitute an "attack on the inveterate masculine bias of rape trials, for Willmore's proviso makes it clear that he does not regard the sober judiciary as the inevitable ally of his own swaggering macho values" (331). However, the ubiquity of legal terminology throughout the scene and Willmore's normalisation of rape as the natural consequence of manly youth and vigour do strongly suggest that if the legal system is not his "inevitable ally," it surely constitutes a *potential* accomplice to the distortion of women's rape narratives. The gender-biased nature of rape trials is further suggested by the Rover's mocking incitation to "call witness to see how finely [she] treats [him]" which not only rewrites rape as a

fine treatment, but also transfers the agency of the sexual act onto Florinda, thereby undermining the credibility of her potential testimony (Behn, *Rov.,* 3.5.48).

Despite her refusals, Willmore "continues to read her as open to persuasion and accordingly steps up his efforts with a more flattering seducing strategy" since, in his "eyes, Florinda, defined not by what she says but by her conduct and appearance, cannot be other than consenting" (Pacheco 328-329). Deliberately privileging contextual, arbitrarily interpretable pieces of information over Florinda's straightforward rejection, the Spaniard accuses her of lying as she cries out for help, clearly establishing that "[r]ape is as he – and the discourse of dominance – define it, not as she experiences it" (Boebel 65):

> **Florinda:** I'll cry murder, rape, or anything if you do not instantly let me go!
> **Willmore:** A rape! Come, come, you lie, you baggage, you lie. What, I'll warrant you would fain have the world believe now that you are not so forward as I. No, not you! – Why, at this time of night, was your cobweb door set open, dear spider, but to catch flies? Ha, come – or I shall be damnably angry. Why, what a coil is here.
> **Florinda:** Sir, can you think –
> **Willmore:** That you would do't for nothing? Oh, oh, I find what you would be at. – Look here, here's a pistole for you. (Behn, *Rov.,* 3.5.50-60).

Problematically offering to buy her body for a pistole – the same amount of money he previously offered to Angellica – to circumvent her accusation of rape, Willmore rewrites the scene to prove that Florinda is just "so forward as" he is, offering his interpretation of her behaviour "as proof of a calculatingly predatory intention to entrap men" (Pacheco 332). By designating Florinda as the spider and himself as the fly, Willmore illogically reverses the prey-predator hierarchy, once again shifting the agency and the blame from the persecutor to the victim. But the allusion to the cobweb also inevitably evokes the metaphorization of the female body as "a text in the literal sense of *textus*, as a 'woven fabric,' a web" (Erickson 94-95). This image consequently establishes parallels with a "mythological tradition" epitomized by Philomela and Arachne that often "associates rape with the production [or suppression] of female utterance" and with women's textual / textile reappropriation of rape narratives (Catty 4). While "Philomela saves herself from imprisonment and initiates revenge against Tereus for raping her, despite his removal of her

tongue, by narrating her story in weaving" and "Arachne condemns the gods' rapes of mortal women, again by weaving," Willmore's appropriation of the cobweb metaphor paradoxically dispossesses Florinda of any linguistic resistance (Catty 5). The arbitrariness of the text that he attempts to inscribe onto Florinda's body also powerfully arises, in retrospect, in *The Second Part of the Rover*. Disguised as a future-teller, Willmore resorts again to the cobweb metaphor as he predicts La Nuche's lovesickness and advises her, "[s]trive not, fair Creature, with the Net that holds you, you'll but untangle more" (Behn, *Rov. II,* 3.1.225-226). Rather than constituting a fortuitous inconsistency, the interchangeable attribution of the spider and the fly roles may mimic the rapist's manipulative endeavour to distort the victim's narrative, ceaselessly rewriting it to blame her beauty for his conduct. The rape is again prevented by the intervention of Belvile, who insistently questions Willmore about his conduct soon afterwards; the latter nonchalantly admits that he took Florinda "for an arrant harlot," considering "her as mere a woman as [he] could wish" (Behn, *Rov.,* 3.6.20, 25). The sequence therefore closes by reaffirming that sexual aggression relies upon the rapist's transformation of the victim's body into an interchangeable, inscribable blank surface.

4.2.3 Distortions of Florinda's Rape Narratives II: Englishmen and Spaniards

Most critics agree that Blunt's attempted rape against Florinda – upon the pretext of avenging the humiliating treatment inflicted upon him by Lucetta – stems from the fact that to him "whore and virgin are interchangeable" (Hutner 110). This passage has also been regarded as evidence that "rape, far from being an expression of uncontrollable sexual desire, may be an act of violence to punish, for the crime of being female, whatever woman happens to be in the rapist's clutches" (Boebel 64). The female body thus becomes "the site of punishment and revenge directed not toward one woman, but all women" and since the definition of rape is often "determined not by the act itself, but by the quality of the woman," it only safeguards "women whose class and sexuality make them valuable patriarchal commodities" (Stewart 90, Stewart 86, Pacheco 327).

Except for Boebel's fleeting allusion to "Blunt's verbal attack" of Florinda as a reiteration of "Willmore's physical assault on the sign" of Angellica (61), these readings yet rarely consider the disparity between Blunt's and Florinda's respective narratorial agency over the events, failing to notice how rape and distortion of rape narrative materially converge onto the victim's body.

Blunt's former self-designation as an "impossible tale" and his rancorous admission, as he was creeping "*out of a common sewer*" that "'Fool' was writ upon [his] forehead" already foreshadowed his endeavour to be revenged by physically inscribing the body of the first "she creature" that would cross his path (Behn, *Rov*., 4.5.63, 3.4.SD0, 7, 4.5.25-26).[21] The designated victim is Florinda, who unconsciously ventures into an open door leading to the Englishmen's lodging while seeking (once more) refuge from Willmore. The noblewoman explains to Blunt that she "seek[s] a safety [t]here, and must be ruined if [he] do[es] not grant it," praying him to "pity a harmless virgin that takes [his] house as sanctuary" (4.5.28-29, 39-40). Yet, despite the clarity of her request, he deliberately misreads her text and envisions to rewrite her rape narrative by literally using her body as an engravable surface:

> I will kiss and beat thee all over; kiss and see thee all over; thou shalt lie with me too – not that I care for the enjoyment, but to let thee see I have ta'en deliberated malice to thee, and will be revenged on one whore for the sins of another. I will smile and deceive thee, flatter thee and beat thee, kiss and swear, and lie to thee, embrace thee and rob thee, as she did me, fawn on thee, and strip thee stark naked; then hang thee out at my window by the heels, with a paper of scurvy verses fastened to thy breast in praise of damnable women. (4.5.49-57)

The grammatical opposition between Blunt, who always refers to himself through the subject pronoun "I," and Florinda, whom he always designates through the object pronoun "thee" mirrors his determination to "be revenged on one whore for the sins of another." He therefore prepares to assume the role of an active subject who humiliates his victim by "strip[ping her] stark naked," rather than the humiliated object who passively endures such treatment. Moreover, the widespread

[21] The dramatization of this form of private revenge can be better apprehended by taking into account that, as "public displays of the female body in the late seventeenth-century England become increasingly acceptable, actual instances of public execution of women (and men) drop," as if "post-Restoration dramas [that] replicate, reinforce, and deviate from contemporary punitive practices" provided cathartic compensation for real public executions (Bishai 225).

recourse to polysyndeton initially allows the coexistence of a male, romanticized rape narrative, punctuated by the verbs "kiss," repeated thrice, "smile," "flatter," "embrace," and "fawn," with a female, realistic one, denouncing the aggression through the antithetical verbs "beat," repeated twice, "see," "deceive," "swear," "rob," and "strip." After the semicolon, however, the female narrative is phagocytised by Blunt's threat to "hang [her] out at his window by the heels," as one of Angellica's pictures, "with a paper of scurvy verses fastened to [her] breast" much reminiscent of the "*papers pinned*" on the courtesans' breasts that appeared in the first act of the play (1.2.SD76).

Delaying but not hindering Blunt's revenge on Florinda, Frederick's arrival only triggers a further distortion of the noblewoman's narrative culminating in the even more ominous scenario of a gang rape. As Bender highlights, "Florinda can only escape becoming a prop in the rape scenes when she establishes herself as already the property of another," producing Belvile's ring as a proof of their connection (37). Before this revelation, however, Frederick readily assumes the roles of a "witness" and a perpetrator of Blunt's "dear revenge" (Behn, *Rov.,* 4.570-71):

> **Frederick:** What's this, a person of quality too, who is upon the ramble to supply the defects of some grave impotent husband?
>
> **Blunt:** No, this has another pretence; some very unfortunate accident brought her hither, to save a life pursued by I know not who, or why, and forced to take sanctuary here at Fool's Haven. 'Adsheartlikins, to me of all mankind for protection? Is the ass to be cajoled again, think ye? No, young one, no prayers or tears shall mitigate my rage; therefore prepare for both my pleasures of enjoyment and revenge, for I am resolved to make up my loss here on thy body. I'll take it out in kindness and in beating. (4.5.73-81)

While Frederick echoes the seductive rhetoric exhibited by Willmore's cobweb metaphor, Blunt clearly rejects the veracity of Florinda's narrative, legitimizing and romanticizing rape as his rightful tool to compensate for his "loss … on [her] body" through "kindness and … beating." Claiming exclusive right over the beating though, he intimates to Frederick, "[w]e'll both lie with her, and then let me alone to bang her" (4.5.102-103). Crucially, Florinda only manages to hinder the rape by producing Belvile's ring, thereby forcing her aggressors to reconsider their assumptions about her low social status and sexual availability:

Blunt: Hum – a diamond! Why, 'tis a wonderful virtue now that lies in this ring, a mollifying virtue. 'Adsheartlikins, there's more persuasive rhetoric in't than all her sex can utter.

Frederick: I begin to suspect something; and 'twould anger us vilely to be trussed up for a rape upon a maid of quality, when we only believe we ruffle a harlot. (4.5.121-126)

After repeatedly rejecting the veracity of her utterances, the two Englishmen can only be persuaded to reconsider their design once confronted with the ring's "mollifying virtue" – an obvious allusion to revelation's effect onto the rapists' erected sexual organs – and "more persuasive rhetoric … than all [the female] sex can utter." Frederick's reply once again betrays the increased vulnerability of women from the lower social classes, exposing rape as the result of asymmetrical power dynamics rather than sexual drive. The ring thus becomes a tangible token of Florinda's upper-class status and, eventually, this realisation induces Frederick to retract his position, claiming: "fear nothing, madam; … you are safe whilst in my hands" (4.5.138-139). Almost specularly, while Shakespeare's Helen serves herself of a ring to claim her bodily ownership over Bertram, proving that they had sexual intercourse, Florinda is forced to produce it to escape rape, inscribing herself under Belvile's protection.

However, as Stewart rightly points out, even though Belvile immediately identifies Florinda as the victim locked up his countrymen's chamber, he "does little to hinder the possible gang rape against the woman he claims to love" (93). As Blunt newly attempts to rewrite the events, claiming that he "got into [his] possession a female" who "assaulted [him] [t]here in [his] own lodgings, and had doubtless committed a rape upon [him], had not []his sword defended" him, Frederick intervenes, acknowledging that they would have "ravished her, had she not redeemed herself with a ring" (Behn, *Rov*., 5.1.66-72). Although Belvile recognizes the jewel as "the ring [he] gave Florinda when [they] exchanged [their] vows," he resolves not to "hinder 'em" for fear of discovering their elopement, and merely asks them to give him the key (5.1.73, 89). His request is yet interpreted by the other men as a sign of his willingness to rape her first, which inevitably leads the audience to reconsider his characterisation, contrasting Florinda's idealising

gaze with that of the Colonel's countrymen. Although Blunt's testimony appears hardly trustworthy, his previous recourse to a food / predatory metaphor to portray Belvile's potential readiness to participate in the rape does not seem excessively amiss anymore: "He's a cormorant at whore and bacon; he'd have a limb or two of thee, my virgin pullet. But 'tis no matter; we'll leave him the bones to pick" (4.5.111-114). Disturbingly, Belvile avoids opposing Willmore's proposition to "draw cuts" to decide who will "go first" and prefers instead to silently witness a phallic sword contest won by Florinda's brother. Resigning himself to the fact that "there is no way to bring her off," he does not even object to the paradoxical suggestion that they might let Florinda choose her own rapist (5.1.109-110). The gang rape is only hindered thanks to Valeria's intervention, who contrives a sufficiently believable narrative about Florinda's flight to persuade Don Pedro to go and search for her: "She's fled away in the habit – of one of her pages, sir – but Callis thinks you may retrieve her yet, if you make haste away. She'll tell you, sir, the rest (*Aside*) – if you can find her out" (5.1.130-132). Only at this point, Florinda's identity can be safely disclosed and, crucially, she designates Valeria – not Belvile – as her true "preserver," thereby implicitly denouncing men's collective distortion of women's rape narratives (5.1.138).

But this complicity also apparently extends to criticism: alarmingly overlooking the play's repeated dramatizations of sexual violence, Adam R. Beach contends that "[t]hrough Frederick's charitable interpretations and forgiving impulses Behn models for her audience the proper bemused response to Cavalier blundering," emphasising how wisely Florinda forgives her assailants (6). A close reading of the attempted rape's aftermath yet unequivocally exposes the problematic nature of this claim. On the one hand, Beach seemingly neglects that Frederick's eagerness to take part into the gang rape, if only Florinda's social status had been more doubtful, casts doubt on the genuineness of his apologies and his reading also fails to detect the highly contractual register of Florinda's reply:

> **Frederick:** So, now do I stand like a dog, and have not a syllable to plead my own cause with. By this hand, madam, I was never thoroughly confounded before, nor shall I ever more dare look up with confidence, till you are pleased to pardon me.

> **Florinda:** Sir, I'll be reconciled to you on one condition – that you'll follow the example of your friend in marrying a maid that does not hate you, and whose fortune (I believe) will not be unwelcome to you. (Behn, *Rov.,* 5.1.154-161)

When Frederick undermines his previous conduct as resulting from confusion, Florinda sets as a condition for their reconciliation his union to Valeria – who could in this way also subtract herself from a male-scripted and constraining narrative – and drily describes such arrangement through two successive litotes exposing their marriage as a financial transaction, rather than a sentimental relationship. On the other hand, the mere fact that "Willmore is always sorry after he has been at fault" hardly seems to constitute a sufficient reason to excuse his conduct as a form of "Cavalier blundering" during carnival (Beach 6). Rather than formulating a sincere expression of forgiveness, the noblewoman "heartily forgive[s] [them] all" to ensure her union with Belvile and benefit from his protection (Behn, *Rov*., 5.1.181). Too much aware of her vulnerability, Florinda must comply with a distorted patriarchal narration meant "to whitewash the horrible intentions of Willmore and his friends as a case of mistaken identity" (Thompson 80), unable to safely reappropriate a rape narrative which all male characters jointly contributed to erase.

In conclusion, *The Rover*'s carnival setting connotes Naples' public streets as privileged theatrical environments allowing female characters to manipulate the male gaze and discourse. Alternatively resorting to masquerade and self-advertisement, Hellena, Florinda, Angellica Bianca, and Lucetta (temporarily) emancipate from constraining, pre-scripted patriarchal narratives through performance. Parallelly, male characters' violent endeavours to repress women's theatrical empowerment by distorting their rape narratives mimics male detractors' accusations of plagiarism meant to undermine Behn's professionalism as a female author.

Conclusion

In his *Roscious Anglicanus: Or, An Historical Review of the Stage from 1660 to 1706*, the prompter of the Duke's Company, John Downes, lists Mrs. Davenport, Mrs. Davis and Mrs. Jennings among the actresses who, in 1673, "by force of Love were Erept the Stage" (35). Neatly diminishing their professionalism, Downes seemingly implies that female performers were likely to favour a financially-advantageous romantic liaison over their acting career. The apparent contradiction underlying this claim already transpires, etymologically, from the Latin origin of the verb "erept," *ēripĕre*, in turn derived from *ē* (out) + *rapĕre* (to snatch), the same root from which the verb "to rape" originated (*OED*). Depriving actresses of their theatrical agency by depicting them as snatched from the public stage through a passive construction that evokes sexual aggression, Downes distorts and rewrites female theatricality from a male, commodifying viewpoint, thereby actively contributing to the pervasive association between female acting and prostitution. In this mémoire project I aligned myself with a more recent critical tendency that challenges such assumptions. My analysis of Shakespeare's *All's Well that Ends Well*, Cavendish's *Convent of Pleasure*, Davenant and Dryden's *Tempest, or The Enchanted Island*, and Aphra Behn's *Rover; or, The Banish'd Cavaliers* has shown that the four works use spatial analogies between the plays' settings and the theatrical space in order to dramatize residual patriarchal anxieties surrounding the empowering potential of female theatricality. My thesis has also illustrated how female characters' attempts to use performance to surpass socially-prescribed gender roles is ceaselessly hindered by male characters who wish to inscribe them with(in) convenient patriarchal narratives.

By systematically intertwining female theatricality and sexuality, the four comedies expose patriarchal responses to the empowering potential of performance for women, as well as male endeavours to contain it, both temporally and geographically, within theatre-like settings outside of which women's ephemeral theatrical self-assertion is inevitably repressed. The impact

of the female protagonists' subversion of traditional gender roles and expectations of femininity is often undermined by their confinement to isolated, utopian, or circumscribed environments, such as Helen's make-shift stages, Lady Happy's Convent, Prospero's Island, and Naples at carnival time. In *All's Well*, Helen's theatrical wandering connotes her as an itinerant player touring across France and Italy, performing on multiple make-shift stages to retrieve her recalcitrant husband. This arguably mimics the exclusion of professional actresses from the commercial theatre throughout the Renaissance. Emancipating from the repressive theatrical environment of the Court of Roussillon, Helen first travels to Paris, where she enchants the Royal Courts with a spectacular display of her healing powers, and then subverts traditional gendered power relations by gaining the privilege to choose her own husband. As Bertram rejects her, she stages her death and secretly pursues him to Tuscany, transmuting Florence's piazzas and streets into new make-shift stages where she arranges and enacts a bed-trick to win him back.

In Cavendish's closet drama, composed during the theatre ban of 1642-1659, Lady Happy's foundation of an all-female separatist community within a utopian, theatre-like, secular Convent devoted to the pursuit of sensual delights arguably symbolizes the freedom of composition – but also the circumscribed empowering potential – of closet drama. Analogously, the Convent ladies' private theatricals dramatize traumatic experiences arising from marital unhappiness, but their confinement to the Convent inevitably reduces their impact on reality, just as the subversive views Cavendish expressed in closet drama never appeared on the public stage.

In the *Enchanted Island,* written and staged after the advent of the professional actress, Prospero's Island repeatedly acquires the connotation of a metaphorical Restoration stage, enhancing the permeable boundaries separating performers from characters to foster the association between acting and prostitution. Capitalizing on the actresses' presumed sexual availability on and off the stage, the Restoration *Tempest* invites the audience to laugh at the exacerbated naivety displayed by Miranda and Dorinda, while Hippolito's breeches role dissuades

them from envisioning that a female player might credibly perform a male role, relegating female empowerment to the onstage fiction, but erasing it from the offstage reality.

In Behn's play, first staged in 1677, both noblewomen and prostitutes interchangeably use Naples' streets at carnival time as privileged theatrical environments to manipulate the male gaze by advertising themselves or to subtract themselves from it by wearing a mask. Offering a prime illustration of the empowering and yet commodifying nature of professional acting, Hellena and Florinda, as well as Angellica Bianca and Lucetta, rewrite their pre-scripted life paths by taking advantage of their theatrical superiority and of male characters' deficient reading skills. As the Postscript to the comedy suggests, the coexistence of these multiple female voices taking (or losing) control over their own narratives also celebrates the author's self-advertisement as a successful emancipation from male-contrived narratives.

Establishing an analogy between commodified, interchangeable female bodies subjected to the male gaze and the blank, inscribable surface of a page, the four plays figuratively and sometimes literally transmute the female characters / bodies on stage into texts whose authorship and (re)appropriation become a source of dispute between competing male normative discourse and female subversive voices. In Shakespeare's comedy, Helen exploits her theatrical superiority over Paroles and Bertram to reshape her social role as a woman, reclaiming both ownership of her body and her right to occupy the position of a desiring subject; tirelessly altering a disappointing reality through her dramaturgical inventiveness, she subverts the dominant misogynist discourse that connoted her as a mere sexual object or as a loathed social impostor, forcibly reinterpreting Bertram's rejection as a list of fulfillable conditions and eventually reduces him to the role of the loving husband that she had scripted for him.

In *The Convent of Pleasure*, the Prince(ss)'s cross-dressed intrusion within Lady Happy's community and her participation in the Ladies' theatricals triggers the protagonist's gradual reduction to the role of a voiceless, submissive wife complying with the marriage institution. While these competing forms of male and female authorship momentarily coexist, the Prince(ss)'s

eventual reassertion of his male rule reduces the heroine to silence, as reflected by the textual alternation between Margaret's sections of the play and those written by William Cavendish.

In the Restoration *Tempest*, Prospero's and Trincalo's attempts to appropriate and rewrite the female characters / bodies on stage to suit their own political agendas mimics Davenant and Dryden's own textual appropriation of the Shakespearean source, which they extensively reshape to adapt it to the contemporary audiences' tastes. Prospero successfully recovers his lost Dukedom by linguistically constructing Hippolito's, Miranda's, and Dorinda's bodies according to his essentialist, dichotomic conception of gender; Trincalo, on the contrary, fails to gain political control over the island by marrying Sycorax, who subtracts herself from the Eurocentric, socially constructed notions of femininity that he attempts to impose on her.

Finally, mimicking the accusations of plagiarism moved against her, Behn dramatizes in *The Rover* patriarchal society's collective endeavour to violently repress women's theatrical empowerment by portraying Englishmen and Spaniards exploiting the anonymity afforded by carnival disguise to reduce female characters into interchangeable, inscribable bodily surfaces, appropriating their narratives by denying their agency, reading them as prostitutes, distorting the notion of consent, and thereby attempting to legitimize rape.

I would like to conclude by quoting in full the epilogue spoken by the King's Company on 8 December 1660, as they took their farewell from the audience of Killigrew's production of *The Moor of Venice*:

> And how d'ye like her, come what is't ye drive at,
> She's the same thing in publick as in private;
> As far from being what you call a Whore,
> As Desdemona injur'd by the Moor?
> Then *he* that censures her in such a case
> Hath a soul blacker than Othello's face:
> But *Ladies* what think you, for if you tax
> Her freedom with dishonour to your Sex,
> She means to act no more, and this shall be
> No other Play but her own Tragedy;
> She will submit to none but your commands,
> And take Commission onely from your hands. (Jordan qtd. in Danchin 56, emphasis added)

Anticipating prejudiced, denigrating accusations against the actress's morality and respectability, these final lines deconstruct simplistic assumptions about the permeability between character and performer. Contending that if the actress truly was "the same thing in publick as in private," then she would be, alternatively, as immoral as the wicked villainess or as virtuous as the helpless heroine that she impersonates, Jordan's prologue challenges the male audience members not to look with "a soul blacker than Othello's face" onto the actress who, just as Desdemona, is only transmuted into "a Whore" by the manipulative gaze exerted "by the Moor." Parallelly, it exhorts the "Ladies" to cheeringly applaud the empowering potential of female theatricality, so that actresses will not be, by force of criticism, *erept* the stage.

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