CAVENDISH IN THE CLOISTER:
REPAIRING AND REPURPOSING FEMALE MONASTIC EXPERIENCE IN THE
CONVENT OF PLEASURE

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ABSTRACT

Seventeenth-century English writers produced a number of texts that featured nuns and convents. However, in a country that had been unwaveringly Protestant since 1558, why the preoccupation with a female figure that belonged to a religion long established as part of England’s past? In this thesis, I attempt to answer this question by examining one of the most intriguing and novel representations of the convent: Margaret Cavendish’s 1668 play The Convent of Pleasure. Previous writers in the period created sensational fabrications regarding the sexual and material excesses of nuns, and often with an eye to denigrating Catholic women and the church as a whole. Cavendish instead offered a secular convent that inverted many of these claims, turning nuns’ supposed indulgences into celebratory means of enriching women’s lives.

The central aim of this thesis is to contribute a comprehensive examination of the many elements that influenced both Cavendish and this play. The thesis is thus divided into two parts, based upon what I see as the two most prominent contexts that influenced The Convent of Pleasure: anti-Catholic literary culture and post-Reformation English convent culture. In the first chapter, I examine the nun in the context of three antipapal writers: pamphleteers Thomas Robinson and Thomas Goad, and the poet Andrew Marvell. I argue that Cavendish’s play at once inverts and emerges from this literary tradition, themes in her play illustrating her
familiarity with the accusations and claims found in these anticlerical sources. In the second chapter, I examine the religious, social and political crossroads Cavendish found herself in, and how these experiences came to directly shape the composition of this unique play. I also look to the influences of her positions as a Royalist, courtier, and exile on the continent after the English Civil War; her Catholic sympathies; and the newly-discovered relationship she shared with an English nun of the Antwerp Carmel.
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Margaret Cavendish’s *The Convent of Pleasure*, while not the first literary work to depict an all-female utopia in literary history, is notable for its use of the Catholic convent as its model. By the time *The Convent of Pleasure* is printed in 1668, Cavendish had already published *Bell in Campo* and the *All-Female Academy* in 1662. In the first, Cavendish imagines a female government, and in the latter, a university solely for women, illustrating a personal preoccupation with what all-female communities might consist of and offer. Interests in examining and rethinking society and women’s positions were of interest to other female authors as well. For example, Christine de Pizan wrote *The City of Ladies* in the middle ages, and more contemporaneously with Cavendish, Lady Mary Wroth composed *Urania* (1621) (Malcolmson, 15). In Cavendish’s *Convent of Pleasure*, however, she pulls from and modifies a female community that already exists, and uses it as a means to explore what roles women are capable of playing, and what ways women might make their lives better. As a Protestant woman, however, her choice to explore these possibilities using a Catholic model is what in part makes her play so rich.

That Cavendish chooses to revise and acknowledge this institution is interesting given England’s convoluted and difficult past with Catholicism—and the way this history comes to influence depictions and conceptions of convent culture and Catholicism in England. In 1536, Henry VIII first severed England’s ties with the Roman Catholic faith when the pope refused to grant his divorce. Nevertheless, England before the Reformation was a place where Catholicism was flourishing while some other European countries were converting to Protestant religions. Christopher Haigh outlines the unlikelihood of Reformation in England, asserting that “one thing
seemed clear about England in 1529: it was not going to have a Reformation” (135). Haigh notes that the early sixteenth century was a markedly devout period of time: “sales of Catholic religious books were booming, and high levels of gifts and benefactions to religious causes suggested that laypeople were content with the religion on offer” (135). Furthermore, “churches were crammed with votive altars and images of saints, and decorated with stained glass and paintings, funded voluntarily by parishioners…[priests] were generally well behaved and hard-working” (135). Thus, the shift from an all-Catholic to all-Protestant country was a rocky and tenuous process. Henry VIII’s Dissolution of the Monasteries begins in 1536 and continues until about 1541. During this period, Catholic churches and cathedrals were converted to Protestant houses of worship, relics and Catholic iconography were removed and destroyed, and many monasteries (male and female) were given or sold to upper class men and converted to private homes. In fact, Cavendish’s childhood home, St. John’s Abbey, and William Cavendish’s Welbeck Abbey are products of the dissolution. As for the men and women religious who occupied these spaces, clergymen had the option to become Protestant preachers and some were pensioned by the government. Nuns had fewer options in the new religion, and Protestantism in England did not recognize the virtues of monastic life. Turned out of their homes, English nuns could thus return to their families, hope to join preexisting convents on the continent, or leave England to establish their own religious houses (Evangelisti 34-8).

While Henry VIII’s shift to Protestantism would ultimately succeed, it was not without complications. Firstly, there were many divergent forms of Protestantism rather than one perfectly unifying religion (though in this paper I will use the term to indicate non-Catholic Christian religions generally). Furthermore, despite the Reformation, many remained true to the Catholic faith, including Mary I. When she became queen in 1553, she reinstated Catholicism,
persecuted and executed Protestants, and invited many priests, nuns and monks back into their former homes. Nevertheless, hers was a short reign and when Elizabeth I succeeded in 1558, Catholicism once again became criminal and monastic life was outlawed. To enforce the recognition of England’s Protestant faith, Elizabeth passed the Act of Uniformity. Under this legislation, and for the entirety of her reign (until 1603), men and women were legally required to attend Protestant church services or to pay a fine. It became punishable by death to be or harbor a priest, and many Catholic recusant women continued to practice Catholicism in their homes and teach it to their children and servants (Walker 59). Despite a strong underground Catholic recusant culture, it was during Elizabeth’s reign that Protestantism finally took hold. Duffy writes that because she ruled for nearly fifty years, Protestantism as the national religion lasted long enough to efface a great deal of the Catholic sentiment that remained throughout Henry VIII’s and Mary I’s rule: “whatever the instincts and nostalgia of their seniors, a generation was growing up which had known nothing else, which believed the Pope to be Antichrist, the Mass a mummery, which did not look back to the Catholic past as their own, but another country, another world” (593).

By the time Cavendish is born in 1623, England had been unwaveringly Protestant for over sixty years, and nuns and their convents were certainly part of that other “country” and other “world”—though this world was soon to grow closer. When James I takes the throne in 1603, he maintains Protestantism; however, his son Charles I marries a Catholic Frenchwoman, Henrietta Maria, who essentially re-introduces Catholicism to England. Flying in the face of decades of criminalized Catholicism, she openly practiced her religion and invited Londoners and well as her court to join mass. Frances Dolan points out that her flagrant observance of Catholicism brought about great anxiety among many English men and women who neither
desired to be Catholic nor face yet another religious upheaval ("Gender and ‘Lost’ Spaces” 106). While anti-Catholic polemic had been printed for decades in England, Charles I’s marriage arrangements in the 1620s and Henrietta Maria’s influential Catholic reign ushered in several new publications, including Thomas Robinson’s *The Anatomie of the English Nvnnery at Lisbon* (1622) and Thomas Goad’s *The Friers Chronicle* (1623). Later after the English Civil War erupts and Charles I is executed, Andrew Marvell composes “Upon Appleton House” (~1651) for a Prominent Parliamentarian commander Thomas Fairfax, who fought successfully against Charles I and his Royalist supporters. This thesis looks to these accounts as they are reflective of a range of various antipapal writing trends: Marvell writes his critique in the form of a poem for a private patron; Robinson’s popular publication notably focuses the majority of its vitriol on nuns; and Goad’s pamphlet, with homage to Robinson, reflects the more common practice of anticlerical writing that attacks members of the church generally. Together, these texts demonstrate a common theme beyond simple reproach of Catholicism: they each make pointed efforts to denigrate *female* Catholics, and most especially nuns.

In accounts such as these, the seventeenth-century English image of the nun is not a woman exiled from her home, observing vows of poverty, chastity and obedience; rather, she is a means of lambasting Catholic women generally, and is a member of a witless community that engages in sexually deviant acts and indulges in material and sensual excess. Though existing in the literary creations of these male writers, most all of nuns had been out of England for as long as Catholicism had, over twenty English convents in exile being established between the dissolution and the eighteenth century (*Who Were the Nuns?*). The nun thus becomes a figure of eroticized otherness, sexual and sensual even in her supposed chastity. The choice to denigrate Catholic women in the figure of the nun pairs well Henrietta Maria’s own female embodiment of
the Catholic faith. Frances Dolan argues that feminocentric Catholic devotion to the Virgin Mary itself was “proof of the excessive power Catholics were willing to invest in women, [and] served as a starting point for attacks on actual Catholic women, such as Henrietta Maria; it also informed Protestant, mainstream assumptions about and responses to Catholic women” (Whores 106). The perceived feminine nature of Catholicism dovetailed well with the emergence of a feminocentric court culture that surrounded Henrietta Maria: “the queen’s artistic patronage, penchant for performance, wifely influence, and Catholic piety all conjoined to elevate the image of woman in the Caroline Court” (Whores 121). Margaret Cavendish herself gets close to this Catholic world, aligning with Royalists whose numbers are also made up of numerous Catholics as well as Protestants; joining Henrietta Maria’s court as a maid-of-honor in Oxford and in exile; and finally living in Catholic Antwerp for over a decade among other exiled Royalists and observant Catholics.

In this thesis, I aim to establish that these experiences directly shape Cavendish’s The Convent of Pleasure, and more importantly that Cavendish draws her inspiration from both Protestant anti-Catholic literary culture as well as real convent culture. I aim to make an intervention by taking up Nicky Hallet’s challenge in her 2013 publication The Senses in Religious Communities, wherein she notes that no scholar “has explored the ‘reality’ of Antwerp convent life,” criticizing many scholars for relying on “fictional representations of convents” to elucidate Cavendish’s own representation (13). To date, the only scholars to have explored this reality in depth are J.P. Vander Motten and Katrien Daemen-de Gelder in their 2014 article “Margaret Cavendish, the Antwerp Carmel and The Convent of Pleasure.” While producing an impeccably researched piece, they fall into the same trap that previous scholars have: while previous Cavendish scholars have failed to recognize Cavendish’s participation in convent life in
favor of literary representations, Vander Motten and Daemen-de Gelder overall neglect to consider the effects of literary culture on Cavendish in their study. My aim in this thesis is to provide a comprehensive exploration of each.

I argue that both Catholic convent culture and anti-Catholic literary culture clearly shape The Convent of Pleasure. Cavendish’s writing illustrates a particularly familiar and insightful treatment of convent life, one that seems far more aware of its material, financial and ritualistic realities than what Marvell and pamphleteers Goad and Robinson offer. Nonetheless, she borrows from literary culture and its influence on English Protestant thought about nuns and their cloisters. In Chapter I, I explore how Cavendish inverts many of their accusations about the sexual depravity, moral dearth, and material and epicurean excess inherent in Catholic monastic life—and in doing so inserts herself into this literary tradition of imagined religious living spaces. However, Cavendish instead treats the convent with a sense of possibility rather than condemnation. The very things polemicists accuse nuns of participating in are what Cavendish deems as part and parcel of ultimate female happiness in an all-female gendered community, questioning what is so inherently wrong in indulging in whatever pleasures one’s life can offer.

In Chapter II, I explore Cavendish’s personal ties to Catholicism and first-hand experience with convent culture, an English Carmelite convent just across the wall from her home in Antwerp. In doing so, I challenge Erin Lang Bonin’s assertion that the nunnery is “a space historically and geographically distant from Cavendish and her contemporaries” (347). While distant from her polemical predecessors perhaps, not so from Cavendish. In this chapter, I look to her life and the influence of Catholic culture, at times looking to historical facts and at others speculating when the record is unclear.
Cavendish, in marrying her influences from Catholic culture and Protestant literary culture, repairs, repurposes and reinvents the convent for secular women. In her play, Lady Happy, a wealthy single woman has just inherited her father’s fortune. With it, she decides to avoid marriage altogether, professing that “Marriage to those that are Virtuous is a greater restraint then a Monastery” (218). With her wealth, she converts her home to a convent (inverting the Dissolution practice), and to the dismay of many hopeful suitors, is joined by numerous wealthy women. In this convent, Lady Happy gives a lengthy speech, informing the sisters of her convent that they will worship “nature,” not the gods, and that they will indulge in every material and sensual whim they desire as only they can in a world without men, who are “the only troublers of women” (219, 224-5, 220). Her convent gains fame, and with it a Princess joins the convent and she and Lady Happy fall in love, albeit a “disgrace” (239). After a series of plays-within-plays performed by all the ladies, the Princess reveals herself to in fact be a prince, and demands marriage to Lady Happy. If she does not comply, he threatens he will take her “by force of Arms” (244). Like the nun Isabella in Shakespeare’s Measure for Measure, Lady Happy is silent upon a powerful man’s demand for marriage (5.1.562-65). At the close of the play, we come to learn in the final scene that Lady Happy does comply, and her beloved convent’s fate is ambiguous. Thus, in the text Cavendish plays upon the enclosure, theatricality and female community inherent in convent life, paying homage to its model. Nonetheless, she removes religion and restraint, and as will be discussed in the first chapter, inverts the material and sexual criticisms of convent life and uses them to elevate women and the notion of (aristocratic) female community.

Ultimately, Cavendish’s convent pays homage to its Catholic model. Cavendish’s changes and revisions to it nonetheless do little to degrade convent life or Catholic tradition. In
the end, the secular convent of *The Convent of Pleasure* demonstrates new possibilities for female community and convent life itself.
Chapter I

Cavendish in Conversation:

Catholicism and Polemic in Early Modern England

“It might seem we have two parallel lines of development here, one in which English women who wish to become nuns are exiled to the Continent, thus isolated, marginalized and invisible; and another in which the figure of the nun, divorced from any grounding in experience with real nuns, looms ever larger as fiction and fantasy.” (“Why are Nuns Funny?” 510)

Tensions regarding Catholicism remained high throughout seventeenth-century Protestant England, resulting in a number of anti-Catholic writings. When James VI of Scotland became James I of England in 1603, many English feared the return of Catholicism and the political and social upheaval it would entail (finding historical precedent in the persecution of Protestants last encountered when “Bloody” Mary I reinstated Catholicism during her short reign). It remained criminal to be openly Catholic, and while James I maintained Protestant England, he and Queen Anne nonetheless arranged potential marriages between their son and heir apparent, Prince Charles, and two prominent Catholic women. Each of these arrangements came to a head during the 1620s and around the time Margaret Cavendish was born: first were arrangements made with the Infanta Maria Anna of Spain, and later, Henrietta Maria of France. The first arrangement fell through, the “Spanish Match” causing great controversy, while the second successfully resulted in marriage in 1625 (though itself not without contention). With marriage to Henrietta Maria came a promise from the Stuarts that she could legally bring her priests and openly practice Catholicism in England. After the marriage, she had two chapels built in St. James and Somerset House. In these chapels not only her French court, but Londoners generally could attend mass, almost flouting the harsh and often deadly penalties faced by many Catholics for practicing
(“Gender and ‘Lost’ Spaces” 648). The fear and subsequent reality of such a strong Catholic presence in the royal court (and bedchamber) realized the fears of many that England could become a Catholic country again; fears which contributed in large part to England’s impending civil war under Charles I in 1642.

One can look to the Stationer’s Register to see examples of the Catholic anxieties felt by many Englishmen and Englishwomen. The marital turmoil the Stuart court produced in the 1620s prompted several anti-Catholic polemics including Thomas Robinson’s *The Anatomie* and Thomas Goad’s *The Friers Chronicle*. These texts are examples from a long history of anti-clerical publications and writings, Goad and Robinson each contributing to and continuing this anti-clerical text culture across various mediums. The representation of Catholic religious as senselessly obedient, sexually deviant, materially indulgent and morally corrupt did not die after the 1620s, and in fact, Robinson’s text remained particularly popular throughout the century.¹ Later, in the midst of the Civil War emerges Andrew Marvell’s country house poem “Upon Appleton House,” which while not printed until 1681, reflects (and builds upon) several of the claims and aspersions Robinson and Goad make.

Beyond a shared intolerance for Catholicism, what unites these anti-clerical tracts, and what interests Cavendish as *The Convent of Pleasure* illustrates, is the way each prominently features female religious as a titillating means to disparage the church, portraying convents as dens of iniquity rather than as spaces of community and worship. These texts’ claims about convent life are somewhat dubious, as will be explored later. While many scholars recognize contemporary Protestant fears and anxieties towards Catholicism in their studies of *The Convent of Pleasure*, none to my knowledge other than Jenna Lay in her very recent book *Beyond the Cloister: Catholic Englishwomen and Early Modern Literary Culture* (2016) have examined
Cavendish’s work closely alongside anti-Catholic pamphleteers and writers that depict convent life.² In this chapter, I aim to go further, however. I make the argument that Cavendish’s The Convent of Pleasure inserts itself into this same literary tradition, one which I argue is based not only on genuine anxieties, but on entertainment, profit and titillation—imagined accounts potentially at the expense of truth regarding the ways nuns conducted their lives. I argue The Convent of Pleasure is in fact both a reflection and refutation of the notions about nuns represented in these texts. While impossible to establish concretely that Cavendish had read these specific anticlerical pieces, I will examine her play with an eye to establishing her familiarity at the very least with the common themes they represent. The play inverts condemnations of nuns’ (supposed) indulgence in material excess, fine food and sex, and offers a reparative argument that such practices can in fact be means of ultimately uplifting women’s lives in an all-female, secular convent.

The Fantasy, Actuality and Appeal of Propagandist Texts

I argue Cavendish’s convent is ultimately based on what is presented in anti-Catholic texts as well as her own real experiences with the Antwerp Carmelites; however I also want to establish that the texts influencing anti-Catholic thought are imagined and fantastic themselves, further cementing Cavendish’s emergence from this literary tradition and providing a means for her reparative interpretation. With the number of Catholic and Protestant texts emerging across centuries that portray eroticism and excess in the convent, one may ask the question of whether we can regard these seventeenth-century accounts as accurate. I argue that while there is likely truth to monastic lives full of excess, wantonness and hypocrisy, it is not necessarily true of all (or many) Catholic convents or all nuns within them. Nonetheless, the scandalous elements of
materiality, excess and sexuality in these texts are inverted, _not denied_, in Cavendish’s play. The antipapal texts are sensational—and sensation and sexuality sell, justifying their embellishment to authors attempting to gain fame or profit alongside maligning female monastics. Cavendish herself ultimately wants a popular play and notability, and even with her direct experience with the austere life of Antwerp Carmelites, as will be further explored in Chapter 2, she maintains much of what it scurrilous in these accounts: indulgence in fine food, materials, and sensual pleasures (_A True Relation_ 62). As this section will establish, _The Convent of Pleasure_ follows suit in that the tradition it emerges from is in large part itself fantastic and designed to appeal to audiences’ prurient and sensual natures.

To illustrate the basis on which themes emerge in both _The Convent of Pleasure_ and anticlerical texts, I look to their capitalization on fantasies of nuns’ tainted sexual history, of which one certainly existed both in fact and in fiction, and both heterosexually and homosexually. When I use the term “fantasy” or “fantastic,” I at once want to use it to suggest imagination, idealization, and dubious veracity, but also to connote the sexuality in almost all seventeenth-century accounts of cloisters. While heavily emphasized in antipapal English works, the eroticization of the nun and her cloister was not new to the seventeenth century. In Boccaccio’s _Decameron_ (1353), the first story of day three and the second story of day nine describe abbesses and nuns engaging in comical sexual relations with secular men and priests; in Erasmus’ “A Maid Hating Marriage” (1523), a suitor encourages his beloved not enter the convent for fear that monks may defile her (230); and in Richard Layton’s letter to Henry VIII (1535), he recounts that the bishop of the prominent Syon Abbey persuades a nun to perform sexual acts (“meddle”) with him during confession (225). Most notably, the church itself recognized potential for same-sex sexual encounters, and in 1212 at the Council of Paris barred
nuns from sleeping together and required lanterns to be left on all night. (Sierra 660, Traub 64). St. Augustine even warned his own sister not to love the nuns in her convent carnally (Sierra 660). Several examples are taken from Catholic authors: Boccaccio, like our writers, uses the nun to create entertainment, and the church itself attempts to remedy illicit sexuality while Erasmus and Augustine recognize it. As Layton’s letter foreshadows, what is notable about this trajectory of sexual convent accounts is that by the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the same tradition that was once entertainment and critique from writers belonging to the church becomes a means of denigrating and upbraiding the Catholic church from without. In fact, during the same period the terms “nun” and “nunnery” become synonymous with prostitutes and brothels, respectively (OED).

While based in historical precedent (at least sexually), I argue that Goad’s, Robinson’s, and Marvell’s accounts ultimately remain fabrications, pulling from these earlier available sources while also crafting their own distinctive tales. With particular attention to facts presented by Marvell and Goad, there is little to support the accounts presented in these texts. As mentioned in the introduction, these accounts as well as Robinson’s seem to appear all too strategically to denounce Catholics during both Charles I’s marital arrangements to Catholic women and the Civil War—each necessitating backlash for detractors to increase anti-Catholic and anti-Royalist (given their support of the Catholic queen) sentiment in whatever ways available. Andrew Marvell’s recounting of Isabel Thwaites’ seduction, cloistering, and rescue by Lord Fairfax in “Upon Appleton House” cannot be supported by any other documentation (Wilcher 150). Furthermore, Marvell writes the poem for his employer, a prominent Parliamentarian commander (and the same who sacked Margaret Cavendish’s childhood home, St. John’s Abbey, leading to her brother Charles’ execution for treason), who certainly would
have had few Catholic sympathies as English monasteries sided with Royalist exiles who favored reinstating England’s Catholic queen (“Crumbs” 636). The timing in the poem is also misleading—Fairfax and Thwaites were married nearly two decades before the Cistercian abbey at Nun Appleton was dissolved in 1539 (Lay 143). Regarding Goad, *The Frier’s Chronicle* consists of a fantastically vile and damning litany of stories from anonymous sources. It ultimately reads as little more than titillating hearsay from across Europe rather than as a description of well-researched incidents. These authors, including Robinson, are all Englishmen, and thus not former nuns or novices, further limiting their insights as even Robinson would not have had as direct an understanding of nuns’ lives given their strict claustration.

However, Thomas Robinson’s claim to have worked as a clerk in the Bridgettine house in Lisbon does trouble the argument I make that these accounts are fabricated. Robinson is thus the most reliable “true account” writer I will explore; however, his motives are also questionable as he worked for Catholics but did not appear to be one before entering the monastery (he was rather enticed by a priest’s “subtill and wily fetches”) (1). Interestingly, the sisters of the same abbey discussed in *The Anatomie* wrote a letter to the Infanta Maria, entreatning her to pursue and follow through with a marriage between herself and Charles I as a way of furthering the Catholic cause and releasing English Catholics from exile (de Hamel 24). Given this information, one cannot help but speculate that if Robinson were in fact working at the abbey as a disenchanted copier, he may perhaps have seen this very letter and hoped to bar this union by stirring discontent through his pamphlet (Warren).

Furthermore, Robinson’s nuns are the product of the same Syon Abbey Richard Layton described to Henry VIII in my earlier example. This abbey was markedly prominent in England before the nuns’ exile. Ann Hutchison recounts in “Beyond the Margins: Recusant Bridgettines”
that before Henry VIII’s dissolution of the monasteries, he hoped the prominent nuns of Syon Abbey would sway the pope by sanctioning his marriage to Anne Boleyn. They refused his state authority in favor of their own Catholic beliefs and allegiances, and used their aristocratic family ties to remain in Syon Abbey for as long as they could once the dissolution began (269). In fact, when the nuns did finally leave, the Duke of Northumberland and post-dissolution owner of Syon Abbey visited them in Lisbon and was surprised to find they had kept his key, and “somewhat nonplused, replied he had had a new one made” (269). They were thus an especially rebellious and prominent group of women, and the only monastic house, male or female, that refused to surrender their keys or their seal to Henry VIII (269). Such importance supports motives for the composition of both Layton’s and Robinson’s works, the first for political gain so that Henry VIII would have reason to finally dissolve them, and Robinson so he might promote Protestantism by taking down the foremost English Catholic abbey and make money off of it. Robinson’s text also suggests that this particular abbey still held clout and respect among English Catholics, particularly since they were in communication with the Spanish Infanta and Robinson makes a point of taking down a house from such high pedigree. Regardless of motive, one cannot discount the notion that Robinson may indeed have been witness to corruption and sexual deviancy, and was thus moved to publish his experiences. However, what is relevant is that without question, these texts all arise within questionable and religiously- and politically-motivated circumstances. One is left to conclude that it is very likely the happenings in Catholic spaces represented in these accounts are at some level the hyperbolic products of historical overgeneralizations and fiction. These accounts cannot be treated as being based wholly in fact, but rather on a longer tradition of sensational convent history and active authorial imaginations.
The creative depictions of convent life build upon one another, and are used at once to disparage the church and to appeal to readers. The success of Robinson’s text reveals continued cultural interest in his “true” account, and while Goad had only one printing and Marvell’s poem was not published until 1681, these depictions demonstrate a continued literary interest in imagining the convent—particularly as a seedy and indulgent place. Furthermore, we can ascertain that such writers were conversant with and interested in one another. Goad pays homage to The Anatomie in his opening sentence, noting that he writes because “there remaines much more to be spoken out” (A2). However, the interest in the fantasy convent literature could create was not held solely by their authors or even their male audience. As Cavendish’s The Convent of Pleasure will illustrate, fantasies about the convent could be had without disparaging the Catholic church (even if she does secularize her convent), and yet pull from the same themes in Protestant polemics. Cavendish’s approach to the cloister is reparative in relation to these texts. She inverts the negativity associated with Goad’s depiction of materiality, instead celebrating the sensuousness that textiles, food, and fine goods can offer to improve one’s life. She also addresses speculation of lesbianism in the convent, as evidenced by Marvell’s depiction, and instead treats it softly, neither encouraging it nor condemning it during scenes between Lady Happy and the Prince(ss). Cavendish also takes on the depictions of sinful convent gardens in both Goad’s and Robinson’s texts, returning them to idyllic and tranquil spaces.

“For Every Sense Shall Pleasure Take”: Materiality and Food in the Convent

While Cavendish will use linens, material, and fine furniture to laud what the earthly world can offer, Goad pointedly attacks the excesses of material wealth in monasteries and convents. Goad lambasts monastic wealth in both male and female religious spaces:
Oh looke for Gods sake, looke, and you shall find in the Cloisters and Monasteries, in the Cels of Abbeys, in the Walkes of Religious places, in the Courts of Princes, in the Castles of Lords…Doe they not […] stretch out their limmes on beds of ivory? Doe they not carowse in Gobblets and Chalices of gold…? (D3)

Goad disparages the lack of poverty in Catholic religious houses, comparing these excesses with those of lords and princes to illustrate how out of place such wealth is among those who profess humility and poverty. While Goad disapproves of this in religious houses, Cavendish inverts this critique by creating a secular cloister, where wealth and indulgence are more culturally appropriate. Cavendish illustrates how “happy” those with the privilege of affording these luxuries can be when they use them. Lady Happy describes to her enthusiastic sisters in detail the fine linens that will be enjoyed in her convent:

And our sheets, pillows, table-clothes and towels, to be of pure fine Holland, and every day clean; also, the rooms we eat in, and the vessels we feed withal, I have according to each season; and the linen we use to our meat, to be pure fine Diaper and Damask, and to change it fresh every course of meat…(225)

This materiality and indulgence in expensive linens to accent her sumptuous table falls in line with Goad’s characterization of the gold “Gobblets,” and Cavendish even mirrors Goad’s language in his continued attack on monastery textiles: “are not their [clergymen and nuns] linnen of the best Diaper and Damask? and the Vtensels of their house so farre from temperature, and moderation, that they exceed in sumptuousnesse, and braverie?” (D4, emphasis mine). Cavendish repurposes these “linnens” and “vtensels” from means of critique to means of celebration; by making her convent a secular space, Cavendish’s convent is a place to indulge
and delight in the finery that wealth enables one to have, while remaining set apart from the outside world. Cavendish thus skirts the issues of inappropriate monastic luxury while also playing on the common critique of religious intemperance, and instead turns this tradition its ear by presenting this materiality as something positive and joyous for aristocratic women in her imagined cloister.

Goad not only attacks the table settings of Catholic religious, but the food they eat as well. He devotes an entire section of *The Frier’s Chronicle* to “epicurisme,” lambasting the rich food the religious use:

> Doe they not feed on the choisest Lambes of the fold..have the purest Wines of Vintage? With what delicious fruits are their Orchards stored?...Is there not at this houre bread made at Paris of the finest Wheat, called the *Chapter* bread? doe they not euer where feed on the dauntiest Manchet? Yea, those they call *Mendicant* Friers receive no scraps, I hope, but whole Loaves, and the best provisions in an house. Are not their Caters sent to the Markets to provide the best meat, both Flesh, Fish, & Fowle; Pikes of five French crownes, Carps, Tenches, Barbels, and all of that sort at high rates? (D3)

Goad’s exhaustive list of epicurean indulgence attacks his readers’ own senses; however, it all sounds delightful (even if out of place) in the religious convent, where men and women are meant to fast, engage in mortification, and conserve money. Goad even attacks Mendicants, who rely on begging and donations for their survival, suggesting they too somehow manage to “receive no scraps.” While Goad derides male monastics in this section, Cavendish nonetheless plays upon the theme of epicurean comforts in her secular convent. This secularity skirts the issues that Goad represents: independently wealthy women were certainly socially allowed to
spend their money on fine foods, and would thus be financially contributing to the community (or at least to the convent community), rather than hypocritically exploiting it after taking vows of poverty. Cavendish again mirrors Goad’s language, Lady Happy crafting her own list to describe the food and drink of her convent: “Also, we will have the choicest Meats every Season doth afford, and that every day our Meat, be dressed several ways, and our drink cooler or hotter according to the several Seasons; and all our drinks fresh and pleasing” (225). Her ladies, like Goad’s monks and nuns, will indulge in “choicest” meats. In fact, Lady Happy’s description of the convent reads so similarly to Goad’s, she almost seems to be mocking the use of extensive cataloguing of convent indulgence common in anticlerical works with her own lengthy list of material concerns.2

Thus, Cavendish appears to speak directly to notions expressed in Goad’s work in her own play, illustrating that not only did these polemicists read one another’s work, but that Cavendish too had familiarized herself with common critiques in anticlerical literary accounts. In Cavendish’s cloister, however, these materials are not means for criticism, but for simply enjoying one’s life with the money she has. Cavendish’s women are not Catholic, but they are cloistered and living in the convent model, allowing for Cavendish to explore the possibility of secluded life wherein material joys could be explored and celebrated, and where happiness is supported rather than chastised. Lady Happy’s sisters present their position best at the close of her lengthy description of the convent’s food and material organization: “None in this World can be Happier” (225).
Sex in the Cloister: Cavendish, Robinson and Marvell

The eroticism in these texts served two practical purposes: first, as yet another means of highlighting and sensationalizing hypocrisy and corruption in the Catholic church; and second, to sell books. Titillating tales full of scandal, abortion and excess regarding the lives of clergymen and nuns would have made for an entertaining means to sell antipapal propaganda, appealing to a (mostly) male Protestant audience. As Rebecca D’Monté writes about women’s retirement into the cloister in The Convent of Pleasure, “it is this very retirement that from society that captivates male curiosity” (95). In point of fact, nuns were sexually deviant even in their chastity, their sexuality being “too little” rather than “too much” (Knoppers 451). Associated with sexuality whether having sex or not, the appeal of the nun is visually illustrated on the title page image (fig. 1) of the 1623 edition of The Anatomie:

Figure 1: Title Page of The Anatomie

Accompanied by a poem detailing these images, we see elements of voyeurism and prurience in these images that reflect the salacious appeal of these texts to mass audiences. The image on the
The Convent of Pleasure also represents sexual desire within its convent culture; however, Cavendish does not address sexuality between men and women, but rather focuses on the same-sex relations that Marvell does. While the rulings of the church in 1212 indicate that sexual relations between women were an issue in at least a few of its convents, further historical grounding is found more contemporaneously in seventeenth-century Italy. Ecclesiastical investigations took place concerning the mysticism and lesbianism of Italian abbess Bendetta Carlini after fellow sister Bartolomea Crivelli accused her of forcing her to perform sexual acts (Traub 64). Hence, homoeroticism too had precedent in convent reality, and though Cavendish’s Prince(ss) is really a prince, she nonetheless withholds this information not only from a live audience, but from her readers as well, Traub noting that “The Princess” is identified as “Lady Happy’s Lover” in the character list (179). For Cavendish, female-female relations are not means to debase convent life, but rather a potentially sympathetic and sensually engaging part of it.
Early modern thought reflects this, as little attention is paid to tribadism; as long as women did not challenge their reproductive and gendered roles, their non-reproductive sexual activities were worth little notice (Traub 182). Nevertheless, Cavendish’s play does present this lesbianism as challenging as her sisters deny their reproductive roles and remove their bodies from men: “when women’s erotic relations with one another threaten to become exclusive and thus endanger the fulfillment of their marital and reproductive duties, or when they symbolically usurp male sexual prerogatives, [there] are cultural injunctions levied against them” (Traub 181).

While Cavendish represents the homoerotic nature of female community with some sympathy, and a degree of ambivalence, Marvell’s account is firmly opposed to it, creating a highly sexualized and manipulative representation of female-female relationships in “Upon Appleton House.” Marvell’s fabricated account of lesbianism in the convent acts as means of “othering” and lambasting women in the cloister by suggesting their sexualities defeat their reproductive function. He at once titillates his reader and denigrates nuns’ positions as unmarried women living in a space that has too little male intervention. In “Upon Appleton House,” Marvell lauds his employer, the Protestant Lord Fairfax, by portraying the nuns that inhabited Nun Appleton House before the dissolution as manipulative and sexually deviant. Marvell crafts a scene where nuns attempt to seduce the beautiful Isabel Thwaites (the betrothed of Lord Fairfax’s ancestor) into their cloister:

    Each Night among us to your side
    Appoint a fresh and Virgin Bride;
    Whom if Our Lord at midnight find,
    Yet Neither should be left behind.
    Where you may lye as chast in Bed,
As Pearls together billeted.

All Night embracing Arm in Arm,

Like Chrystal pure with Cotton warm.

But what is this to all the store

Of Joys you see, and may make more!

Try but a while, if you be wise:

The Tryal neither Costs, nor Tyes."

Now Fairfax seek her promis'd faith:

Religion that dispensed hath;

Which She hence forward does begin;

The Nuns smooth Tongue has suckt her in. (168-200)

Marvell’s nuns are represented as sexually deviant not only in their chaste restraint and removal from marital circulation, but by their indulgence in lesbian relations. Marvell’s language is highly erotic: “Each Night among us to your side / Appoint a fresh and Virgin Bride… / All night embracing Arm in Arm,” and “The Nuns smooth Tongue has suckt her in.” There is little left to the imagination regarding these nuns’ appetites for pleasure, and the representation of the virginal (non-penetrative) but still sexual sisterhood of women is not only titillating for the poem’s reader, but also represented as clearly “wrong.” These nuns do not follow the rules—sleeping together violates the Council of Paris and “nature’s” reproductive order. Consequently, Lord Fairfax charges into the nunnery, marries Isabel and disbands the convent: “But the glad Youth away her bears, / And to the Nuns bequeaths her Tears” (265-6). Protestant masculinity, heterosexual procreative marriage, and the rejection of monasticism win out in the poem in the
figure of Fairfax. Hence, the lesbianism depicted by Marvell is twofold: it is at once suggestively erotic, making it interesting for his reader, but also a means of critiquing the papal practice of sequestering women in spaces with few men by suggesting its structure promotes lesbian sexuality—something potentially more deviant than sex between monks and nuns, and even chastity itself.

From a female perspective, however, Isabel’s tale reaches a troubling close in that it could be read to suggest she desired to remain in the convent. She is left crying after her removal, bequeathing her tears rather than her inheritance, which will now go to her husband (266). Is she happy to be rescued, or sad to leave the other women? Was she coerced or a willing participant in convent relations? Historically, male family members had forced women out of their convents. Sylvia Evangelisti quotes a particularly heartbreaking letter from Amy Leonard’s *Nails in the Wall* (2005); responding to her brother’s fears of violent Protestant uprisings in 1525, Strasburg nun Anna Wurm begs him not to remove her:

I understand that you have written publicly and expressed that you want to remove me from the cloister…and yet you do not even know whether I want that or not…I am in a good, pious, blessed, honourable, free, spiritual estate, wherein both my body and soul are well cared for…I want to stay here…I have never asked you to take me out of the cloister, and I am not asking you to do so now. (35)

While this passage involves a Catholic brother attempting to remove his sister (which he successfully does), it illustrates that women in convents were never fully autonomous, and remained tied to their male family members. Fairfax exercises his own rights over his betrothed, and as Evangelisti writes, “the physical destruction of nuns and nunneries represented a potent
sign of Protestantism’s success” (35). Fairfax’s violent entry, destruction of the nunnery and forcible removal of Isabel illustrates an ultimate account of male Protestant strength; however the question of whether Isabel left willingly or not is troubling. The poem suggests either could be true, leaving her passively waiting at the altar while Fairfax charges the abbey (“But truly bright and holy Thwaites / That weeping at the Altar waites”) and it is Fairfax who “bears” her away—she does not actively escape or remove herself (263-4, 265). While Cavendish may never have read this poem, it does illustrate the early modern perception that women in fact might like their cloistered lives, enough perhaps to rebel against or refute present, and in Fairfax’s case, future, male family members to maintain it. Even more dangerously for Protestant patriarchy, the poem and historical letter illustrate that many women preferred their relations (sexual or otherwise) and communities without men—making cloisters a threatening space where it falls to men to “rescue” potential wives from the “Hypocrite Witches” in nunneries (205).

Unlike the polemicists above, Cavendish celebrates female community, and indulges in the speculation that female romance and sexuality existed in convents. Nevertheless, she inverts this too, instead presenting a sympathetic love story rather than a salacious encounter between Lady Happy and the Princess. Regardless, Lady Happy does struggle with her burgeoning homoerotic emotions:

L. HAPPY: My name is Happy, and so was my Condition, before I saw thus 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. (234)
Cavedish’s convent is where “Pleasure Piety doth meet,” though in Cavendish’s convent, her piety is to nature, which this romance does not align with for Lady Happy (Marvell ln. 171, Cavendish 219). However, Cavendish’s convent encourages not a salacious sexual relationship between multiple women, but a genuine romantic one. Lady Happy grapples with nature, while the Princess notes their embraces “though of Female kind, / May be as fervent as a Masculine mind” (234). That the Princess is really a prince complicates the play; however Lady Happy and the audience are unaware of this. She loves a woman physically and emotionally the way she “naturally” would a man. Lady Happy continues to suffer because of her emotions: “O Nature, O you gods above / Suffer me not to fall in love; / O strike me dead here in this place / Rather then fall into disgrace” (239). Her plaintive repetition of “O” underscores her suffering, and Cavendish’s portrayal of lesbian romance thus becomes sympathetic—even if it does unravel as a heterosexual coupling at the close of the play. It is clear that this female-female affection is not entirely accepted; not by “Nature” as it will produce no children, nor even within Lady Happy’s convent of pleasure itself, highlighting the genuine emotion Lady Happy grapples with while simultaneously dismissing Marvell’s representation of nuns who join cloisters and encourage others to do so for sexual purposes. Cavendish elevates notions like Marvell’s of the association between female-female sexuality and depravity to female-female love, inverting the portrayal of such relationships as examples of convent folly and vice.

Cavendish thus repurposes disparaging notions of rampant lesbianism in the convent, as evidenced by Marvell’s account, and instead notes that lesbianism might occur because of genuine romantic attachments. That Marvell focuses stanzas 11-35 on recounting the nuns’ attempt to “inchant” Isabel and their subsequent fall illustrates that the lesbianism and sexuality of the convent is enough impetus to warrant their defeat by Fairfax (206). There is little mention
of materiality or food, other than brief mention of the “jewels” in the vault (262). This suggests that such female relationships were regarded with little sympathy, the nuns’ sexuality alone sufficing to warrant their monastic defeat. By imagining the convent as a space where lesbianism and female-female love was a possibility and not a requirement, Cavendish offers a new understanding and approach to such relationships that antipapal propagandists such as Marvell do not.

The Fraught Space of the Convent Garden

A common trope in male-authored polemics is the damning treatment of convent garden spaces. To the dismay of anti-Catholics, gardens were dangerous places where one could find some of the greatest privacy: “inseparably associated with a behavior, which was walking…what was reassuring about the garden was not only its acoustical inefficiency as sound dissipated in open air, but also its spatial range, so that confidences could be exchanged elusively, in motion, rather than captured in stasis” (Orlin 233). Beyond the slippery dangers of garden walks and confidences, gardens for Catholics were strongly related to female worship. Catholics had long associated the Virgin Mary with the Hortus Conclusus (enclosed garden), and many Protestants
thought Mary should neither be worshipped nor imbued with as much power as she was by Catholics: “the stature of Mary in Catholic belief and practice [was] proof of the excessive power Catholics were willing to invest in women” (Sierra 660, Whores 106, emphasis mine). Thus, the convent garden was a distinctive Catholic and feminine threat to the Protestant patriarchy so championed by Marvell.

Unsurprisingly, these gardens are sites for some of the most scurrilous sexual accusations levied on nuns, and gardens themselves curiously were also as emblematic of Marian chastity as they were of sexuality and fecundity. As the original site of sin, the Garden of Eden seems an appropriate literary allusion for these depictions of walled gardens, secreted and hidden from the outside world. Just as the first woman became associated with sin in a garden, so were nuns imagined to practice (and conceal) immoral behavior in these private, feminized spaces. The female sexuality implicit in gardens existed long in the literary world, dating back to medieval texts like The Romance of the Rose and Marie de France’s “Guigemar,” where the eponymous hero discovers his married lady love and makes love to her in a lush walled garden (Sierra 662, de France 533). In Phanseys, William Cavendish himself prints a love poem he wrote to Margaret before they wed; in it, he likens her body to a garden, “visiting each part in turn to kiss her lips, her cheeks, her hair, her breasts, until the final culmination when she would ‘bathe me in love’s pool, / My heated love to cool’” (poem 31, qtd. Whitaker 79). These associations with femininity, privacy, Catholicism and sexuality each serve to complicate the convent garden space in these texts and engender a perfect setting for some of these ladies’ worst behaviors.

In very broad strokes, both Goad and Robinson use the enclosure and privacy of the convent garden to implicate nuns in not only fornication (presumably with clergymen), but in abortion as well. Goad recounts particular trees in a convent, implying the widespread sexual
immorality between nuns and priests: “I could also adde, that in the gardens of Nunneries, was always a tree or two of Sauine, which they say the Nunnes vsed to drinke steeped in Wine: now the property of Sauine is to destroy any thing condensed in the womb, and so you may judge the cause” (E2). Goad notes that there was “alwayes” a tree or two of Savine, indicating its necessity in every convent and implying the rampant and common occurrence of wanton acts. Robinson himself describes a garden in terms of abortion and potentially infanticide in *The Anatomie*. Robinson recounts his shocking discovery in the walls:

That my selfe (being diuers times called into the Nunnes partition or side, to help them to nayle up boords, set up their Vines in the walkes of their Gardens, and doe such things which women could not so well doe) did chance to make a hole in a hollow place in a wall, (which had beene latelier dawbed up then the rest) to set up a Spare to underprop the Vines; out of which hole I pulled sundry bones of some dead children, and left many more remaining behind. (28)

This account of Robinson’s gruesome findings is particularly damning, insinuating that nuns perhaps not only had late abortions, but also murdered their born children. Like Goad, he does not spell out what this discovery means for us, forcing the reader to use his or her own imagination. The irony of a garden, a space meant to promote growth and beauty, as the space for inhibiting the growth of a child is evident, and readers are left to assume that convent gardens are sites not for beautiful flowers or necessary food, but for concealing the effects of these nuns’ depraved sexual dalliances.

Marvell’s garden is not without sin either, and in fact becomes an emblem of Protestant and patriarchal battle. In a rich metaphor, Lord Fairfax announces to Isabel, “I know what Fruit their Gardens yield, / When they it think by Night conceal’d” (219-20). The line can be read
multiple ways, Marvell encouraging his readers to imagine the situation for themselves. First, the
garden itself becomes emblematic of the nun’s pregnant body, carrying “fruit” of a child,
“Night” covering her indecency by suggesting both literal evening as well as the color of her
loose fitting black tunic and cloaking veil. Furthermore, one might read the “Fruit” as
emblematic of female loins, revealed during sexual encounters in the evening. Marvell thus
provides readers with a sensational experience through this rich garden metaphor, then quashes it
by describing what Lord Fairfax does when he takes up residence in Nun Appleton: “when
retired here to Peace, / His warlike Studies could not cease; / But laid these Gardens out in sport /
In the just Figure of a Fort; / And with five Bastions it did fence, / As aiming one for ev’ry
Sense” (284-288). The converted Protestant garden becomes associated with Fairfax’s triumph,
designed not with beauty in mind, but with war and battle, creating a masculinized garden space.
The bastions aiming for sense imply that the garden’s Catholic past related directly to the sensual pleasures of the female nun. The direct relationship between gardens, femininity and sensual pleasure illustrate Traub’s cultural claim that the “sensuality of tactile pleasures […] were increasingly associated, both philosophically and culturally, with the feminine” in the early modern period (Traub 179). Marvell’s text thus illustrates and reflects the understood relationship between Catholicism, femininity and sensuality.

Cavendish takes on these critiques in her work directly, inverting that garden by making it into a place meant to delight the senses in an affirmative and positive way, and a space for women to use their own skills of cultivation. Cavendish repairs the “abortive” garden space by removing male presence from her convent, eradicating those “troublers of women” (at least until the Prince is revealed) and making gardens once again into a beautiful feature of convent life and architecture (Convent 220). Lady Happy provides a brief description of the convent garden: “my
Gardens to be kept curiously, and flourish, in every Season of all sorts of Flowers, sweet Herbs and Fruits, and kept as to not have a weed in it...and all the ponds, Rivolets, Fountains and Springs kept clear, pure and fresh” (225). Lady Happy’s convent is notably described as “pure” and will not have “a weed in it”; it is clear in this passage that Cavendish’s garden is not a place for dark secrets, but for beauty and aesthetic enjoyment of the purest kind. It is kept “curiously,” with great care, and meant to “flourish” and promote, not hinder life, growth, and sensual experience.

What is markedly lacking in this flourishing and pure garden, and the whole convent plan otherwise, is men (Lady Happy will admit “non of the Masculine sex”) (223). Cavendish thus inverts the notion of gardens as places of convent abortion and infanticide by removing what makes these actions necessary: procreative sex. Furthermore, just as Lord Fairfax turns his garden into a monument against sensual female pleasure, Cavendish makes the cultivation of her garden squarely female. Madam mediator expresses to a disgruntled suitor, “here 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” (223). Consequently, Cavendish asserts that such an impressive garden can certainly be plausibly maintained solely by women, and is an opportunity for them to cultivate beauty and sensuality untainted by male domination and presence (in fact, gardening was often considered a male art, and one angry suitor angered over this usurpation later asserts that they can infiltrate as “we [men] shall be proper for Gardens, for we can dig, and set, and sow”) (Bushnell 130, Convent 228). Hence, Cavendish shifts the blame of tainted gardens from solely nuns to men as well. Only in this convent of women can a garden be made into the perfect “flourishing” and nutritive space (“Herbs and Fruits”), usurping a male profession and making it
female, and reclaiming and inverting negative associations between women and gardens. Her garden is no longer marred by the prevention of birth and the decay of dead children, for it is not marred by men at all.

**Conclusion**

Hence, we see that Cavendish was familiar with many of the scandalous thoughts and texts produced by England’s religious upheaval before, during, and after Charles I’s reign. It would appear Cavendish was conversant with themes in polemical accounts, and in culture widely, addressing them in her own imagined depiction of idealized convent life and illustrating her play’s direct emergence from this literary culture. She presents a more female-centered and sympathetic view in her own imagined space: materiality is something to enjoy, not be chastised for; deviant and indiscriminate female-female sex is elevated to genuine monogamous love and mutual affection; and gardens can be made pure in the convent, enjoyed for their beauty, vegetation and distinctly female cultivation. Consequently, Cavendish inverts and, importantly, uses criticisms in Protestant male interpretations of convent life. She plays upon them while yet presenting a sympathetic and sometimes celebratory view of these common critiques. She sides with women, Catholic nuns or otherwise, in her play; women who need no longer be criticized for living lives that bring them joy in what their female community did, could, and might offer.

What remains to be explored, beyond Cavendish’s protofeminism, is an *explanation* for her choice to insert herself into the literary and cultural imaginations of convent life, as well as her choice to use the convent as a model for her all-female space in *The Convent of Pleasure*. While her space is imagined in that no secular all-female cloister existed, and in that it plays on anti-nunnery literary themes, Cavendish’s account is also very likely based in fact and biographical experience with female companionship and experience—most particularly while in
Queen Henrietta Maria’s court and while in exile on the continent. As will be further explored in the next chapter, the play both repairs and repurposes convent life to suit Cavendish’s aristocratic, educational, and literary goals, and also illustrates the connections made between Catholics, Royalists and women in exile. A recent discovery has demonstrated that Cavendish herself spent time among the English Carmelites while living in Antwerp, revealing that Cavendish’s *The Convent of Pleasure* may very well be the product of both lived experience and fantasy. In fact, from this convent Cavendish lived “only a garden away” (*The Senses* 13).
Chapter II

“My Cloister Shall Not be a Cloister of Restraint”:

Catholic Influence and Revisions to Monastic Life

“The play is thus not simply a paean to or elegy for the possibility of life without men; it is also an important intervention into a contemporary conversation regarding what convents were, are and could be.” (Lay 159)

Cavendish’s interest in and distaste for elements of Catholicism can both easily be read into The Convent of Pleasure. I argue that while Cavendish’s convent does away with many of the religious elements of the traditional Catholic cloister, The Convent of Pleasure is nonetheless a sympathetic, albeit altered, account of convent life. It carefully realigns the religious to the secular to suit aristocratic women that do not desire to give up worldly pleasures; however it retains elements that also pay homage to its Catholic model and the position Catholicism affords women. As established in the last chapter, her criticisms do not lie with those of antipapal English writers. Rather, it is not that convent excess is too much—it is not enough. Cavendish’s convent acknowledges the restraint and hardship faced by many female religious, and instead celebrates sensual pleasures with abandon and uplifting delight. An exploration of this Protestant woman, whose life was so heavily influenced by Catholic culture, helps to explain what led her to her particular treatment of the Catholic model.

Once the English Civil War began in 1642, Margaret Cavendish (then Margaret Lucas) became embroiled within it, her entire family aligning with the monarchy as Royalists. Her family’s close ties to the monarchy meant close ties to a Catholic queen, and to many Catholic Royalists—many of whom perceived Henrietta Maria as a chance for Catholicism to once again either be reinstated or at least legally practiced once again in England. The Cavendishes, like the
Lucases, remained both Protestant and Royalist; however, Royalism set each family on a course that would align them with Catholicism for years to come, and for Margaret Cavendish, these experiences also coincided with familial and social participation in strong female communities. Margaret Cavendish’s experiences as a maid-of-honor to Henrietta Maria in Oxford and abroad in Paris immersed her in feminocentric court life, material excess, and theatrical entertainments. Later, during her exile with her husband in Antwerp, she experienced life in a vibrant Catholic city and entertained many prominent individuals, including King Charles II and his family (Whitaker 119). Similarly, so too did the convent next door, home to an English Carmelite house established in 1619, and the religious house for whom Cavendish herself prepared a young novice for profession (*English Convents Vol. 4*, xiv).

This chapter aims to examine the Catholic influences, both within and without the convent, on Cavendish’s representation of female community in *The Convent of Pleasure*. Cavendish’s writing demonstrates her interest in the idea of gendered communities, clear in both *Bell in Campo* and *The Female Academy* (1662); however, the convent is the only real model of a female-governed space other than the home, and this model provides her with ample possibilities to imagine what an ideal female life could be. The convent and Catholic traditions offered Cavendish a rich source from which to craft one of her most studied plays: a convent theater history that dovetails well with Henrietta Maria’s love of court masques and Cavendish’s arguments for the education of women; the maintenance of class distinction within the convent; and the recognition of a reality that women could live amongst one another and sustain themselves. Nevertheless, Cavendish saw fissures in what Catholic convent life and Catholicism had to offer. Men remained an influential presence; grates posed threatening permeability to the walls of convent stability; and Cavendish witnessed convents that were politically active.
communities, not ones meant for reflection, ease, and enjoyment. This chapter will synthesize what biographical information is available on Cavendish, and make the argument that based on her life and the contents of *The Convent of Pleasure*, her knowledge of convent life was far broader and more realistic than her literary predecessors’. Furthermore, I will argue that her revised account is sympathetic not only because of her family ties and associations with Catholicism, but because the culture around Catholicism held a genuine appeal, giving her the opportunity to explore female community, agency and theatricality in ways generally unsupported in Protestant England during the Civil War.

**Personal Associations with Catholicism**

As discussed, to be Catholic in England was essentially to be criminal, and with the country’s Catholic past and Catholic queen, the religion was becoming far too prominent for Protestant comfort—and Cavendish’s family was in the thick if this controversy. Parliamentarians were on the whole Protestant (though this is not to suggest there were not internal religious and ideological divisions) and discontented with the court—Colchester itself, the seat of the Lucas’s estate, was itself Parliamentarian overall. The Lucases were an already disliked local family, often the locus of local discontent with the court regime (Whitaker 34). Nevertheless, the queen was Catholic and the Lucases were a wealthy family who supported she and her husband maintaining control of England, and the status quo. In 1638, when Cavendish was in her teens, Marie de’ Medici, the queen’s mother and a Catholic as well, stayed with the Lucases at their home St. John’s Abbey: “the queen arrived at St. John’s on a Saturday, to dine magnificently in the great hall, with her ladies-in-waiting, court officials and bodyguard. After a night’s rest, she spent Sunday morning with her Roman Catholic priests in prayers” (Whitaker
35). The allowance of priests and the consent to allow Catholic mass at St. John’s Abbey would only have served to heighten local discontent with the Lucas family, and John Lucas, Cavendish’s brother, had developed an “‘undesirable reputation as ‘a favourer of popery’” (Whitaker 35).

However, with Marie de’ Medici’s stay, Cavendish was also introduced to “an inspiring re-creation in her own home of all the refined manners and grand ostentation of the royal court that her family admired and emulated” (Whitaker 35). Witnessing what the current Catholic-Anglican court life could offer, thus likely begins the sense that Cavendish develops to at once defend and champion her family’s Protestantism while not also denigrating a religion that those whom she followed and admired practiced. Her husband, William Cavendish, Duke of Newcastle (whom I will refer to as Newcastle), also had many dealings with Roman Catholics as a Royalist, and as Erna Kelly notes, “English Catholics were disproportionately from the upper classes” (8). Cavendish publishes a biography she writes about her husband, *The Life of William Cavendish, Duke of Newcastle* (1667), and in the fourth book writes the following account that at once lauds him as an Anglican leader while also curiously nods to the Catholic Church:

> Some condemning my Lord for having Roman Catholics and Scots in his army; he answered them, that he did not examine their opinions in religion, but looked more upon their honesty and duty; *for certainly there were honest men and loyal subjects amongst Roman Catholics*, as well as Protestants; and amongst Scots as well as English.

Nevertheless, my Lord, as he was for the King, so was he also for the orthodox Church of England, as sufficiently appears by the care he took in ordering the Church Government, mentioned in the history. To which purpose, when my Lord was walking one time with some of his officers in the church of Durham, and wondered at the greatness and strength
of the pillars that supported that structure, my brother, Sir Charles Lucas, who was then with him, told my Lord that he must confess those pillars were very great, and of a vast strength; but, said he, your Lordship is a far greater pillar to the Church than all these. Which certainly was also a real truth. And would have been more evidently appeared, had fortune favored y Lord more than she did. (137, emphasis mine)

The passage deftly defends both her brother and her husband against popery, each “for the king” and the “orthodox church of England.” Nevertheless, the passage begins with a defense of Catholicism, and Newcastle’s (Cavendish’s) assertion that Catholics could be decent Englishmen too.

This recounting is colored, however, by the setting of the “church of Durham”: an important site in English Catholic history. Cavendish’s description of the impressive pillars suggest she is more than likely describing Durham Cathedral, a massive gothic structure dating back to early medieval England. This area and this church have a strong history tied with Catholic pilgrimages, Durham being the center for the cult of St. Cuthbert (Rollason and Dobson). The Cathedral housed a shrine to St. Cuthbert, his body, as well as many relics: “This coffin was placed on the floor of the sanctuary, and a series of miracles was believed to have been worked there, some through the agency of the shoes, clothing, and hair of the saint, which had been retained as secondary relics” (Rollason and Dobson). While pilgrimages grew less frequent as cult numbers lessened by the beginning of the sixteenth century, Rollason and Dobson note that St. Cuthbert remained highly associated with the cathedral: “the affection of northerners for their saint was still alleged to be the biggest obstacle to the progress of the Reformation north of the Tees. According to the late sixteenth-century Rites of Durham,
Cuthbert was still being remembered as the cathedral's most beneficent patron long after the ruthless desecration of his remains by Henry VIII's commissioners in 1542.”

Though the church was successfully converted to a Protestant house of worship, its Catholic ties were not lost. While difficult to establish how associated the cathedral was with its Catholic past during Cavendish’s account, we do know that St. Cuthbert’s relics and body were preserved through and past the dissolution, and that Protestants were often aware that their houses of worship once served the Catholic faith. Anthony Milton laments in “A Qualified Intolerance,” “many of the sermons that eulogized the newly Protestantized church were delivered in parish churches that were still dominated by the images and physical structures of the Catholic past” (qtd. in “Gender and Lost Spaces” 646).¹

Cavendish thus demonstrates impressive religious fluidity in her description of her husband’s Protestant allegiance. Whether the story is true or her own machination, she illustrates Milton’s critique: Cavendish bolsters her husband’s Protestant religious allegiance within a particularly Catholic cathedral with a storied past and beloved saint. The pillars that hold the cathedral up, the very same that Newcastle is so impressed by, were built to uphold both literally the building and metaphorically the Catholic faith. Thus, the pillar that Newcastle embodies is at once a pillar of strength for both Anglicanism and Catholicism, even if it is Anglicanism that Newcastle practices. Newcastle’s religious ties were even more expansive than Cavendish’s, for beyond Catholic Royalist allies and a loyalty to the crown, Newcastle had close family members who were Catholic. His aunt, Mary Cavendish, converted to Catholicism, while her daughter and his cousin, Aletheia Howard, Countess of Arundel, followed suit—something Cavendish neglects to mention in her cursory discussion of these women in her husband’s biography (The Life 118).
In fact, while in exile both Aletheia Howard and Margaret Cavendish sponsored novices in the same English convent in Antwerp. In 1641, Aletheia Howard and her husband Thomas were sent abroad by King Charles I to accompany Marie de’ Medici, and settled down in Amsterdam (Vander Motten and Daemen-de Gelder 139). Vander Motten and Daemen-de Gelder can confirm two occasions wherein both Lady Arundel and her daughter-in-law, Mary, assisted novices, and each illustrates a degree of extravagance conferred upon these novices before they took their vows. Each of the Mostyn sisters were clothed by Lady Arundel and Mary, as is described by Edmund Bedingfield: “‘they dressed out as is customary for such a solemnity, and adorned with the costly jewels of Lady Catherine [Mary?] Howard and the Countess of Arundel, who attended…and led them into the monastery’” (139). On the second occasion, another novice and the daughter of the marquess of Worcester, Anne Somerset, was ministered to by Lady Arundel, wearing black velvet almost completely covered in pearls (139). While unknown if Arundel dressed these women in her own finery or had it made for the novices, it does demonstrate the splendor of such ceremonies. Many English women who joined English convents in exile were upper class, and the with the clothing ceremony came great splendor: “clothing and profession ceremonies were elaborate services that marked the women’s transition from secular to convent life, often accompanied by sumptuous food, music and entertainment, akin to their secular equivalent in marriage festivals. During these celebrations they changed from often very elaborate clothing to religious vestments” (Senses 15).

With Lady Arundel’s death in 1654, Vander Motten and Daemen-de Gelder posit that perhaps this role was passed down to Cavendish. In 1656, Cavendish personally assisted with Mary Cotton’s religious profession to the Antwerp Carmel, and the historical record suggests that they formed a friendship (136, 139). Fittingly, Cotton and Cavendish’s ceremony reads all
the more splendidly and theatrically than either the Mostyn sisters’ or Somerset’s, and an examination of both Cotton’s first- and third-person account of her life and *The Convent of Pleasure* illustrate a strong possibility that Cotton’s own misgivings about joining the convent align closely with what Cavendish sought to remedy in her own fictional convent.

**Cotton and Cavendish: Material and Social Concerns**

In the account of Mary Cotton’s life, *Sister Mary of the Blessed Trinity*, the first portion of the account is written by Mary herself, and expresses her deep concerns regarding how much convent life would force her to give up. She was twenty-seven when she joined the Antwerp Carmelites, overall quite a bit older than the average age of twenty that most Englishwomen had reached before joining English convents abroad. Having done my own calculations based on the available data, Cotton was certainly among the minority—about three quarters of nuns professed before the age of twenty-five (*English Convents 232, Who Were the Nuns?*). This offers quite a bit of insight into Cotton’s apprehensions: not only would her novitiate (the time between expressing interest in taking vows and actually professing) have lasted at least the typical one year, but she also would have been even more in the habit of leading a worldly life than younger novices. In support of this, her concerns were more worldly than spiritual in the portion of the account she writes:

> it pleased almighty God to detaine me a long time in the most painfull suspence of his most holy will and pleasure and amongst divers tryalls and worldly allurments one of the chieftest and most powerful was a Speciall fortune then present [that many admired her]…I was in in perpetuall anxiety of mind and it seemd unto me that I should never more injoy my self, if I did forsake those
worldly friendships, and that I should be forever miserable if I did frustrate my self of such desights [sic] as might be freely injoyed…I had so much difficulty to imbrace a Religious practice and many things therein appeard so very hard especially to be restrayned of my will and liberty, to be forever deprived of the Company of those whose conversation had formerly been very delightfull unto me…I must confess a thousand times over that a Supernaturall courage was requisitt for me to undertake such a State [religious life]. (Convents in Exile 232-33)

Cotton’s language is particularly illuminating. The passage she writes abruptly ends after she describes her heroic efforts to overcome the “Divill” and his attempts to draw her to “the pleasures of the world,” and another individual records the remainder of her life as a religious woman (233). Her descriptions of her fears of convent life are more to do with the dearth it offers rather than any excess. While Cotton turns from this account of her struggles to a concluding mention of her contentment with religious life and subsequent lack of worldly temptation, her discussion is replete with her fierce desires for worldly company, liberty and delight—the very things Lady Happy refuses to give up in The Convent of Pleasure (233).

While one can only make speculative claims, that Lady Happy’s concerns should so closely mirror Mary Cotton’s own anxieties regarding being “restrayned of [her] will and liberty” suggests some level of intimacy between Cotton and Cavendish, or at the very least that Cavendish gave great thought to what Cotton would have to leave behind to enter the church. Lady Happy resolutely remarks that her convent will deny women nothing, criticizing the reality of sensual and material deprivation in many Catholic convents: “I believe, the gods are better pleased with Praises then Fasting; but when the Senses are dull'd with abstinence, the Body
weakned with fasting, the Spirits tir'd with watching, the Life made uneasie with pain, the Soul can have but little will to worship” (220). A critique of monastic sensual paucity in relation to worship, Cavendish illustrates that Cotton was not likely to be entering a place that offered anything like the luxury and company Cotton had become accustomed to, particularly in light of her experience with Cavendish and her social circle. The end of Cotton’s account reads, “when she [Cotton] came to be Religious the Dutchess of New Castle being then here was much taken with her as being extream pretty, entertained her at her own house dressd her with her own hands for her Entery like a Nymph and lead her in her self” (235). These words emphatically suggest a bond between Cotton and Cavendish, though to my knowledge there exists no correspondence or link between these two women beyond these quoted words. Nonetheless, the writer is committed to acknowledging that Cavendish took on a personal and vested interest in Cotton socially, admiring her feminine beauty and receiving her in her home, a place where many prominent Antwerp denizens and visitors spent time (Whitaker 172). As Vander Motten and Daemen-de Gelder point out, “one wonders whether the ‘special fortune then present’…and ‘worldly friendships’ could have alluded to the favors, material no less than intellectual, bestowed on her as a member of the Cavendish circle” (137).

Based on the material and social concerns of the play, these two women were likely intimate acquaintances, and that Cotton would have expressed some of these concerns to Cavendish is not outside the realm of possibility. Lady Happy’s assertion at the close of Act I establishes the presence in her convent of all that Cotton would be giving up by taking vows: “I will take so many Noble Persons of my own Sex, as my Estate will plentifully maintain…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” (220). This statement directly addresses Cotton’s own concern over losing her free will and social and pleasures—Lady Happy’s ladies will be of aristocratic birth, creating a similar social circle to the one Cotton feared missing after leaving secular life. Lady Happy’s sisters’ senses are filled by “softest silk,” “pictures rare,” “perfumed air,” and “melodious sound,” and thus never “dull’d with abstinence” or “restrayned” (Cavendish 220; Convents in Exile 232). Thus, this play illustrates Cavendish’s thorough knowledge of the reality of what convent life might (not) offer—the source of which were likely the anxieties of Cotton herself. Furthermore, through this friendship, Cavendish would also have gleaned more insight into Catholic female monastic life through Cotton’s familial connections. Cotton’s cousins, Anne and Catharine Keynes, were both already nuns among the Antwerp Carmelite; furthermore, Mary Cotton was the niece of Margarette Cotton and great niece of Elizabeth Cotton, the former a Benedictine in Cambrai and the latter deceased and the secretary to the famous “galloping nun” Mary Ward, illustrating a long tradition of familial participation in convent life (Who Were the Nuns?). Hence, not only was Cavendish in close geographical proximity to the English Carmelite, but she was also close to someone who would become one and had strong insights into nuns’ lives.

A final connection between the play and Cotton is the way in which Cavendish curiously dresses Cotton theatrically “like a Nimph” (235). Cavendish closes out her sequence of plays-within-plays in The Convent of Pleasure with a pastoral about a sea god and sea goddess who rule over a chorus of Lady Happy’s sisters, themselves dressed as nymphs. Such a costume is far more spectacular than either the Mostyn sisters’ jewels or Somerset’s black velvet with pearls. That Cavendish would choose something so fanciful and theatrical for Cotton is compelling, as such “solemnity” as Bedingfield describes in respect to the clothing ceremony would hardly
seem the fit circumstance to be dressed in pastoral accouterment. Notably, this is Cotton’s final moment before facing the stark reality of her choice to begin her pious vocation, and just as she exits the secular world dressed a nymph, so too do Lady Happy and her sisters exit the beloved world of their convent. Cavendish’s theatrical nature is not without inspiration from the Catholic world, however. While the public theaters were closed in England for much of Margaret’s adult life, the masques and entertainments of Henrietta Maria’s court as well as the Catholic festivities in Antwerp furthered and fostered Cavendish’s interest in theater and drama, and given the plays-within-plays in *The Convent of Pleasure*, raise the possibility that Cavendish was aware of the long history of convent theater as a method to educate pupils, spectators and nuns alike.

Cavendish’s choices in repurposing and repairing convent life in *The Convent of Pleasure* to suit secular life seems to directly relate to not only Cotton’s own struggles about the religious reality she was soon to face, but also with what Cavendish imagines as a perfect marriage between all-female convent life and secular society and materiality. In making these adjustments, Cavendish illustrates a thorough knowledge of convents not only gleaned from polemical texts, but also likely from first-hand accounts of convent life, such as those that may have been provided by Cotton herself, Cavendish’s cousins, and visitors to both her home and the convent (Charles II himself was known to have been entertained by the Antwerp Carmelite as well) (*Lives of Spirit* 16). Cavendish thus writes about the cloister with a knowledgeable perspective, at once choosing elements to revise in her convent (theater), elements to retain (class divisions and female community), and elements to reject (men, religion and political involvement), while nonetheless avoiding direct aspersions toward the Catholic Church.
Reinventing and Repurposing the Religious Convent

One of the most integral parts of *The Convent of Pleasure* is Cavendish’s inclusion of theater—a long tradition in Catholic convents and popular entertainment during the seventeenth century. Theater in both Antwerp and England was flourishing (though only privately in England between 1642 and 1660). As a Catholic city, Antwerp held multiple festivals and celebrations, and was a creative and artistic center (in fact, Cavendish and her husband rented Peter Paul Rubens’ home) (Kelly 9). Cavendish commended Catholicism for its sense of exuberant festivity in *A Monastical Life*, an essay that both defends and questions Catholicism, applauding the religion’s “recreation[s] and pastime[s]” such as “Mass and Musick, and shewes, as at Christmas, Easter, our Lady day, & on many days of the years” (qtd. in Vander Motten and Daemen-de Gelder). To Cavendish’s pleasure, Antwerp openly celebrated theater, while in England, theaters closed once the Civil War commenced, many Puritan Parliamentarians taking issue with it. Nonetheless, closet drama in England (and Antwerp as well) remained popular as both an entertainment and creation for both men and women. Julie Sanders notes that “the gendered, supposedly non-performative site of the closet, and the related form of closet drama, needs serious re-interrogation…and performance history needs to rethink the performative vacuum it has implied existed between 1642 and 1660” (135). While Cavendish’s convent experience suggests that *The Convent of Pleasure* may have been written while in exile though not published until 1668, I am not aiming to make a case for the period she wrote in, nor am I especially concerned with whether the play was staged during her time in exile. What I do aim to establish is that her experiences in Catholic Antwerp and as maid-of-honor to Henrietta Maria were formative to *The Convent of Pleasure*. In Antwerp, Cavendish is witness to female performance in public, and not just at court or “in the closet,” and is an event that transfixes her.
Furthermore, her inclusion of drama within Lady Happy’s convent suggests her familiarity with the long tradition of female-driven convent theater—a tradition Cavendish chooses to retain and celebrate in *The Convent of Pleasure*.

Cavendish’s writing illustrates the influence female acting has on her, and *The Convent of Pleasure* emerges as an ideal production for women to enact both male and female roles upon the stage, butting English early modern tradition. In Antwerp, Cavendish witnessed women act in public, and found herself particularly moved by one’s convincing male performance:

> Upon this Profess’d Mountebank’s Stage, there were two Handsom Women Actors…indeed [one sister] was the Best Female Actor that ever I saw; and for 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 have believed she never had worn a Petticoat…I took such Delight, to see them Act upon the Stage, as I caused a Room to be hired in the next House to the Stage, and went every day to See them, not to Hear what they said, for I did not Understand their Language, & their Actions did much delight my Sight, for I believe they were better than their Wit. *(CCXI Sociable Letters, 405-7)*

While this may not have been the first time Cavendish saw a woman act publicly, that an actress could act as a man so expertly and with so much talent clearly fascinated Cavendish. Prior to living in exile, Cavendish would have been privy to women acting only at court, and perhaps acted herself; upper class women had been performing in masques and pastorals in the Stuart court since Queen Anne (Strong 111). Henrietta Maria was the first woman to be termed an “actress” for a performance celebrating Shrove Tuesday in 1626, and reports of this pastoral,
wherein her ladies-in-waiting performed male parts in costume, was something shocking enough to be commented upon and even criticized (Tomlinson 189). Thus, women at court were cross-dressing in private performances when acting, and Cavendish herself was known to have worn clothing inspired by men in day-to-day life (Fitzmaurice). In fact, so too was another denizen of Antwerp and frequent visitor of the Antwerp Carmelites during this period: Queen Christina of Sweden (Fitzmaurice, Whitaker 177). Cavendish’s enjoyment of Antwerp and court theater thus serve as inspirations for Cavendish’s inclusion of theater, each open to female performers and more accepting of gender flexibility (even if only on stage or among the upper classes). While these secular influences play a role in forming Lady Happy’s convent, wherein women play all roles, convents were also locations for theater production, particularly as an educational tool.

While one cannot ascertain Cavendish’s knowledge of convent theater, her notion that performance is an empowering and educational practice aligns with religious notions of theater. Cavendish writes an epistle to her readers in *Playes* (1662), “I cannot chuse but mention an erroneous opinion got into this our Modern time and men, which is, that it should be thought a crime, or debasement for the nobler sort to Act Playes, especially on publick Theatres…for certainly there is no place, wayes or meanes, so edifying to Youth as publick Theatres, not only to be spectators but Actors; for it learns them graceful behaviors.” Notably, she says “youth,” not men, illustrating that who will be acting, edified and taught through theater includes women. Interestingly, the Antwerp Carmelites were overseen by Jesuits, for whom theater was an integral part of religious pedagogy: “The *Ratio Atque Institutio Studiorum Societis Jesu* itself outlines the pedagogical significance of theater within the Jesuit curriculum and readily acknowledges the connection between performance and religious zeal” (Bicks 465). Thus, that the Carmelites would have employed performance as a means of educating pupils, nuns and laywomen is not
out of the realm of possibility. Furthermore, their practices were similar to secular theater: with a limited gender pool to pull from in convents, and like plays staged at court and in Antwerp, convents employed cross-dressing in their productions (though meeting resistance from especially male members of the church) (Weaver 82-87). While Cavendish may never have been privy to a convent performance, nor have I located any manuscript accounts of any put on by the Antwerp Carmelites, Elissa B. Weaver asserts that the tradition was not confined to early modern Italy, the geographical focus of her book: “in early modern France [and Spain], there, too, we find evidence of the participation of women religious in theatrical performances” (235). The content of convent theater was largely religious rather than simply entertaining, and at least geographically, we can recognize that convents near to the Carmelites were certainly participating in it.

While a convent rife with secular delights may be enough to justify Cavendish’s heavy emphasis on theater in Lady Happy’s convent, it is worth entertaining the possibility that Cavendish was not only inspired by her secular surroundings, but her religious ones as well. The intersections between Henrietta Maria’s court, Antwerp’s secular theater and convivial qualities, and convent theater’s commitment to female education all find a place in The Convent of Pleasure’s plays-within-the-play. Many signs hint at the notion that the convent could have inspired Cavendish’s inclusion of theater, perhaps most saliently that the vignettes performed to educate women on the evils of marriage conclude with the actress announcing that she is “going into a nunnery” (233). Cavendish’s own plays inculcate the women in The Convent of Pleasure, not with moral or religious instruction, but in Lady Happy’s conviction that men are “obstructors” of women’s pleasure (223). Hence, whether knowing the tradition or not,
Cavendish does revise and include convent theater, and it plays an integral role in creating female enjoyment in Lady Happy’s cloister.

Cavendish also makes a point to retain class distinctions in her convent, something convents had long done. Some convents were more aristocratic than others, and as established previously, the Antwerp Carmelites were associated with nobility not only through Cavendish, but through Queen Christina, Anne Somerset, Lady Aletheia Howard, as well as Charles II and his brothers Henry and James (Vander Motten and Daemen de-Gelder 141). Mary Cotton herself was the grand-niece of Sir Edward Blount, and thus was connected to English nobility (Who Were the Nuns?). Hence, the nobility and Royalist outsiders that graced this convent were high in number, and the high-born women who were both nuns and visitors may very well have influenced Cavendish’s representation of a convent meant for just aristocratic women. This said, convents had long been places for well-connected and wealthy women to enter, as only those who professed with sufficient dowries could become choir nuns—other women were relegated to the status of servant nuns or conversae, who were not allowed to vote on convent matters, performed manual labor, and ate separately from choir nuns (Evangelisti 30). Thus, convents were never egalitarian spaces, and the women with the highest status within them would have come from similarly upper class families.

In The Convent of Pleasure, Cavendish is very clear to illustrate that her convent is not a refuge for all women, but only for the well-born. Lady Happy informs Madam Mediator, “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” (220). Unlike a real-life convent with financial struggles and a vested interest in dowries, Lady Happy notably cares more for birth than fortune (Who Were the Nuns?). Nevertheless, Cavendish
maintains a division between the ladies and their servants, the choir nuns and the conversae of her Convent of Pleasure. Madam Mediator informs male suitors that Lady Happy “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” (223). This reveals from whose hands the labor for all of those fresh linens and well-pruned gardens will come from, and who will be preparing fine food in the hot kitchens each day and night. Like a religious convent, Lady Happy’s cloister is more pleasurable to the noble women who enter.

Cavendish, while wanting to elevate women like herself in the arts and sciences, nonetheless was not interested in elevating all women. Her autobiography reveals a deep-seated belief in innate differences between the aristocratic and the “vulgar.” Cavendish describes her mother’s approach toward her servants: “she sufferd not her servants, either to be rude before us, or to domineer over us, which all vulgar servants are apt…neither were we sufferd to have any familiaritie with the vulgar servants, or conversation…by reason the vulgar sort of servants, are as ill bred as meanly born, giving children ill examples, and worse counsel” (A True Relation 43). Thus, Cavendish’s generalizing account of the “vulgar” reveals she clearly believed that class had more to do with breeding than money, and that those nobly born would be more deserving of pleasures and delights than “ill bred” and “rude” servants. For Cavendish, a woman’s pleasure could thus only be found when she did not toil, but rather indulged in her every desire and whim, resulting in a need for servants to cater to these pleasures. Cavendish’s version of choir nuns certainly had differing lifestyles to those of many real nuns, Cavendish doing away with their unpleasant mortifications and penances; however she maintains the separate social spheres recognized in convents. The convent itself, despite shared vows among
their nuns of chastity, poverty, and obedience, nonetheless recognized and upheld class distinctions, and certainly found no critique from Cavendish.

While Cavendish includes the theater tradition, gendered community and class divisions preexisting in the traditional Catholic convent model, she does away with three key elements: religion, men and politics. Her elimination of these in her own imagined convent illustrates the upheaval many women in Cavendish’s circle had endured during the seventeenth century. Because of all three, women such as Cavendish and English nuns themselves were in exile, and it was very little of their own doing. Thus, in Lady Happy’s idealized convent, she creates a very different and more perfected space without these elements, where women should ideally remain untouched and unaffected by the world outside.

In some ways, by eliminating one element Cavendish could eliminate others—for example, Cavendish manages to avoid state politics and religion through barring men. Cavendish reveals the powerful connection men have to both the church and state in The Convent of Pleasure. Upon learning that the wealthiest and most eligible women have sequestered themselves and taken their wealth with them, their suitors immediately think to do two things: first, “fee [pay] the clergy to perswade her [Lady Happy] out for the good of the commonwealth” and second, as suggested by Madam Mediator, to “put up a Petition to the State, with your desires for a Redress” (222, 223). By creating a cloister that exists separately from these spheres, Cavendish is able to imagine a convent wherein women are free to enjoy themselves and devote their lives to nature and pleasure, rather than to their duty to husbands and children (state) or self-punishment, strict religious vows, and obedience to clergymen (church). Furthermore, without men there is no one to take advantage of nuns or overturn their decisions. Nuns had a history of clashing with clergymen, not only over what kind of plays they put on, but over what
kind of power they could exert in their own community and over their own bodies (Weaver 84, Gilchrist 27). By attempting to remove men from the convent from both without and within, Cavendish allows for the creation of more female autonomy and a truer version of female space—something evidently imperative for this particular play’s conception of female pleasure.

In fact, Cavendish’s Lady Happy keeps her women more cloistered than actual nuns did, Lady Happy announcing she “will suffer no grates about the cloister” (223). Here, Cavendish repairs the convent by completely eradicating this fraught space. As seen in the last chapter in Robinson’s front book image (fig. 1), the grate is ever a dangerous place: it allows for nuns and friars to cross over into each others’ spaces; it allows communication with the world outside; and would in fact have been the means of getting local news, and delivering and receiving sensitive Royalist mail to and from nuns in Ghent during the Royalist exile (“Crumbs” 635). Another female author, Aphra Behn, also depicts the grate as a dangerous place in The History of the Nun; Or, The Fair Vow-Breaker (1689) when her main character is watched and enjoyed by locals through the grate, eventually leading to her meeting and running away with a man after professing and later becoming a murderess. While this text emerges some time after Cavendish’s, it nonetheless illustrates the continued conceptual and real threat that grates posed to the potential tranquility of secluded convent life—it kept nuns tied to the world outside, and was the most clearly permeable space. To illustrate, The Duke of York, Charles II and the Duke of Perth had all been frequent visitors of the Antwerp Carmelites, and were clearly allowed within convent walls: “[the Duke of York] ‘came to the King [Charles II] and told him, if he had a mind to see a pritty woman he must go to the Infirmary which he did, where dear Sr Tecla was’” (qtd in Lives of Spirit 16). Thus, nuns remained sexualized while in the convent by men, favored for “pritty” faces, and clearly (some) men could gain access to the convent Cavendish
lived near. Without grate and without men, Cavendish attempts an imagined reconstruction of convent architecture and convent life. These women are beholden to and influenced by no one should they choose not to be (though Madam Mediator is evidently free to come and go as she likes). What is important is that Cavendish gives her nuns the choice to truly live in an even more cloistered and female-centered community than Catholic nuns do, and therefore to exercise greater control over their lives and personal pleasures.

Nevertheless, by eradicating clergymen and religion, Cavendish’s play begins to take on the trappings of Catholic critique; however, I argue that these revisions and acknowledgments to Catholic life are deftly handled in the play in effort to avoid religious controversy, something her work illustrates she fears (Kelly 3). The Catholic convent is a genuine model for her community, though hers is a secular one. Unsurprisingly, the strongest critique Cavendish makes of religion has to do with Catholics’ sensual abnegations and apparel:

Can any Rational Creature think or believe, the gods take delight in the Creature's uneasie life? or, Did they command or give leave to Nature to make Senses for no use; or to cross, vex and pain them? for, What profit or pleasure can it be to the gods to have Men or Women wear coarse Linnen or rough Woollen, or to flea their skin with Hair-cloth, or to eat or sawe thorow their flesh with Cord…(218)

Thus, Cavendish does not renounce God or even the Catholic religion as a whole as being “evil” or “bad”; rather, she couches her criticism in the sense that the physical denials and pains that drive monastic life are misguided. Cavendish works through defending her secular convent, one devoted to nature rather than “the gods,” and thus illustrates potential for a new kind of convent—not one built on demolishing or denigrating the model that came before.
In fact, Cavendish’s convent pays homage to its Catholic predecessor in its language. Madam Mediator refers to Lady Happy as both a “Votress to nature” and “Lady-Prioress,” and the suitor Courtly refers to the women as “nuns” (223). These terms are included deliberately and not intentionally sacrilegiously. Based on Cavendish’s experience and writing, she at once defends Catholicism while also refraining from joining it, Cavendish straddling the line between her Royalist associations with them and her Protestant beliefs. In her autobiography, Cavendish describes both herself and her mother in terms that suggest a preoccupation with convent life: of her industrious and caring mother, Cavendish writes that she “made her house her Cloyster, inclosing herself,” and that Cavendish herself would be content to live secluded with her husband, “inclosing my self like an Anchoret, wearing a Frize-gown, tied with a cord about my waste” (A True Relation 48, 63). Cavendish thus envisions both herself and her mother as women in a convent, paying homage to the devotion with which nuns live their lives; devotion not unlike her mother had for her family, and Cavendish had for her husband. Thus, throughout Convent of Pleasure, Cavendish is aware of her model, and through her play’s terminology wants her audience to be as well. As we understand the strength of religious devotion for most women in the religious convent, so we come to understand the devotion of Lady Happy’s women to nature and pleasure.

**Conclusion**

Cavendish’s appropriations of and associations with Catholicism and convent life clearly influence and color The Convent of Pleasure. The Cavendishes as well as the Lucases had strong connections to close Catholic family, friends, and the royals themselves. Cavendish’s play is not religious; however it nonetheless pays homage and endeavors to avoid disrespecting the model
that it owes so very much to. Catholicism afforded Cavendish much of what she portrays in her play, particularly in the way it offered women more than Protestantism did. Henrietta Maria’s power and influence, as well as her unapologetic love of Catholic traditions and theater ushered in an artistic milieu that favored and elevated women. She flew in the face of Puritanical England’s distaste for theater, festivity and autonomous women, setting an example for Cavendish of a strong woman leading her court and encouraging her ladies to act, perform and indulge in what court life could offer.

Cavendish was aware she was living in a particular time where she had a rare chance to flourish as a female. In Poems, and Fancys she writes,

But this Age hath produced many effeminate Writers, as well as Preachers, and many effeminate Rulers, as well as Actors. And if it be an Age when the effeminate spirits rule, as most visible they doe in every Kingdome, let us take the advantage, and make the best of our time, for feare their reigne should not last long; whether it be in the Amazonian Government, or in the Politick Common-wealth, or in flourishing Monarchy, or in Schooles of Divinity, or in Lectures of Philosophy, or in witty Poetry, or any thing that may bring honour to our Sex. (qtd in The Mental World 30)

Cavendish’s language suggests a cynical sense that this world for women was fleeting, and that it needed to be taken advantage of. She encourages women to partake in many subjects, and desires to uplift other women, refuting Sarah Mendelson’s claim that “she was not a true champion of her sex, but an egoist who happened to be of the female gender” (Mental World 55). While I can concede that she was not a champion of all women, she was without question focused on promoting women of her own class to reach new intellectual heights. The Convent of Pleasure
itself, a place of theater and female community without men attempts, even if unsuccessfully, to assert that women could rely on one another for their needs, and could sufficiently occupy a happy, utopian space.

While she defended her family’s Protestantism and clearly felt elements of Catholic monastic life needed revising, the culture around the religion clearly appealed to Cavendish. The particularly Catholic surroundings that Cavendish inhabited in the seventeenth century in court and in Antwerp illustrate why Cavendish would undertake to pay homage to and repurpose a model of female space notably stripped away by English Protestant men. One need only look to Cavendish’s revisions of convent tradition in her play to see that she had great insight into convent life, and this is only bolstered by the recent discovery of her involvement with the Antwerp Carmelites. In court and in exile Cavendish entered Catholic domains that broadened her horizons regarding women’s lives and capabilities. While never a Catholic herself, she does their convent model a service by reimagining its possibilities and reinvigorating the notion of female space for women of any religion.
Imagining Female Possibilities:

Conclusion

“It is interesting to observe how Margaret Cavendish is thinking through ideas about the spaces allocated to women in society. Moreover, as with questions of sexuality, women need to be seen to create new areas of agency” (D’Monte 93)

The Convent of Pleasure ultimately ends on a cynical note. While Lady Happy has committed herself to strict enclosure from men and to enjoy all of life’s material and sensual opportunities, she, like Isabel Thwaites, is forcibly removed from her all-female community. The women in her community are also affected by the Prince’s discovery. Madam Mediator enters Act 5 Scene 2 “lamenting and sobbing,” concerned that all the sisters are “undone and lost” (244). Monsieur Advisor tells Madmam Mediator, yet unaware, that Lady Happy and the Prince “agreed” to be married, and that the state is happy and hopeful (245). Madam Mediator, Lady Happy’s once closest confidant and purveyor of all convent news, clearly no longer has the same access to Lady Happy given her ignorance of the match, and admonishes Monsieur Adviser that “There’s much between the Cup and the Lip” (244). The phrase is related to the notion of there being many “slips” between the cup and lip, ominously suggesting that despite the state’s optimism, there remain many uncertainties about the effects of this marriage, particularly with regard to Lady Happy’s personal contentment and the fate of her convent sisters.

In no Cavendish play concerning all-female societies do the women succeed in sustaining themselves. Erica Lang Bonin comments on this ephemerality:

...there is no tabula rasa outside culture available for unrestricted representations of female intellect, power, and sexuality…the insistent impermanence of Cavendish’s dramatic utopias [Bell in Campo, The All-Female Academy, and The
Convent of Pleasure] suggests that women’s desires are marginal, inappropriate, or even impossible to sustain outside of patriarchal contexts” (352)

Unlike the Catholic convent tradition, the secular convent falls apart before it even gets off the ground, and ultimately many readers might find themselves feeling dejected by what they perceive as an “unhappy” ending wherein the women fail to maintain their convent lifestyle. While Cavendish felt strongly that the time for female influence was only fleeting, she nonetheless used it. While she seemed to demonstrate that a female convent simply was not a workable alternative to marriage, she nonetheless dared to (re)imagine a site wherein women could be more than wives, mothers, maids or even nuns—they could be autonomous, creative, and sufficient on only female labor. Cavendish created a space for women to exist; however the model itself suggested it was destined to fall—convents were always places where men intervened and hardships were faced. Nonetheless, Cavendish created a space for herself within a male-dominated literary community, and in doing so diminished their critiques of female desire and community. Furthermore, she built upon the possibilities she witnessed for women in her own life by inserting them into her own convent.

Just as the Convent of Pleasure ultimately fell, so too did the feminocentric court of Henrietta Maria and many of the English convents in exile over time. While Cavendish was aware of this ephemeral moment of female possibility, through publishing and writing this play, Cavendish nonetheless offers her audience a certain permanency for her secular cloister through the written word, and in this permanency offers a long-lasting representation of broader female possibilities yet unrealized and impossible in Cavendish’s time. Her play thus encourages her audience to wonder—if this possibility is doomed to fall, what others might there be that would not?
Notes to Chapter I:

1. *The Anatomie* was printed in 1622, 1623, 1630, 1637 and 1662 (notably soon after Charles II regained the English throne, and the same year he wed the Catholic Catherine of Braganza). Goad’s work was printed twice in 1623, once for John Budge and once for publisher and bookseller Robert Mylbourne (the same bookseller who sold Robinson’s first two editions).

2. Lay examines the same texts by Marvell and Robinson, as well as Lewis Owen’s pamphlets, *The Running Register: Recording a True Relation for the State of the English Colledges, Seminaries, and Cloisters in all Forraine Parts* (1626) and *The Unmasking of All Popish Monks, Friers, and Jesuits* (1628), with an eye to the ways which they diminish and efface nuns’ literary, spiritual and political importance. Owen’s text is similar to Goad’s, also featuring an extensive list of clerical material excess that Cavendish may have drawn upon. In chapter 4 of this book, she makes a somewhat similar argument to mine that Cavendish at once repairs and repurposes the convent. Unfortunately, this appeared in print too late to take this into account when writing this thesis.

3. Though this engraving is not directly of either the convent at Lisbon nor at Antwerp, and though it may more likely be the courtyard rather than the garden, it does provide a visual of the walled, secluded outdoor spaces common in convent architecture across Europe. This particular convent was located Southwest of Paris, and the image is part of a series by Horthemels (a female engraver) that features colorful and detailed descriptions of convent life.
(Poulson 21). This convent image in particular also features a surrounding gallery, a fraught space in and of itself (Orlin 2007).
Notes to Chapter II:

1. Even at home the Lucases and Newcastles occupied converted spaces. St. John’s Abbey, as the name suggests, was a former Catholic monastery. So too was Welbeck Abbey, the main residence of the Cavendishes.


3. Tomlinson describes responses to this particular performance. John Chamberlain notes that “some of the ‘participants were disguised like men with beards,’” while another observer remarks, “‘I hear not so much honour of the Quene’s maske, for if they were not all, some were in men’s apparel’” (189).
Works Cited:


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