

SAA 2021: Seminar 06: Early Modern English Women Writers and the Arts of Language

Emily Donahoe,

“We must be instructed by a Narrative way”: Margaret Cavendish’s Reformation of Rhetoric and the Theater

Margaret Cavendish and her circle had a problem with rhetorical education. Disputations promoted discord rather than harmony and incited passion over reason. Oratory could make vice look like virtue. Rhetoricians deceived themselves and their auditors, prioritizing words over matter, artifice over natural expression. Among the many alternatives to rhetorical education that Cavendish and her circle explored was instruction through literature and, more particularly, the theater. Cavendish, herself a prolific playwright, insisted that the performance of plays provided “the Best and Readiest way of Education for your Children.” But along with some of her contemporaries, Cavendish also worried about how the onstage presentation of vice—and the histrionic acting that accompanies it—might detrimentally affect spectators. Drama, like rhetoric, could be an enemy to understanding and good judgement. This paper will argue that Cavendish, in her writings, undertook a twin reformation of rhetoric and the theater for the purposes of audience education. Cavendish sought to reorient rhetoric and the theater away from artificial forms of expression to more natural ones; from counterfeit toward sincerity; from persuasion toward wit; from masculine argumentation toward feminine discourse; and finally, from discord toward harmony. In doing so, she both aligns with and departs from similar projects in which her male contemporaries were engaged. What she offers, ultimately, is a new form of rhetorical and theatrical education designed with noble women in mind.

Aurélie Griffin & Sophie Lemerrier-Goddard,

“Truth’s school” (IV.Cho.17): Learning and Teaching in Elizabeth Cary’s *The Tragedy of Mariam*

When *The Tragedy of Mariam* was first printed as the work of “that learned, virtuous, and truly noble lady, E. C.” in 1613, its title-page self-consciously stressed the custom-breaking accomplishment of the first female playwright to publish an original play. Though the anonymous E. C. as she revealed her gender felt compelled to state her respectability – based on rank, character and education – her “learned” authority also points to a key motif in the play, that of learning. Despite not going to grammar school, Elizabeth Cary’s knowledge of rhetoric was extensive. The play indeed showcases a variety of figures of speech, in particular figures of repetition such as anaphora or antanaclasis, which suggest an effort to create an effect of *copia* in the tradition of Erasmus. This demonstration of the author’s rhetorical skills serves as proof of her ability to enter the male domain of humanist training, as do the classical references, the consistent choice of rhymed iambic pentameters, or the presence of several sonnets in the playtext. The long monologues and soliloquies which characterise the play (and closet drama as a whole) are cases in point which allow the playwright to fully engage with both rhetorical demonstrations and a structured display of emotions through a variety of techniques that she seems to be practising as well as potentially teaching to her audience. Cary’s closet drama may test the reader’s theatrical imagination with an almost complete absence of stage directions, but we would also argue that her embodied rhetoric teaches delivery and behavioural performance. Cary’s use of rhetoric is meant to teach and delight – or more specifically to provide pedagogical practice to an audience, with a text that combines speech, gesture and action.

Rebecca Helfer,

Blazing World as Memory Theater: Cavendish's Wit and Art of Memory

In one of her *Sociable Letters*, Margaret Cavendish defends the memory of Shakespeare's wit, as it should be "Remembred," from the charge that he was merely clowning around. "I Wonder how that Person you mention in your Letter, could either have the Conscience or Confidence to Dispraise Shakespear's Playes, as to say they were made up onley with Clowns, Fools, Watchmen, and the like," she writes, arguing that such criticism could only be from one who "Understands not Playes, or Wit." Cavendish asserts that "Shakespear's Wit will Answer for himself," but she nevertheless defends "Shakespear's Wit and Eloquence" throughout, praising him as a "Natural Orator, as well as a Natural Poet." This sharp defense of Shakespeare's wit and eloquence ultimately speaks to Cavendish's own rhetoric and poetics in *Blazing World*, both of which I connect with the art of memory. This place-based method of memorization and recollection was used by performers (whether orators or actors) and playwrights alike, most commonly to construct an architectural mnemonic: a building-cum-book of memory such as a theater, fashioned in the mind and in writing. In this paper, I explore the role of wit and its relationship to theatricality in *Blazing World*, suggesting that Cavendish constructs this world as a memory theater – as a space in which to remember the past and imagine the future, and as a place in which she both defends and dramatizes her rhetorical poetics as an art of memory.

Tanya Schmidt

"The Stage is the Brain": Allegory and the Court in Margaret Cavendish's "Phantasm's Masque"

Margaret Cavendish's collection of poems, *Poems and Fancies* (1653), is a series of thought experiments. While often criticized for lacking method, in fact the collection is highly structured in its own way; as Liza Blake has argued, each of the collection's five parts clusters around a topic, and the transitional poems in between parts look backwards and forwards to comment on both the preceding and succeeding sections. "Clasp III-IV," however, is a particularly knotty transitional sequence. Nominally connecting Part III and Part IV of the collection, the sequence begins with the poem "Phantasm's Masque," the first lines of which are, "The scene is poetry. The stage is the brain, whereon it is acted." Interpretations of this sequence have typically been from an autobiographical perspective. While the "plot" in these poems concerning "the fortune of a young lady" aligns with parts of the narrative of Cavendish's life, Cavendish seems to be doing more here. This paper thus explores two other contexts for interpreting Cavendish's rhetorical ends: namely, the tradition of allegorical romance and the tradition of the court masque.

Dorothy Todd

How to Do Things with Thread: Textiles, Mourning, and Melancholy in the Poetry of Hester Pulter

As Susan Frye expertly demonstrates in *Pens and Needles: Women's Textualities in Early Modern England*, traditional women's work such as needlework both provided women with a way to communicate and helped women forge communities. In this paper, I will turn to the poetry of Hester Pulter—specifically “Upon the Death of My Dear and Lovely Daughter, Jane Pulter,” “The Lark,” and “A Dialogue between Two Sisters, Virgins Bewailing Their Solitary Life”—to demonstrate how Pulter simultaneously participates in and inverts the traditional community-building of the female needleworker as she employs images of textiles, embroidery, and weaving to meditate on loss and solitude. Drawing on the classical traditions of Arachne, Philomel and other female weavers, Pulter incorporates images of women communicating via textiles into her poems, but these images bring into sharp relief the solitude, rather than the community, she experiences. Notably, the language of needlework appears most often in poems that deal explicitly or implicitly her children and/or the loss of children, thus drawing a connection between women's textile work and the women's labor of motherhood. Through her rich use of the languages of textiles, Pulter does perhaps draw find community among women needleworkers, but it is a community woven together through loss and mourning.

Olivia Tracy

The Rhetorical Hand: Rendering as Rhetoric in Wroth's Urania

This paper explores the rhetorical agency of hands in Mary Wroth's *The Countess of Montgomery's Urania*. Focusing on the poem Pamphilia carves into and addresses to the Ash tree, this paper investigates how Pamphilia's hand, the knife and the tree participate as agents in a rhetorical interaction. This interaction rehearses and generates early modern rhetorical practices and pedagogies, including practices of collection, elicitation of emotional response through delivery, and imitation through public visibility. Vin Nardizzi and Miriam Jacobson have explored relationships between Pamphilia's writing and early modern gardening, and Jacqueline T. Miller and others have considered Pamphilia's writing in the context of imitation and emotion. This paper builds from their explorations, as well as the work of scholars investigating Renaissance grammar school pedagogies, including Lynn Enterline's and John Wesley's work on oratory, imitation, and theories of rhetoric, gesture and performance. Pamphilia's act not only allows other people to read and be affected by her publicly sited poetry, but also creates a site of more immediate and material rhetorical interaction—of an intended effect, and an effected outcome—with the tree itself. The rhetorical implications of this moment resonate alongside and within other equations of hands and rhetoric in the period. Pamphilia's poem invites us to examine the embodied considerations of rhetoric permeating rhetorical and literary early modern texts and furthers our understanding of how we might expand notions of rhetorical response to incorporate the overlap of women's oratory and writing.