

# [Review of the book "*The Convent of Pleasure*" and *Other Plays*]

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dividends of the Habsburg generals' investments in empirical and analytical knowledge. He also articulates their employment of such learning in the political discourse required both to promote and to manage their careers. Lund thus challenges the current scholarly fashion of viewing high-ranking aristocrats primarily as patrons of science. Instead, he reveals their role as active agents in applying, if not producing, scientific knowledge to execute their fundamental political contract. To forge such a substantial linkage between the knowledge and the power of early modern Europe is a substantial achievement.

BRETT STEELE

**Margaret Cavendish.** *"The Convent of Pleasure" and Other Plays.* Edited by Anne Shaver. xiii + 280 pp., bibl. Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999. \$47.50 (cloth); \$15.95 (paper).

Margaret Cavendish (1623–1673), the first woman to write on scientific subjects in English, has lately become a feminist icon, although her work demonstrates a conflicted view of female ability and potential. Nowhere is this more obvious than in her plays, which—together with her poetry, essays, orations, and treatises on natural philosophy—explore the nature of mankind, the physical universe, and the interactions between different types of beings, including the male and the female. The plays in this collection edited by Anne Shaver are representative of the thought of a woman who prided herself on her "singularity" but was tormented by a sense of exclusion from the courtly society of Restoration England. In these plays most women are condemned as either lewd or silly, but virtuous women become the saviors of society.

The play *Love's Adventures*, the first in Shaver's collection, represents the nuanced and ambiguous depiction of sexuality and gender roles characteristic of Cavendish's work. In it the female heroine disguises herself as a boy in order to win the love of her intended husband, whom she eclipses in her military successes. Nevertheless, the play argues against faction and the confusion of traditional roles in either the public or the domestic sphere. In all the plays in this collection, female independence is eventually subsumed in the marriage of heroes and heroines.

References to Cavendish's audacious natural philosophy are largely absent from these plays. The character Sir Peaceable Studious, in *Love's Adventures*, who forsakes his study of useful inventions in order to demonstrate to his wife the

dangers of amorous behavior, probably is an avatar for the natural philosophers Cavendish had met during her exile in France and England, as well as the members of the newly formed Royal Society. The ideal, female-only society of *The Convent of Pleasure* can be read as a kind of gendered Epicurean retreat, where every moderate pleasure is permissible and the goal is tranquillity—achieved only when the masculine is eliminated. But by and large these plays, which also include *The Bridals* and *Bell in Campo*, are social satire. For a more detailed exposition of Cavendish's materialism, a reader would be better advised to go directly to her treatises, especially *Philosophical and Physical Opinions* (1663) and *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* (1666).

Anne Shaver has performed a service to scholars in making these plays available in a modern edition. Her introduction is brief and informative, although students of the history of science may be surprised to hear the Royal Society referred to as an "all-male science club" (Cavendish, however, might have agreed with this characterization) (p. 5). Shaver urges a "diachronic perspective" in interpreting Cavendish's disparate ideas of the female role (p. 7). But viewing this remarkable woman through the perspective of modern gender studies, as well as within the context of her own times, may do a disservice to the unique quality of Cavendish's bipolar vision of women and their essential nature. Nevertheless, to the extent that gender informs the articulation of theories of nature, Cavendish's depiction of the female in these plays will help modern scholars understand the implicit assumptions guiding the interpretation of the natural world in the seventeenth century.

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## ■ Eighteenth Century

**Charles Willson Peale.** *The Selected Papers of Charles Willson Peale and His Family.* Volume 5: *The Autobiography of Charles Willson Peale.* Edited by Sidney Hart, David D. Ward, and Lillian B. Miller. xlv + 513 pp., frontis., illus., index. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000. \$75.

This volume is not simply a good read or even an excellent book. It is an outstanding work, for it tells a human interest story set in a time that tends to be glossed over in American history.