Cecilia Rosengren, »On the Deathbed: Margaret Cavendish on What to Say in Times of Grief«

ABSTRACT
The article highlights a couple of fictitious speeches of dying persons, written by the 17th century philosopher, dramatist and author Margaret Cavendish. The speeches are included in her book Orations of Divers Sorts, Accomodated to Divers Places (1662), in which early modern society is displayed in various rhetorical situations. In the introduction Cavendish invites the reader on a tour through a metropolitan city, while eavesdropping on people talking. Her book is in a way a theatrical staging, which fits well with the Renaissance metaphor of »theatrum mundum«. Relating Cavendish's intervention on this stage to early modern philosophical discussions on emotions and to the rhetorical genre as such, the article discusses how Cavendish conceived of the concepts of grief and comfort in her age.

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Introduction

Deathbeds have most likely always evoked a complex set of feelings and emotions – grief, anxiety, anger, relief, envy et cetera. Nevertheless, in pre-modern western societies the deathbed was thought of as a place where the transition from life to death was something you should welcome without fear. It was a tamed death, a familiar event, as the historian Philippe Ariès calls it in his classic works on death and dying in western history. Unless you were stricken by a sudden or violent death, which was generally seen as an exception and something no one talked about, the prevailing notion was that you were in some way or another forewarned of death’s arrival and could thus prepare yourself and the people around you. Moreover, surrounded by family, friends and neighbours watching by your last hours on earth, you had the opportunity to perform the art of dying well, *ars moriendi*, in terms of public gestures that offered both council and consolation from within a Christian tradition and a context of salvation. In fact, Ariès writes, death was a ritual organized by the dying person himself, who presided over it and knew its protocol […] and carried out, – in a ceremonially manner, yes, but with no theatrics, with no great show of emotion.

All the same, the ritual opened up for both theatrical and rhetorical situations, which inter alia meant handling emotions and passions put in play by the dying person and those attending. Following Ariès’ argument, this particular aspect of the deathbed scene became more important when attitudes to death and dying slowly changed during the early modern period into a more modern conception of death as something abrupt, unfamiliar and frightening – so frightful that we dare not utter its name – a wild death, in Ariès phrasing, which was not related to the notion of a shared humanity and its destiny, but rather to the specific existence of individuals and one’s own death, or the passing away of the other person. It was a death that called for personal tombs and other memorial practices for the purpose of consolation and reminiscence. This individualized, dramatized and rhetorical treatment of death was according to Ariès noticeable in the early eighteenth century and was soon turned into the cult of tombs and cemeteries in the centuries that followed.

In the following I want to highlight a number of fictitious
deathbed speeches from the period of transition from tamed to wild death, and to read them in the light of these notions. The speeches were included in a book of orations, *Orations of Divers Sorts, Accommodated to Divers Places* (1662), written by Margaret Cavendish, a seventeenth century prolific author of various literary and philosophical works. My questions are: Do the speeches of dying persons support the idea of a change of mentality in the face of death? Do they entail the emergence of a new need of consolation and perhaps a new conception of grief?

Margaret Cavendish was a controversial figure in her times. She defied gender expectations and insisted upon being taken seriously as an intellectual person. She wrote and published several books in an age that had no actual place for such a persona. Her social standing made a career as an author possible, though her living conditions were from times to times harsh and her sex hindered any real impact on the philosophical and literary scene. She was born in 1623 as Margaret Lucas, a daughter in a royalist family. As one of Queen Henrietta Maria’s ladies-in-waiting she was forced into exile 1642, an exile that lasted almost twenty years. While in Paris she married into the scientifically interested family Cavendish, in which household the philosopher Thomas Hobbes had worked for many years. Her husband William and his brother Charles encouraged Margaret to take up studying and to take part in their philosophical discussions of the day. At that time she had no formal training, but according to her autobiographical notes, she had had an urge for studying and writing since she was a child.

In her writings to come – first in exile and then back in England, from 1660 to her death in 1676 – she was to explore all sorts of genres: natural philosophy, drama, novel, poem, essay and oration. She also developed her own natural philosophy, embracing the new science but at the same time criticizing its dualism and mechanical concept of nature.

Although much of an autodidact and a loner, Cavendish belonged to the modern intellectual milieu of her times. She was well acquainted with the new philosophical standpoints and in her books she discussed the ideas of René Descartes, Henry More, Pierre Gassendi among others. Not least Thomas Hobbes is likely to have played an important role in her self-fashioning as a writer of philosophy – as an opponent as well as a source of inspiration. »Hobbes is an obvious starting point for trying to set Cavendish into contemporary context«, as the historian of philosophy Sarah Hutton has pointed out. Thus I think it is helpful to briefly present Hobbes’ reflections on the emotion of grief, which Cavendish surely had come across, before turning to the book of orations and the dying persons’ speeches.
The philosophical enterprise of the seventeenth century was preoccupied with knowledge foundation and rationalistic reasoning. Nevertheless, as the philosopher Susan James has convincingly shown, the passions played a crucial part in the early modern philosophical understanding of the human being. Thomas Hobbes, for instance, believed that the differences in people’s natural wit – in their capacities for judgement, and incidentally, for fancy – lie[d] in their passions and principally in the strength of their desires for various forms of power, including wealth, knowledge, and honour. In his seminal work *Leviathan* (1651) – in the first part *Of Man*, chapter six, »On the Interior Beginnings of Voluntary Motions; commonly called the Passions. And the speeches by which they are expressed« – Hobbes identified seven fundamental passions for sustaining human life: appetite, desire, love, aversion, hate, joy and grief. Hobbes stated that these passions were all voluntary motions – as opposed to vital motions, like breathing, pulse, digestion, et cetera – and as such they were always dependent upon the faculty of imagination and a precedent deliberation, an expression of the human will and capacity. He concluded: »Will therefore is the last Appetite in Deliberating.«

The seven passions described by Hobbes, had each an intrinsic potentiality to develop into more specific passions. The passion in focus for this article – grief – was accordingly a displeasure of the mind, a want of power and a dejection related to a spectrum of emotions and expressions of emotions, like weeping, shame, blushing, pity, fellow-feeling, cruelty, envy and so forth. The forms of speech, countenance, motions of body and actions, by which the passions were expressed were furthermore linked to particular intentions and particular situations such as the dying person on her deathbed. A specific human desire for consolation or comfort in relation to grief was however not mentioned by Hobbes, which does not come as a surprise considering his overall analysis of power and his analysis of human nature and the instinct of self-preservation. The closest match to consolation in Hobbes’s thought is perhaps pity or fellow-feeling, though in a peculiar and individualistic way:

> Griefe, for the Calamity of another, is PITTY; and ariseth from the imagination that the like calamity may befall himselfe; and therefore is called also COMPASSION, and in the phrase of this present time a FELLOW-FEELING.

The word fellow-feeling may have been in Cavendish’s mind when she, in her orations, turns to the reader and appeals to his or her compassion to visit the dying persons, though here in the name of »charity« and »humanity«:
—[...] your charity calls you forth to visit the sick, and when as death hath released those sick persons of their pains, humanity will persuade you to wait on their dead corpse to the grave [...].

### Orations of Divers Sorts

*Orations of Divers Sorts, Accommodated to Divers Places* (1662) consists of 180 speeches, including a short prefatory speech, of which twelve are speeches of dying persons. According to Cavendish’s own words in a later book – *CCXI Sociable Letters* (1664) – the orations were only written to »Exercise my Fancy« But this is surely an understatement, since she also makes clear that she wants the orations to be useful, as should be the purpose of all scientific and literary endeavours. She claims in the prefatory speech that »the subjects of my orations being of the most serious and concernable actions and accidents amongst mankind, and the places most common and public, it hath caused me to write my orations rather to benefit my auditors than to delight them.« The narrative frame of the speeches is intriguing. In the preface of the book, Cavendish invites the readers to go for a tour with her into a metropolitan city and then to its countryside, in times of peace and war, and peace again, observing the social life and listening to people talking and arguing. This framing gives Cavendish the opportunity to present a dramatic and many-sided representation of the early modern western European society she was familiar with, by the means of various speech acts. In *CCXI Sociable Letters* she comments on this practice and says that it is »Fit and Lawful that both Parties should bring in their arguments as well as they can, to make their Cases Good.« In reality Cavendish let many parties speak, which makes *Orations* a sort of social space, a public sphere *avant la lettre*, where a hypothetical discussion of multiple voices of political and social matters could occur. Susan James, the editor of the modern edition of *Orations*, argues that Cavendish broke the rule of formal rhetoric by introducing multiple voices and not just two sides to a question. Accordingly the book contains »speeches of all sorts, and in all places fit for orations, speeches or particular discourse.« Cavendish adds that they are »general orations, viz. such as may be spoken in any kingdom or government – a standpoint that enabled her to express different views without openly defying those in power in her home country. Cavendish had political interests, as a defender of both the absolute monarchy and the rights and honour of her husband, who had been severely affected by the civil war. The rhetorical genre made it possible for her to be sharp in opinions without taking sides, which could have been risky for a woman and the wife of a person who many considered a traitor.

The objective for Cavendish was, however, not to publish yet
another rhetorical handbook in the spirit of Cicero or Quintilian. Neither did she want to reproduce a number of handy commonplaces, as in the contemporary The Academy of Eloquence: Containing a Compleat English Rhetorique, exemplified, Common Places and Formula’s digested into an easie and Methodical way to speak and write fluently, according to the Mode of the present Times [...] Upon emergent occasions (1663). Cavendish dissociates herself from a kind of artificial eloquence in other early modern books of orations and she vindicates an idea of natural eloquence since, in her words: it is better to be silently wise than foolish in rhetoric. Her wish is to match sense and reason, instead of matching words. So, with a more open and free style that matches sense and reason, rather than words, she hopes that her speeches will be useful in every man’s life, in public life and not just as a delight for private companies.

Notwithstanding this critical tendency towards rhetoric, Cavendish was certainly acquainted with the classical tradition, not least through Hobbes’ translation of Aristotle’s rhetoric. Aristotle’s three types of orations are represented among her 179 orations. There are (1) demonstrative orations that praise and dispraise; (2) deliberative orations that aim to prove a thing profitable or unprofitable; and, (3) judicial orations that accuse and defend a cause. The narrative that frames these different sorts of speeches is, in my reading, very effective. As mentioned above, Cavendish invites the reader on an imagined eavesdropping tour. It starts in the marketplace in a city in a country on the brink of civil war, a situation Cavendish had experienced herself and feared would reoccur. The first orations deal with the pros and cons to this frail political situation, which unfortunately ends in war. The following speeches are held in the field of war, some performed by distressed and mutinous soldiers. But, Cavendish says, wars bring ruin and destruction to one or some parties if not to all, and loss causes men to desire peace. So when peace finally arrives the reader visits the city again, now in ruins, and listens to the citizens’ opinions on how to overcome the disorders and the misery, and how to reconstruct a social and political order. The orations deal with questions like the relationship between the monarch and the subjects; the king’s counsellors’ part; different aspects on government; the utility of theatre houses; the freedom of conscience and speech; social customs like weddings and funerals et cetera. In seven of the orations the role of women is the topic for discussion; these are held in a more private setting as a response to a misogynist public speech. They fit nicely into the genre that developed within la querelle des femmes, which shows how well Cavendish was aware of and successfully could use the common places in the Renaissance rhetorical tradition if she wanted to. The same goes for her representation of the
peasants’ talk, following the common places on how to depict
the happiness of rural life. The travel ends at a university and
sleepy orations among fellow students.

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THE SPEECHES OF DYING PERSONS

In the order of the book’s orations the twelve speeches of dying
persons are placed after the nine speeches that focus on the
relation between the monarch and his subjects and before the
twenty-eight funeral speeches. The orations are the following:

A Kings Dying Speech to his Noble Subjects (no 74)
A Daughters Dying Speech to her Father (no 75)
A Soldiers Dying Speech to his Friends (no 76)
A Dying Speech of a Loving Mistress to her Beloved
Servant (no 77)
A Foreign Travellers Dying Speech (no 78)
A Lovers Dying Speech to his Beloved Mistress (no 79)
A Sons Dying Speech to his Father (no 80)
A Young Virgins Dying Speech (no 81)
A Husbands Dying Speech to his Wife (no 82)
A Common Courtisans Dying Speech (no 83)
A Vain Young Ladies Dying Speech (no 84)
A Fathers Speech to his Son on his Deathbed (no 85)

Maybe Cavendish put these speeches in a random order and
maybe she wrote them for the purpose of exercising her fancy,
in any case they all dramatize deathbed scenes in certain social
settings – the state (king to subjects), the family (daughter to
father, son to father, wife to husband, father to son), and also in
more loosely knitted contexts of friends, lovers, soldiers and
travellers. Cavendish used her experience as a play-writer and
she let the characters perform the act of dying while communi-
cating a message to a specific addressee. But since they do not
represent a realistic situation, they do not offer real council
and consolation as in the old *ars moriendi* tradition. So, what
is performed? What is the message?

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Memento mori

In many ways the speeches perform a sort of *memento mori*, as
an enlightening sign in midst of Cavendish’s orations of politi-
cal and social issues. Through the speeches Cavendish reminds
the readers of their own mortality, in line with the pregnant
skull in a Renaissance portrait or the details in a Baroque
vanitas painting, or the short life of »bubble man« in the widely
read *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying* (1651) by bishop
Jeremy Taylor. Taylor writes that to die well is to live well in life,
to examine your way of living and the fundamental conditions
of the short human life, and by doing so you prepare for your
own calm transition to the after world. Taylor says that:
he that prepares not for death, before his last sickness, is like him that begin to study Philosophy when he is going to dispute publickly in the faculty. All that a sick and dying man can do is but to exercise those virtues, which he before acquired, and to perfect that repentance which was begun more early.  

Cavendish’s dying persons seem very aware of these circumstances. They have all come to terms with the fact that death is approaching, but some blame themselves for a too late awakening. In the common courtisan’s dying speech (no 83) the orator informs her friends and lovers that if she had taken care of her body and soul, she would have been in a better condition, «for had thought of Death, or could imagine the pains that I now feel, the pocky, rotten pains that torture my weak body, I should have been less covetous of wealth and more careful of health.»  

A vain young lady (no 84) reproaches herself in the same way. She had tried to avoid death as far as possible. She tells her friends that she

Cavendish’s speeches of dying persons confirm the idea that the dying persons are in charge of the event, independent of what kind of life he or she has behind. The pedagogical task for the dying persons is to convey that they have made friends with death, and in a consoling effort urge their addressees to also accept the fact of death. Even if, as the foreign traveller declares in his speech (no 78), it is normal for humans not to have »the curiosity to travel into Death’s kingdom», death is unavoidable and should be welcomed when the time has come. As the dying daughter asks her father (no 75):

Why do you mourn that Death must be your son-in-law? Since he is a better husband than any you could choose me or I could choose my self, it is a match that Nature and the Fates have made; wherefore be content.

The persons dying in Cavendish’s speeches have been forewarned of their death and their words are part of the preparation to leave this world in peace, as the virgin says to her friends (no 81): »I do perceive the holy angels hover about my soul to bear it to the Gods when parted from my body [...] As for my body, though it be young, yet is it only fit for Death.»  

There are no escape routes and therefore no pain in dying. The
dying persons are calm and in a comforting way they call upon the mourners to be calm as well.

Cavendish’s advice on what to say in times of grief can thus be said to activate the art of dying and a notion of tamed death. As Ariès pointed out, the dying person was more worried about the fear of not having been forewarned of death than fearing of the actual death itself. Cavendish’s dying persons seem to act within the old paradigm. Grief is something that is expressed through certain repertoires of social gestures. Death is still something the dying persons are prepared to welcome. So instead of offering a Hobbesian rational discourse on human grieving, which could have been plausible considering Cavendish’s support of parts of his philosophy, the speeches seem to be closer to traditional notions of grief and the act of grieving. The conception of wild death, frightening and dramatized, that is taking form during Cavendish’s lifetime, can however also be found in the speeches. According to the Oxford English Dictionary grief was during this period understood as a deep or violent sorrow of an individual person, caused by loss or trouble, as for example is shown by the common places represented in The Academy of Eloquence (1663):

——Drenched in a sea of sorrows – Love, jealousie, anger and sorrow divided his heart, and drew strange sighs from him. He bare the image of his sorrow in his dejected countenance [...] He opened his mouth, as a flood-gate of sorrow [...] She poured her self into tears without comfort, as her misery seemed devoid of remedy [...] Sorrow having clos’d up all the entries of thy mind.32

In the dying daughter’s speech to her father (no 75) this deep sorrow is very near. The daughter anticipates her father’s reaction and tries to convince him not to lament her death: »Father, farwell! And may that life that issues from my young and tender years be added to your age! May all your grief be buried in my grave [...] May comfort dry your eyes, God cease your sorrow.«33

——To be remembered——

Even if Cavendish’s dying persons show little anxiety, they nevertheless worry about being forgotten in the world of the living. If forgotten, what was the purpose of living? In the speeches the passion of grief is connected to want of power, more in line with Hobbes’s thinking, and the expressions of envy, jealousy and anger towards the living. An example of this is the dying husband who tells his wife not to re-marry after his death (no 82):

——Wife, farewell; for Death will break our marriage knot and will divorce our persons, but not dissolve our love, unless
you be inconstant; for Death hath not that power to dis-unite souls, for they may live and love eternally; but if you marry a second husband [...] you will bury all remembrance of me; and so I shall doubly die, and doubly be buried [...] but if you live a widow you will keep me still alive, both in your name and memory.34

In the same vein, the lover (no 79) is tormented not by the pains of his sick body, but by the thought of being forgotten when dead, if his mistress will take another lover: »O my jealous thoughts do torture more my mind than the pains of death do torture my weak body.« 35 And the soldier tells his friends at his deathbed (no 76) that he fears that »the service I have done my king and country will die with me and be buried in oblivion’s grave.« 36

The mourners too are supposed to experience a kind of grief. But once again the displeasure of mind is more related to the fear of being forgotten in the world of the living. The dying son is sorry to cause his father the grief of him dying without issue (no 80):

——Father, I have been an unprofitable son, for I shall die a bachelor and so leave you no posterity to keep alive your name and family, which is a double grief, both to yourself and me, indeed to me it is a treble grief, because the fault is only mine, loving vain pleasures and liberty so much as made me unwilling to be bound in wedlock bonds [...] besides, I trusted my youth and health [...] but Death will alter that design, and you and I must both submit to Heaven’s decree. Yet have I this to comfort me, that you did never command me to marry, wherefore my fault was not a fault of disobedience [...], which makes me die in peace.37

When there is an issue the dying persons can happily look forward to posterity »in name and fame«38 as the dying father tells his son (no 85). Thus, the real »displeasure of mind« for Cavendish has to do with the fear of disappearing without trace, which after all would mean that she stands on the threshold to a more modern conception of death such as the one Ariès points to, in which the human being becomes conscious of his or her specific individual and lonely life. This thought goes well with Cavendish’s own ambition in life. Her biggest fear was to be forgotten, and since she was childless, this fear was a major driving force in her writing and publishing. Her attitude is typical for the horror of oblivion that was an obsessive pre-occupation among the social elite in the seventeenth century according to the historian Keith Thomas.39 This horror is certainly linked to the new conception of the individual as an autonomous entity and the hardening social
competition, and is shown for instance in the growing popularity and importance of monuments over dead persons, often on one’s own initiative.

**To Conclude**

Even if the nine speeches of dying persons in Margaret Cavendish’s *Orations of divers sorts* most likely express a premodern conception of death and dying, they can also support the idea of a change of mentality in the face of death and the emergence of a new need of consolation and a new conception of grief that focuses on the individual existence and death rather than a shared human destiny. Cavendish’s writing as a whole could be interpreted in this way, as a form of social assertion for her as an individual to deal with the abyss of existential loneliness and the want of consolation. The *memento mori* is still an important reminder of the constant changes and the inevitable death, but new openings to create a posthumous name promises long after life. Cavendish could use her prolific publishing as a sort of monumental memorial, though wary of the precariousness she complains already in *Philosophical Fancies* (1653): I write, and write, and’t may be never read. / My Bookes, and I, all in a Grave lye dead. Cavendish was wrong; a comforting thought.

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**Endnotes**

1 Philippe Ariès: *Western Attitudes towards Death from the Middle Ages to the Present* (Baltimore, 1975) and *The Hour of Our Death* (London, 1981 [1977]).

2 Ariès: *Western Attitudes towards Death*, 33 ff. For the *ars moriendi* tradition, see Mary Catharine O’Connor, *The Arts of Dying Well: The Development of the Ars Moriendi* (New York, 1966) and Atkinson, David William. *The English Ars Moriendi* (New York, 1992). The different Christian churches had different interpretations of the practices around dying, but all stressed the importance of dying well as to resist vices and to secure the salvation.

3 Ariès: *Western Attitudes towards Death*, 11ff.

4 Ariès: *Western Attitudes towards Death*, 13.


6 The research interest in the life and work of Margaret Cavendish is growing constantly. These books give a good and nuanced picture of Cavendish’s achievement as a woman intellectual and natural philosopher in the seventeenth century: Lisa T. Sarasohn: *The Natural Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish. Reason and Fancy during the Scientific Revolution*, (Baltimore, 2010); Emma L.E. Rees: *Margaret Cavendish. Gender,
Cecilia Rosengren, »On the deathbed: Margaret Cavendish on what to say in times of grief«. 


1 Margaret Cavendish: »A true Relation of my Birth, Breeding, and Life«, in Natures pictures drawn by fancies pencil to the life (London, 1656), 368 ff.


4 James: Passion and Action, 213.


6 Hobbes: Leviathan, 43.

7 Margaret Cavendish: »Orations of Divers Sorts, Accommodated to Divers Places«, in Political Writings, Susan James (ed.) (Cambridge, 2003 [1662]), 120.

8 Margaret Cavendish: CCXI Sociable Letters (London, 1664), »The preface«

9 Cavendish: Political Writings, 129.

10 Cavendish: Political Writings, 119f.

11 Cavendish: CCXI Sociable Letters, »The preface«

12 Cavendish: Political Writings, 119.

13 Cavendish: Political Writings 5, 118

14 Susan James, »Introduction«, in Cavendish, Political Writings, xxii.

15 By T. B. of the Inner Temple: The Academy of Eloquence: Containing a Compleat English Rhetorique, exemplified, Common Places and Formula’s digested into an easie and Methodical way to speak and write fluently, according to the Mode of the present Times […] Upon emergent occasions (London, 1663).

16 Cavendish: Political Writings, 129.


18 Cavendish: Political Writings, 119.

19 Cavendish: Political Writings 5, 118

20 James Taylor: The Rule and Exercise of Holy Dying (London, 1651), »The Epistle Dedicatory«

21 Cavendish: Political Writings, 201–207.

22 Cavendish: Political Writings, 206.

23 Cavendish: Political Writings, 206.

24 Cavendish: Political Writings, 203.

25 Cavendish: Political Writings, 202.

26 Cavendish: Political Writings, 205.

27 Cavendish: Political Writings, 206.

28 Cavendish: Political Writings, 206.

29 Cavendish: Political Writings, 203.

30 Cavendish: Political Writings, 202.

31 Cavendish: Political Writings, 205.


33 Cavendish: Political Writings, 201.
34 Cavendish: Political Writings, 205.
35 Cavendish: Political Writings, 204.
36 Cavendish: Political Writings, 202.
37 Cavendish: Political Writings, 204f.
38 Cavendish: Political Writings, 207.
40 Thomas: The Ends of Life, 253.
41 Margaret Cavendish: Philosophical Fancies (London, 1653), 78.