Empiricism became popular as an explanation that people are defined more by sensory exposure than by any predetermined spiritual inclinations. The literature of the period tended to comment on the theory of empiricism in one way or another: John Dryden advocated empiricism wholesale in his adaption of “Cymon and Iphigenia,” a story of a man’s self-improvement after seeing a beautiful woman. The widespread acceptance of this new doctrine lead some enterprising female minds to take up the pen and offer their own feminine perspective on the matter, such as Margaret Cavendish’s _The Convent of Pleasure_ famously illustrating a convent wherein a group of women surround themselves with sensory pleasure. When taken together, the two stories offer insight into how the age-old topics of love and marriage were meant to interact with Britain’s newfound fascination with empiricism, particularly how the gaining and utilization of sensory knowledge was thought to differ between men and women. These differences in depiction cause the development of men to fit the model of empiricism much closer than women.

Cymon, the protagonist of “Cymon and Iphigenia,” is a “fool of nature” (Dryden 94) transformed into a gentleman by his attraction to Iphigenia. His story is the perfect model for empiricism: Cymon is described as a useless disappointment to his noble father for his dullness and general lack of initiative. He starts the story as a base creature bereft of knowledge and
purpose just as empiricists envisioned all people starting their life. It is only when he uses his senses to experience his surroundings, the presence of Iphigenia in this case, that Cymon has a reason to want of improve himself in order to impress a woman. A man must experience and want sensory pleasure, as it is “that sense of want (that prepares) the future way to knowledge.” (Dryden 94) Dryden depicted men as having no inherent virtues: What virtues Cymon does have are actively gained and practiced. Cavendish seemed to agree with Dryden in her *Philosophical Letters*, wherein she presented active virtues “wisdom…carefulness…hardiness, humility, industry…valor and courage” (Boyle 520) as desirable traits in men. They must actively glean these virtues from sensory experience and practice, so men were reflective of the concepts of empiricism.

It is of note that even as an effective model for empiricism, “Cymon and Iphigenia” exposed the flaws in empiricist thought through its depiction of Iphigenia. Dryden described her as “the goddess well expressed, not more distinguished by her purple vest than by the charming features of her face, and ev’n in slumber a superior grace.” (Dryden 94) She began the story with grace and charm that starkly contrast Cymon’s brutishness, and the lack of explanation as to how she gained these traits through experience leads to the implication that they are inherent. None of Iphigenia’s experiences throughout the story are transformative: She only possessed the traits she began with that made her desirable to the two men who feud over her. Cavendish’s *Philosophical Letters* tellingly provided mostly passive traits like “chastity, constancy, patience, trustworthiness, thrift, and being fashionable” (Boyle 520) as virtues desirable in a woman. With the exceptions of being fashionable, which is active but accomplishes little of substance, and thrift, which is a genuinely practicable virtue, these are traits that are to be maintained rather than sought. The only activity involved in chastity in particular is the losing of it. It would seem that
depictions of women in 17th century British fiction were valued for their inherent traits that empiricism would dictate do not exist. Iphigenia acted not as a blank slate observer enlightened by sensory experience, but as the greatest factor of Cymon’s sensory experience.

The question then becomes whether empiricism was not meant to apply to women or if it applied in a different manner dictated by the differences in the sexes. The Convent of Pleasure presented readers with a female protagonist in Lady Happy, a woman who divorced herself from men in order to feed her own carnal desires and who should be the perfect subject for this question as a result. Lady Happy argued that “the fact that we are possessed of five senses… proves that Nature designed us for and invites us to experience pleasure.” (Liebert 40) She certainly believed that she should have the same sensory experience that Cymon had, but she needed to isolate herself from men for risk that she become an object of a man’s experience instead. But while Cymon is inspired to grow intelligent and topple monarchs in love’s name, Lady Happy merely created a hedonistic nest “of clothing, paintings, perfume, music, and food” (Sierra 654) to amuse herself. Cavendish pays lip service to the women in the convent having doctors and other impressive occupations among them, but the majority of the narration is dedicated to the lavish seasonal decorations. Women may be depicted as “naturally more attractive and graceful than men,” (Boyle 526) but The Convent of Pleasure showed these superior traits turn into indulgence without any male influence. Fiction in this time often depicted women as having more inherent traits than men, but less potential to use those traits for the benefit of society.

The perceived difference of men benefiting from sensory experience while women are deteriorated by it led to a marriage dynamic that Lady Happy specifically addressed as what she rejected in making her convent. She realized that she should use her inherent feminine virtues for
the betterment of a husband, much like Iphigenia does in “Cymon and Iphigenia.” She explained to Madame Mediator “that riches ought to be bestowed on such as are poor and want means to maintain themselves; and youth, on those that are old; beauty, on those that are ill-favored; and virtue, on those that are vicious: so that if (she) should place (her) gifts rightly, (she) must marry one that’s poor, old, ill-favoured, and debauched.” (Cavendish 14) Lady Happy correctly concluded that such a husband would only make her personally miserable. She only relented to marriage when she met a prince that is already worthy of her due to his high standing and turn of phrase. The prince transformed himself just as dramatically as Cymon did even if his transformation was to a womanly disguise rather than a permanent change to manhood. In its conclusion, The Convent of Pleasure seems to agree with “Cymon and Iphigenia” by having Lady Happy allow herself to be wooed by a changed man despite her protestations against marriage. The implication was that she was taking her role as a man’s empiricist sensory object too direly: She was merely “conscious of her form” and feared the “brutal lust” (Dryden 95) of men like Iphigenia did when she first saw Cymon. Lady Happy’s fear of the natural order of empiricism may have been intended as a misguided one.

However, for as much as Dryden and Cavendish may have agreed that “love is absolutely fundamental to a sane, generative, peaceful culture,” (Gelineau 216) their respective stories also acknowledge that the strong sensory influence women have over men did not always arouse the noble “tradition of courtship” (Ernst 164) marriage was intended to maintain the benefits of. Cymon may have become more intellectual and fit for his royal calling, but these positive changes were accompanied by an increased bloodlust: Cymon waged war on Iphigenia’s betrothed, a far cry from the sedentary pastoral life he was previously leading. The arranged marriage with Pasimond is presented as an unjust obstacle to Cymon’s fulfillment, but Iphigenia
is conflicted with “womanish complaints” (Dryden 97) over which man it would be right for her to be with. Pasimond was inspired by an empiricist appreciation for beauty to force a woman to marry him, while Cymon “reverts to the ideals of the brute” (Gelineau 224) to claim a prize wife that he has no right to through “raptus, or theft, often in terms of kidnapping.” (Ernst 164) Dryden condemned his own protagonist by equating his kidnapping of Iphigenia with rape. The simple idea that men piece their identities together from their sensory experiences with women becomes far more complicated when multiple suitors exist to teach the blank slate jealousy and contempt. Cavendish alluded to this complication by opening *The Convent of Pleasure* with two gentleman discussing how being “extremely handsome, young, rich, and virtuous…is too much for one woman to possess.” (Cavendish 14) Iphigenia and Lady Happy were both too desirable to not be available through acceptably virtuous means, naturally causing the men to dishonorably conspire the acquisition of the women that empiricism dictates are their only way to define themselves as real men.

Cavendish further illustrates the flaws in 17th century marriage by having her characters portray it as little more than a system of ownership for wicked men to exploit so they can get as many women as possible. The women of the convent seemed to have little on their minds other than frivolous home decoration and their own discontent with men. They composed several plays based entirely on “husbands (who) drink away their livelihood, gamble themselves into debt, or conduct affairs under the marital roof.” (Liebert 38) The women could conceive of no greater narrative than this, and even admitted that their own plays were garbage. This reinforces the idea that women couldn’t aspire to higher callings like men could. But the men were shown to be equally useless without women: The men outside of the convent talk of nothing but the women now unavailable for their admiration. They had a brief debate on whether it’s more barbarous to
“make love adultery” or to “make adultery love.” (Cavendish 19) They had different views on how natural and morally acceptable adultery was because that standard of marital loyalty was much more ironclad with women than with men, probably because empiricism made sensual pleasure much more valuable for men. Cavendish criticized the idea that indulgence was shameful in women but necessary for the fulfillment of a man’s potential. *The Convent of Pleasure* shows that men’s greater potential influence made their sensual indulgence more harmful than women’s merely unproductive indulgence, a moral captured in Madame Mediator’s observation that the disguised prince “kissed with more alacrity than women use—a kind of titillation, and more vigorous.” (Cavendish 29)

It’s fascinating to consider that a man writing an epic and a woman writing a farce were both so heavily influenced by the same philosophy of empiricism, considering how differently wired they were thought to be in the 17th century. Even more so that they largely concurred on how the conventions of romance interacted with the idea that people gain knowledge and identity through their senses. Ironically, the only point they seemed to disagree on came down to a gendered difference in perception: Dryden acknowledged that empiricism has some negative effects and connotations, but ultimately romanticized the positive qualities a woman’s influence created in men. Cavendish acknowledged that love has positive influences on people, but ultimately called for reform to account for the largely negative influence of a marriage system that allowed men more than one sensual muse in their lives. The advent of empiricism allowed for such analysis to be accomplished by replacing the previous theory that human beings are spiritually inclined towards certain behaviors and are unfixable regardless of environmental influence. It allowed the people of the 18th century to discern whether or not empiricism applied to both men and women. Whether or not they came to a consensus on the matter, their artistic
works seem to prove that both genders experienced some form of empiricism in their development, just not necessarily the same kind.
Works Cited


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