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*Gendered Authorship and Cultural Authority in Siri Hustvedt's the Blazing World*

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**The author's "person": examining gendered authorship and cultural authority in Siri Hustvedt's *The Blazing World*, after the work of Alice B. Sheldon and Margaret Cavendish**

1. Introduction

Siri Hustvedt's sixth novel *The Blazing World* (2014) takes as its subject the sexism prevalent in the contemporary visual arts market. In this article, we seek to demonstrate how the hoax perpetrated by the novel's central protagonist, Harriet (Harry) Burden, works to capture the complex differences between how creative works by women and by men are interpreted and valued in contemporary culture. We begin by acknowledging the contribution of Margaret Cavendish, from whose seventeenth-century work of philosophical fiction Husvedt's novel draws its title. We highlight how Cavendish's ideas on knowledge and cultural authority remain useful as a way of reading and responding to ongoing struggles with gender and authority in patriarchal culture. We move on to examine the tensions and complications created by each of the three living masks Hustvedt's protagonist Harry employs as part of her series of hoaxes in *The Blazing World*. In and through this illustration, we contend that the visual arts industry represented in the novel can be read as a metaphor for the literary industry in which the author Siri Hustvedt is an active participant. In writing *The Blazing World*, Hustvedt draws from numerous literary examples, most importantly the hoax perpetrated by the writer Alice Sheldon. The central question in this paper becomes the notion of gender and its relation to cultural authority. Given that the struggles of feminism, as Seán Burke has written, have been primarily a struggle for authorship, how should the erasure and

belittlement of women's work be responded to by women artists and authors? Is it enough to demonstrate it, to call it out, to parody it, as Harriet Burden does in *The Blazing World*, or should we come to terms with a form of making and meaning that is outside the dominant, commercial mode of success?

## 2. Acknowledging and re-presenting Margaret Cavendish's gender work

Margaret Cavendish's genre-blurring seventeenth-century book *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World* (1666) is "fundamentally a text about imaginative worldmaking" (Hanlon 53). Her writing, recently excerpted and anthologised in *Paper Bodies: A Margaret Cavendish Reader*, occupies a diverse collection of genres (not unlike Hustvedt's novel), and has been said to engage "surprisingly modern themes", in particular "feminisms, utopianism and self-fashioning" (Pohl 223). Cavendish was insistent about entering into the world of men – in 1662, she was the first woman ever to enter and partake in conversation at The Royal Society for example - and, like, Harry Burden, her insistence on being heard, on having her work noticed, was deeply performative. She refused to be silenced. Mona Norain argues that Cavendish's "studied flamboyant transgressions into masculine spaces and interjections into restricted discourses" demonstrate her deliberate and intentional construction of a public persona at a time when "fame was a deeply gendered phenomenon" (71-75).

Cavendish was widely criticised during her lifetime because of her tendency to understand the natural world in term of anecdotes and analogies based on lived experience. Aaron R. Hanlon, an English professor with an interest in scientific writing and the enlightenment, has observed of Cavendish that "as she was the only woman publishing on natural philosophy in the seventeenth century, the critical tradition tended to define her contribution to natural

philosophy largely by the phallogocentric logic of what she is not” (51). Indeed, the reception of much of Cavendish’s work during her lifetime provides an all too familiar echo for contemporary women writers. Prolific and insistent, she was an apparently divisive figure. She was defended by educated women, such as Bathsua Makin, who wrote that she, “by her own genius, rather than timely instruction, overtops many grown men” (qtd. in Narain 70), but powerful figures amongst those men, such as Lord North and Samuel Pepys, certainly more influential voices at the time, publicly ridiculed her, the latter calling her a “conceited, ridiculous woman” (Narain 70). Some biographical representations of Cavendish read her insistence on engaging with domains such as philosophy and science – then exclusively the domains of men - as a form of attention-seeking; others represent her as mad. This is a reception very much mirrored in the public reception of Harry Burden and her life’s work in *The Blazing World*, a discussion we will return to later. In both cases, as we shall discuss, the author’s “person” – being female – is perceived by the cultural authorities as problematic, and in both cases the women in question recognise this problematisation squarely and respond to it through forms of imaginative and intellectual parody that foreground roleplay, hoaxes and masks.

## 2. The construction and reception of the female artist/author in *The Blazing World*

The central protagonist of *The Blazing World* is a visual artist in her sixties who has tried and failed to gain attention for her creative work, and has long suspected that this has been withheld from her on the basis of her gender: “I chased the men howling *Look at me!*” (27). As, Corinna Sophie Reipen writes in her book, *Visuality in the Works of Siri Hustvedt*, a recurrent theme in Hustvedt’s work is that “the space between viewer and viewed is an intersection of multiple discourse, and art comes to life on the threshold” between the viewer

and the narrator (52). This threshold of understanding is what Hustvedt is most concerned with in *The Blazing World* and for Harry, the threshold she is interested in examining is the one between the work of art and the artist. Harry has played the role of compliant and supportive wife and mother through several decades of marriage and parenthood and confesses that at times she had felt fully immersed and engaged by those roles. But as the novel opens she is preparing to devote time to her art, and she realises that she resents her late husband Felix Lord, a successful New York art dealer, for never taking seriously the artistic work his own wife. Harry makes several observations about the place of women in the art world fairly early on in *The Blazing World*, stating that, “It has often taken women longer to gain a hold in the art world than men. The remarkable Alice Neel worked without much attention until she was in her seventies. Louise Bourgeois made a breakthrough in her show at MOMA in 1982. She was seventy” (71). Harry notes that

It is interesting that not all, but many women were celebrated only when their days as desirable sexual objects had passed. Although the number of women artists has exploded, it is no secret that New York galleries show women far less often than men. The figures hover around twenty percent of all one-person shows in the city, despite the fact that almost half of those same galleries are run by women. (72)

Hustvedt makes a similar point in her essay “My Louise Bourgeois” when she writes that young female artists are perceived of being incapable of being great artists “because the young, desirable, fertile body cannot be truly serious, cannot be the body behind great art” (*A Woman* 32). In the novel, Harry, who Hustvedt has claimed she has modelled in some ways on Bourgeois, is certain that the same machinations that have withheld attention from artists

such as Neel and Bourgeois are also responsible for her own side-lining within the art world (*Blazing* 30).

Harry aims to reveal that cultural authority is routinely held from female artists and is readily bestowed upon male artists, and that there remains a fundamental difference in how critics interpret work by male and female artists. As Seán Burke has stated, “It would scarcely be an exaggeration to say that the struggles of feminism have been primarily a struggle for authorship – understood in the widest sense as the arena in which culture attempts to define itself” (quoted in Eagleton, 1). Mary Eagleton writes that, “Second wave feminism always presumed that access for women applied to the cultural sphere as much as any other” (1). Yet, while it is true that women have, especially since the 1960s and 1970s, been active and prolific producers of texts and visual artworks, it also remains true that their work is still received differently from men’s, in a way that demonstrates an automatic withholding of any kind of cultural authority for the female artist. Harry wants to prove that, “All intellectual and artistic endeavours, even jokes, ironies, and parodies, fare better in the mind of the crowd when the crowd knows that somewhere behind the great work or the great spoof it can locate a cock and a pair of balls” (*Blazing* 1).

In many ways, then, little has changed in terms of cultural authority since Margaret Cavendish was alive. Writing in 1990, Janet Wolff contends that

Any look at major national and international exhibitions confirms that men predominate in the visual arts. Women’s work, across the arts, is given considerably less space in critical discussion.

(123)

This is so despite several decades of creative and critical feminist interventions – such as the work of the Guerrilla Girls – that have worked consistently to expose, parody and critique such practices<sup>1</sup>. Hustvedt, who is active as a New York art critic, is well aware of the mechanisms for keeping women out of the cultural centre. “The history of art is full of women lying around naked for erotic consumption by men. Those women are mostly unthreatening, aren’t they?” she writes, in an essay critiquing an exhibition of Robert Mapplethorpe’s photography, curated by Pedro Almodóvar (*A Woman* 41).

Determined to intervene in such a culture, Hustvedt’s central protagonist in *The Blazing World*, Harry, chooses three young men - Anton Tisch, Phineas Q. Eldridge and Rune – as living masks or actors in an elaborate series of art hoaxes. Her first conspirator, Anton Tisch (Tish) is a young, white, up and coming artist, whom Harry chooses because, as one of her journal entries reveals, he *looks* the part. In the first of the three staged exhibitions, Harry creates the artwork *The History of Western Art*, which she affectionately calls Big Venus, and exhibits it undercover, in collusion with Tish. The work comprises a large sculpture of a nude woman who is an “overblown, three-dimensional allusion to Giorgione’s painting of Venus” and covered with pictures of photographs and texts (43). Big Venus is also accompanied by a figure of a man, dressed in a suit, staring at her, as well as seven small story boxes with a series of small figures within them. The work is a success, or in the words of fawning, misogynistic art critic Oswald Case, “a tour de force” (44).

Harry feels vindicated by the success of *The History of Western Art*, writing in her journal that, “They have swallowed that Tish shit whole, gulped it down . . . the little boy with a few

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<sup>1</sup> The Guerrilla Girls are a group of anonymous female artists, writers, performers, and other arts professionals who fight discrimination through humor, activism, and the arts. They have been active since 1985. See [www.guerrillagirls.com](http://www.guerrillagirls.com).

fresh acne scars has whetted their appetites for more Wunderkind jokes, more smartass jokes with historical flourishes and the buffoons are pounding out their enthusiasm in reviews.”

Though she notes that “they haven’t found a tenth of my little witticisms, my references, my puzzles” (59).

The success of *The History of Western Art* is tentative confirmation of the gender bias Harry has always suspected of existing in the art world. As Harry’s friend and confidante Rachel, asks, “What did it mean that an amorphous *they* had celebrated her work when it arrived in a *twenty-four-year-old body with a cock*, to borrow Harry’s words? What were the enthusiasts really seeing?” (110). Yet the success of this first mask is obscured by the de-legitimisation felt by both Harry and Anton. After the success of the exhibition, Anton feels he can longer work, that Harry has stolen his “purity” as an artist, an irony given the virgin/whore paradox of the naked female muse throughout the history of Western art (115). Tish bows out of the arrangement with Harry, and leaves New York, telling her that it is she who needed him, not the other way around, because without him, the work would never have been so successful. This wounds Harry, but also makes her uncertain of the merit of Big Venus. She tells Rachel, that she will have to try again, to repeat her experiment, although Rachel warns her against this, claiming that the “psychological toll was too great” (115). Harry, ambitious as ever, doesn’t heed her friend’s advice and plans another hoax: with the “right face I can do more” (61).

Harriet’s next mask is Phineas Q. Eldridge, who she meets through her son Ethan. Phineas is no stranger to Harry’s subjective positioning as the other. Phinny moves into Harry’s Red Hook home, becoming one of the waifs that Harry cares for there. Over months, Harry and Phinny become friends, and then co-conspirators on an exhibition titled *The Suffocation*



*Rooms*, though Phineas warns her that “she should think twice about taking on a swishy black man” as a living male mask (129). Phinny is all too-aware of his outsider status: “White boys, the Anton Tishes of the world, have no need to explore their identities, of course. What is there to explore? They are the neutral universal entity, the unhyphenated humans. I was pretty much all hyphen” (137). Phinny’s awareness of his hyphenated-self means that he is sympathetic to Harry’s plan, and for her desire to have her work taken seriously as an artist, and not just as the hyphenated identity of the woman-artist. Unlike Anton, Phinny is an intellectual equal for Harry with a keen understanding of the bias of the art world, though in Phineas’ case, it is the world of acting, the performing arts, in which he is constantly a bit player, facing “rejections, more rejections and a few measly parts for a freckle-faced, light skinned black man who can do any and all accents on request” (125).

It is useful here to consider the aesthetics and themes of the exhibition that is *The Suffocation Rooms* in light of our focus on cultural authority and gendered authorship. The exhibition is an installation comprising of seven rooms, each complete with a table and chairs and cutlery. The rooms get smaller as the furniture within them gets larger, so that, as Phinny states “by the time you hit the seventh room, the scale of the furniture had turned you into a toddler” (131). The rooms also house two of Harry’s metamorphs – soft stuffed dolls which are heated and get progressively hotter in each room. *The Suffocation Rooms* is a moderate success, or as Phinny recounts it, “a white, half Jewish woman became a black gay, male artist of some small notice, causing a little stir among sophisticated black and/or gay or both people, but white heterosexual people too. Without the latter it’s back to the ghetto, an art ghetto, but a ghetto nonetheless” (137). But the show is not as successful as *The History of Western Art*. As Phinny points out, “black people (are) feminised and infantilised by racism” (140), and yet, Harry suspects that as an artist it is much better to be a black, gay man than an

old white woman. She wonders what people might have seen in *The Suffocation Rooms* had it been shown under her own name: “Were I to come out with *The Suffocation Rooms*, the powers that be would instantly back away. The work would look different. Would it look old-womanish all of a sudden? I insist that this is a question with urgency” (158).

What Harry learns through her experiment with Phinny is the importance of intersectionality in evaluating artistic merit. And while it may be better to be black and gay in the art world than it is to be female and old, the moderate success of *The Suffocation Rooms* compared to the rave reviews garnered by *The History of Western Art* also prove that what is most desirable is a triple act: heterosexuality, masculinity and whiteness. Of Rune, Harry’s third living mask, and of Tish, Harry writes that, “they have no identity (and) their freedom lies in precisely this: they cannot be defined by what they are *not* – not men, not straight, not white. And in this absence of circumscribed being, they are allowed to flourish in all their specificity” (270).

Rune, Harry’s third mask, is a white, handsome, single-named wunderkind, whose art works sell for millions, and who bears some resemblance, in terms of his cultural capital, to the American artist Jeff Koons. In using Rune Harry hopes to utilise his fame to “prove how the machinery worked, how ideas of greatness make greatness” (172). Her work with Rune is genuinely collaborative; Harry tells him, “With your name on my work it will *be* different. Art lives in its perception only. You are the last of three, and you are the pinnacle” (234). Rune, while being blind to the gendered nature of the art world – “there are lots of women in art now” (234) – is lured by the idea of perpetrating a hoax. In preparation for their collaboration, the two artists record themselves wearing blank masks, and they role play swapping sexes. The game turns violent, Rune, as a female (Ruina) starts to whine and

speak softly and in response, Harry masked as a male, becomes angry, condemning and aggressive. Later, Harry wonders why Rune acted so passively and whether it reveals something of what he thinks of women. Her own aggressive behaviour, meanwhile, is an embarrassment to her. Rune, by contrast, is not bothered by the game. The video of Rune as Ruina and Harriet as Richard Brickman (a pseudonym Harry later uses to publish articles and reviews) is shown as part of *Beneath*, the installation the two create and exhibit. *Beneath* is a maze, made of thick white plexiglass walls. The maze is, in Phineas' words "claustrophobic and disorientating" (261). The width and height of the walls gradually expand and contract. Many of the windows built into the maze feature screens or boxes depicting masks, a roll of gauze, or a piece of paper with two lines on it. However, while some of these boxes are identical, in others the colour of the crayons, the position of the lines, the proximity of the masks or the appearance of the gauze changes. There are videos of Rune, sitting at a table. There are post 9/11 images of mutilated cars and children's shoes covered in ash, and there are also peepholes in which the viewer can see the videos of a masked man and woman locked in a violent dance. Phineas is impressed by the work and notes that, "Harry had cleverly designed an art object that forced people to pay attention to it, because if they didn't, they'd never get out of (it)" (262).

*Beneath* is a huge success, and Harry watches "them coming, one after another, waiting in a long line outside the gallery and the maze, my maze. I wanted to throw back my head and howl, It's mine, but I clenched my teeth" (290). Rune is surprised by the success but tells Harry that with her name on it, the work "would have been nothing" (298). That her work is so successful when it is shown under Rune's name, rather than her own, is, again, difficult for Harry to bear. Worse still, when Harry seeks to unmask herself, Rune refuses to give Harry credit for *Beneath*, stating, "It's mine now. It's disguise and more disguise, Harry, he said.

You lift up one mask and you find another. Rune, Harry then Rune again. I win” (299).

Without Rune’s validation, Harry cannot claim ownership of *Beneath* and when she announces that she created the work, no one believes her. Critic Oswald Case writes that “*Beneath* looks nothing like those squishy Burden works that are being shown now” (179).

The art dealer William Burridge states that Harry’s work, is characterized by “round feminine shapes, mutant bodies, that kind of thing. *Beneath* is hard, geometrical, a real engineering feat. It’s just not her style, but it made sense for Rune” (277). When reading a review of *Beneath*, Harry points out that the reviewer “does not know he has written about me, not Rune. He doesn’t know that the adjectives, *muscular*, *rigorous*, *cerebral* can be claimed by me” (292).

These observations about *Beneath* are clearly laden with the ideological binary of gender stereotypes – the conflation with men’s work with terms like ‘hard’, ‘muscular’, ‘geometric’ and ‘cerebral’ (to name just a few), and the dismissal of women’s work with terms such as ‘squishy,’ ‘feminine’ and ‘round’. The terms which are applied to the work Harry creates under her own name and the work she presents with her masks illustrate the stark difference in how women and men’s work is critically received and interpreted.

### 3. The critical cultural pattern of dismissal: women’s work

In *The Blazing World*, Harry draws parallels between her hoax and what she calls “the Tiptree drama” in which the actual historical figure Alice B. Sheldon used a male pen-name to publish some of her work. Critics, especially male critics, staunchly refused to believe that James Tiptree Jr. could be a woman, bestowing on the work the kinds of adjectives reserved for male writers, or as we can see in *The Blazing World*, male artists. Writer Robert Silverberg had a correspondence with Tiptree, whom he assumed was “a man of 50 or 55, I

guess, possibly unmarried, fond of outdoor life, restless in his everyday existence, a man who has seen much of the world and understands it well” (quoted in Itzkoff).

When rumours began to circulate that Tiptree might be a female author, Silverberg wrote, “It has been suggested that Tiptree is female, a theory that I find absurd, for there is to me something ineluctably masculine about Tiptree's writing.” He likened Tiptree's “lean, muscular, supple” stories to those by Hemingway (quoted in Itzkoff). Sheldon also created a female pen-name, Raccoona Sheldon, and there are marked differences in the reactions to Tiptree’s work and Raccoona’s. Sheldon’s biographer, Julie Phillips notes:

David Gerrold recalled finding Raccoona’s first stories to be ‘too light, too fluffy, too delicate’ and having ‘no bite’. Ted White remembered them arriving ‘with little hand-written notes on flowery notepaper’ and said, ‘They read like the work of an entirely different author – one whose stuff left me cold. (330)

Phillips notes that ‘Alli (Sheldon) herself felt more authority as a man: she felt she could write about sex, science, and violence without being second-guessed’ (260), and that ‘Tiptree allowed Alli to be, as Charlotte Bronte wished, neither male nor female, but “an author only” (261).

Writing as Tiptree to her agent in a letter that was not sent, Sheldon reveals her true gender identity. As Tiptree, she writes that, “As I saw my brave sisters, I went through terrible qualms. Everything sounded so much more *interesting* coming from a man. (Didn’t it? Didn’t it, *just a little?* Be honest)” (377). The interesting thing about Tiptree is that Sheldon not only used him as a pen name, but also corresponded with many people under the pseudonym. In the 1960s and 1970s the science fiction community was a small one, and as Tiptree

Sheldon wrote to and received letters from agents, editors, and fellow writers such as Ursula Le Guin, Harlon Ellison, Craig Kee Strete and Joanna Russ. Sheldon experienced Tiptree not just as a pen name, but also as a persona. Unlike Harry she never set out to write under male name to prove the existence of sexism, as Phillips notes:

Ali had not been trying to dream up a new identity that day . . .  
and she didn't recognise it as such when it arrived. Later, Allie  
sometimes wondered if Tiptree hadn't been in her all along,  
waiting to be given a name. But he doesn't seem to have been a  
deliberate plan. (246)

Yet there are very strong similarities between the depression Harry feels at the end of her hoax, and how Sheldon feels when her true identity is revealed. Like Harry, Sheldon does not get to control the revelation, her many correspondents link the death of Mary Bradley to the death of Tiptree's mother and knowing that the rumours are circulating, Sheldon comes out to a number of her friends. But far from being released by the truth of her identity, Sheldon finds herself struggling to be taken seriously, not only as a writer, but as a human being. In her diaries, she wrote:

quite a few male writers who had been, I thought, my friends and  
called themselves my admirers, suddenly found it necessary to a  
adopt a condescending, patronizing tone, or break off our  
correspondence altogether, as if I no longer interested them.  
(Phillips 420)

This took a toll on Sheldon's creative work, and once a prolific writer, she "submitted nothing for publication for the next three years, and though she eventually wrote a number of

stories and another novel, nothing was ever as direct, honest, and exciting as her work before she was exposed” (Phillips 424). Sheldon not only lost the respect she had commanded as Tiptree, her creative practice too was affected by the revelation of her female identity.

What the Tiptree hoax proved was that men and women’s work was being read differently; that there are different expectations of writing and authority when it comes to female and male writers. Gilbert and Gubar write that “in publically presenting acceptable facades for private and dangerous visions women writers have long used a wide range of tactics to obscure, but not obliterate their most subversive impulses” (74). It has been well-documented that, throughout history, women have used male or genderless pen names to have their work published; authors such as George Eliot, Currer Bell, HD all the way to JK Rowling have felt the pressure to present their work under masculine pseudonyms. In 2016 writer Catherine Nicholls set up a fake email address and pitched her manuscript under a male name. Nichols sent out enquiries under the name George Leyer fifty times in total, and notes that the manuscript was requested seventeen times under the male pseudonym, as opposed to twice under her real, identifiably-female, name.

During the last three or four decades, a number of women writers and literary critics have been vocal in the public domain on this issue. As literary critic Pam Morris argued in her influential *Literature and Feminism*, first published in 1993:

male critics always treat books by women as if the texts themselves were women, and thus impose upon them the same kinds of stereotypes that generally characterize thinking about women. Writing by women is accused as being formless, restricted, irrational, over-emotional and lacking in discipline. (43)

More recently, writer Roxane Gay claimed that books by male authors “are allowed to be more than what they are by virtue of the writer’s gender while similar books by women are forced to be less than what they are, forced into narrow, often inaccurate categories that diminish the content of the book.” Or, as Canadian novelist and poet Margaret Atwood put it, “when a man writes about things like doing the dishes, it’s realism; when a woman does it it’s an unfortunate genetic limitation” (199).

Hustvedt, too, has noted such gendered and belittling criticisms of her own literary work, providing examples in her most recent collection of essays such as the journalist who believed that Hustvedt’s husband must have taught her about neuroscience and psychoanalysis, and the “grand old man of French publishing who had read my third novel and, with a magisterial wave of his hand, said, ‘You should keep writing.’” Later she cites a female fan who asked Hustvedt whether her husband had written the parts of *The Blazing World* that had been written from the point of view of the male character, Bruno Kleinfeld (*A Woman* 79-80). Indeed, many reviewers make an issue of Hustvedt’s marriage to novelist Paul Auster. In a review of *The Summer Without Men*, Lionel Shriver states, “She has impressively distinguished herself in her own right, emerging from the shadow of her literary luminary husband.” Of her relationship with Auster, Hustvedt has written, “I am a woman writer married to a man writer (note that the latter sounds bizarre but the former doesn’t)” (“Underground” 123). It is also interesting then, that much of the current scholarship which surrounds Hustvedt focuses on the visual or psychological aspects of her fiction, rather than on the feminist impulse which can be clearly seen throughout her oeuvre, especially in novels such as *The Blindfold* (1992), *The Summer without Men* (2007) and *The Blazing World*. In her book, *“I am because You are” : Relationality in the Works of Siri Hustvedt*, Christine Marks writes that “Hustvedt’s work, while not always explicitly labelled as feminist, also



partakes in gender discourses and targets simplified constructions of gender identity” (5). We would argue that a feminist reading of Hustvedt’s work is not only timely, but necessary.

#### 4. Authorship and cultural authority in contemporary art and literature

If we read the art world as a mask for the literary world – a world Hustvedt the author has identified as being filled with sexism towards female writers – then *The Blazing World* becomes a metaphor for the plight of the woman writer. Anna Thiemann, one of the few critics to give a detailed examination of gender in Hustvedt’s novels writes that “many of Siri Hustvedt’s essays and interviews revolve around the social status of the woman artist, which she regards as symptomatic of the “widespread, corrosive presence ” of sexism (311 ). And it is true that Hustvedt has often spoken about her own marginalisation as a female artist. A benefit of critiquing work in the digital age is the way in which the rise of commercialism in the literary industry has undercut, almost completely, the post-structural notion of the death of the author which Roland Barthes espoused in his essay of the same title in 1967. For Barthes, literature’s author was “impossible to know” and literature itself was “a trap where all identity is lost, beginning with the very identity of the body that writes” (1). For feminist critics, the death of the author was a deliberate denial of the authority of the writer which came at a time when female writers were beginning to achieve a measure of success. Historian Liz Stanley asked the reader to “consider what the denial of authorship actually does” (16). For Stanley the death of the author was a very convenient death for the beneficiaries of patriarchy.

Fifty years on, the increasing commercialisation of the book industry depends to a great extent on the idea of the individual author as sole originator of the text and as the authority on its genesis, purpose and meaning. It has never been so easy to know what a writer thinks

about their work or anything else for that matter. The media machine that surrounds the publishing industry plus the proliferation of content which is driven by the internet means that 'The Author' has well and truly been resurrected. As an author operating across the genres of fiction, essays, interviews and opinion pieces, Hustvedt is a case in point. Her extended interest in gender, authority and authorship is multi-layered and has played out across a range of texts, enabling readers a range of insights into her intentions with a work as complex as *The Blazing World*.

In her essay, "No Competition" for example, Hustvedt argues that although Karl Ove Knausgaard writes like a woman, because he is a man his work is applauded, successful, revered. As a man, Knausgaard has the cock and balls that Hustvedt mentions at the opening of *The Blazing World*, which ensure that his work is well-received. The irony is of course that when women write like Knausgaard; when they focus on the domestic, the interior, the mundane, they are accused of insufficient imagination or of confessional writing. In the same essay, Hustvedt cites a survey which finds that "on average 80 percent of a woman writer's audience is female as opposed to 50 percent for a man writer's" which means that women are far more likely to read work by men than men are to read work by women (*A Woman* 79). In addition, as Hustvedt goes on to argue, these statistics point to a bias when it comes to the expectations readers bring to books. Speaking with *Signature Magazine*, Hustvedt was asked whether she has ever written under a male pen name. She responded:

When I was young, I had the experience of receiving responses to my work (both rejection and acceptance letters) from editors who believed I was a man: Mr. Hustvedt . . . The tone of the letters addressed to the male Siri Hustvedt was strikingly

different from the tone of those addressed to the female Siri Hustvedt. The respect and seriousness granted me as a man was frankly astounding. I confess I felt rather shocked by the difference, and I have never forgotten it. (Quoted in Yabroff)

She goes on to speak about the sexism she has encountered because of her writing, stating that sexism is “alive in the sciences and in the literary arts.” Hustvedt elaborates:

Literature, however, labors under a cloud of inferiority in a culture where science has become the arbiter of truth. Poems and novels are often seen as fluffy, soft, imaginary, and feminine in ways physics never is. Add to that the fact that women are the great consumers of fiction, not men, then you have a roiling sea of worry. Therefore, the desire to make literature serious, to dignify it with tough, masculine traits, with beards and bulging biceps and swagger, becomes all the more important. To a significant degree this has meant championing work written by men or work that connotes masculinity in one way or the other. (Quoted in Yabroff)

She has also noted that “anything that is associated with women and girls loses status, whether it is a profession, a book, a movie or a disease” (“Underground” 125).

Feminist literary critic Annette Kolodny argues that “reading is a learned activity which, like many other learned interpretive strategies in our society, is inevitably sex-coded and gender-inflected” (quoted in Culler 307). Francine Prose supports the gist of this argument through extensive analysis and example in her essay titled “Scent of a Woman’s Ink” which finds that

when reading work blind, the author's sex is not necessarily apparent to readers. Prose concludes that "fiction by women is still being read differently, with the usual prejudices and preconceptions." For literary critic and historian Nina Baym, the "idea of 'good' literature is not only a personal preference, it is a cultural preference" (65).

##### 5. The case of Harry as authorship erased

In both *The Blazing World* and "No Competition," Hustvedt cites the Goldberg study from 1968 in which students were asked to evaluate two identical pieces of work, an essay and a work of visual art, and in each case rated the work higher when it was signed by a man's name. In the novel, this is made manifest by the difference in the perception of Harry's work when her name is attached to it and the radically different perception of her work when it is shown by her male masks. Throughout the novel Harry struggles to be seen – to have her ideas and her creative work acknowledged. That she achieves this through her use of male masks is at once satisfying and demoralising. It is satisfying because *her work* is deemed to have power, but only when she, the female artist, is removed from it. Her invisibility as Harry is so complete that she is rendered as unmemorable by those who have known of her and her work for years. Oswald Case recalls, vaguely, seeing her in Tish's studio before *The History of Western Art* is shown:

What puzzled me is why I didn't recognise her. I must have seen her multiple times before that day with Tish. I was a regular at openings and, at least twice, I'd been to cocktail receptions uptown at the Lord's noisy digs . . . I have a keen eye, and my ears can take in a suggestive sentence fragment from across the

room and yet Mrs Felix Lord left no trace whatsoever. For all practical purposes, she had been invisible. (*Blazing* 47).

Harry herself is aware of her erasure, suggesting:

I suspect that if I had come in another package my work might have been embraced, or at least, approached with greater seriousness. I didn't believe there had been a plot against me. Much of prejudice is unconscious . . . Perhaps being ignored is worse – that look of boredom in the eyes of the other person, that assurance that nothing *from me* could be of any possible interest.

(32)

In the novel, Harry's struggle for recognition ends dramatically. When Rune refuses to give Harry sufficient credit for *Beneath* he disrupts her whole project of masking. Harry cannot claim ownership of all the pieces of her work. The effect on her is traumatic. Her relationship with her partner Bruno, who had doubts about Harry's project all along, comes to an end and she becomes very sick very quickly. Her diagnosis of terminal cancer places an expiry date on her artistic aspirations and her illness means that she can no longer physically create work. Her body, which has always been problematic for Harry, begins to deteriorate. This is hard to bear, especially given her lucidity and ambition.

A recurrent theme of Eagleton's *Figuring the Woman Author in Contemporary Fiction* is how the loss of a woman's authority over her work in terms of content, form and legal ownership, results not in a dispersal of power and a liberating deposing of 'The Author' but in a redistribution of power which confirms existing hierarchies of gender, class and race (5).

While this plays out in Hustvedt's novel, it is significant that the last artwork we as readers

see is Harry's private project, entitled *The Blazing World*. This work is a kind of heterotopia, in the Foucauldian sense, a parallel artwork that has more layers of meaning or relation to the other artworks in the book than immediately meets the eye. Harry calls the figure 'my Margaret' after Margaret Cavendish. Bruno refers to it as "the Blazing World Mother creature" (314).

In fact the figure is an artwork Harry had begun years earlier and abandoned as it "never satisfied her" (314). It is not, as Bruno remarks, anything like the "sweet, dreaming, oversized odalisque" that Harry uses for her first artwork with Tish, but is rather a "huge, grinning, naked heated-up, pregnant mama with her hanging boobs squatting in the studio" (*Blazing* 314-315). The doll is Margaret; she is also Harry. Her figure embodies fertility, giving birth to myriad smaller others, many of whom escape the body of the maternal as fully-formed adults. She is a doll who, as Harriet puts it in her journal, "gives birth to worlds" (348). Importantly, for the artist, she is not intended for the public eye. Hustvedt, all too aware of Cavendish's legacy, has Harriet quote Cavendish directly towards the end of the novel:

And if she be slighted now and buried in silence, she may perhaps rise more gloriously hereafter; for her ground being sense and reason, she may meet with an age where she will be more regarded than she is in this. (349)

In fact, Harry – and in a parallel sense Hustvedt's novel – can be read to embody the same sense of outrage and anger as that identified by Cavendish three centuries ago. Here is work that is vital, energetic, sophisticated, indeed blazing, that is structurally not just rejected but

belittled and to a large extent erased by mainstream commerce and culture in the relevant field.

One of the central questions in this article is that given that the struggles of feminism are primarily struggles around authorship and authority, how should the erasure and belittlement of women's work be responded to by women artists and authors? Harry's final artwork – coming as it does in the wake of the parody and demonstrative calling out of the game established by her living masks series – can in many ways be read as a valid mode of response.

That Margaret does not become the final public exhibit in Harry's recent series is, in our view, meaningful. It suggests that the work is something the artist creates for herself and that she is not going to let it be critically and commercially judged. Speaking of the little figures which she puts in Margaret's head, or which come out of her vagina, Bruno says that "it wouldn't matter . . . if anyone saw them or not. She (Harry) needed to make them" (*Blazing* 315). Margaret is seen however, by the inhabitants of the house, by her family, and by Sweet Autumn Pickney, a friend of Anton Tish's who comes to spend time with Harry as she dies. Sweet Autumn is a healer and is only given one chapter of the book for her narrative, but significantly this is the final chapter. The very final scene in the book takes place about eight months after Harry has died. Ethan, who stays in touch with Sweet Autumn, asks her if she would like to see some of Harry's work before they categorise it. Sweet Autumn has no interest in art: "There's a lot of art I don't understand. To be honest, it's kind of boring to me," she states. But Margaret is different, and while looking at her, Sweet Autumn gets "the sacred feeling" (378). Sweet Autumn spies, amongst all the little people, a small sculpture in Harry's likeness which she points out to Ethan and Maisie. While looking at the figure, Sweet

Autumn sees it glow purple, and as she takes a last look at the artworks in Harry's studio, she sees "their auras blazing out all around them" and understands that this is because art contains "the spirits and energies" of the people who made them (379).

Like Cavendish's dismissed philosophical and scientific treatises on knowledge, Harry's final artwork is intricately decorative and stylistically elaborate, and this seems to make it less easy for it to be assimilated by reason and intellect. It sits – deliberately – outside the dominant mode of understanding. As Cavendish scholar, Ryan John Stark has said of the philosopher's work, "she advocated consistently that fancy and adornment were appropriate stylistic ingredients in scientific and historical prose" (264). For Stark, this is notable precisely because her male contemporaries – Francis Bacon, Thomas Hobbes and Thomas Sprat – "targeted science and history as areas in which fanciful and elaborate writing styles *had no place*" (our emphasis, 264). Such writing was read as "less pure, reasonable and epistemically viable" and was treated by the dominant scientific establishment as "an immoderately dressed woman" – in fact, Harry's sculptural form of Margaret embodied (Stark 266).

Cavendish's own *The Blazing World* – also a work of fiction – can be read along with Harry's final artwork as both a rejection of the dominant mode of discourse and a conscious effort to do things wholly differently. The empress in the Cavendish's novel becomes the absolute monarch in a utopian world, then leads an all-female army to rescue her native land, often read as an allegorical England. Here, as Norain argues, "Cavendish creates strong female characters who achieve fame through their extravagant exploits subverting prescribed norms for feminine behaviour" (82). With the form of the utopian novel, Margaret Cavendish sets down the rules of philosophical and scientific engagement and tries to get at the same set of ideas in a more imaginative and perhaps more complex mode. Harry too, has set down the



rules – in her case of commercial artistic practice, of exhibitionism – and reshaped, reimagined and renegotiated what it is she wants to say with her art, and to whom.

In Hustvedt's novel, Margaret as artwork is there to be read as *feminine* or *domestic* – terms which are still being used to denigrate women's creative work. Her version of the female form is not the sexualised nude so commonly used in the masculine art-world; it is in many ways antithetical to the female figure represented in much visual art. The act of childbirth is, of course, biologically reserved for females and so the artwork could be viewed as essentially feminine, were it not for the fully-grown figures to which Margaret gives birth. Harry makes direct reference in her journals to Cavendish as a woman who had no children. Instead, she gave birth to “paper bodies”, her breathing works, and she loved them dearly” (*Blazing*, 349). The phrase “paper bodies” is a direct quote from Cavendish, who used it to describe her own manuscripts, works she knew were capable of making “a great Blazing Light” when they burned (quoted in Bowerback and Mendelson 9).

It is interesting that Harry's Margaret has the power to move Sweet Autumn, to connect with her on a deeply personal level. This seems to us a final statement from Hustvedt on what art should be and what it is for, that the act of judging art is fallacious at best, and destructive at worst. Hustvedt critic Corinna Sophie Reipen argues that the characters of postmodern genius that Hustvedt represents in her work, and which Harry in many ways embodies, are “not materialistic,” but rather their art “reflects a meeting of intellect and emotion through which deep meaning and a long-living reputation of the artist is established” (57). To end the book with a focus on the Margaret artwork is to suggest that it is this work upon which Harry's reputation might be finally established.

Again, Cavendish, alongside Harry, can offer us a model for the creation of new work on our own terms, outside and in the face of the grand procession. Cavendish and Harry are, above all, defiant, but they are not unreachable, and neither is their work. Cavendish's legacy, in which her novel *The Blazing World* forms just one of a group of significant works, is a mode of thinking predicated on "vitality, irreducibility, plurality and relationship" (Stark 274). Hers is a serious intervention in the procession; at the same time it is a complex contribution to the field that stands robustly on its own terms. These same characteristics can be said of the fictional Harry's body of artworks, and, in a neat para-textual parallel, of that body of written work we identify with the author Siri Hustvedt.

## 6. Conclusion

The sad irony of the death of the author – in the case of Cavendish – is that it has taken several hundred years for her status as an author – and hence as a scientist, novelist and a philosopher – to be seriously considered. At the time of her death, like Harry, she felt deeply betrayed by the way in which her work had been both dismissed and belittled by her contemporaries, the all-male cultural authorities in her field. The shame of this game of silencing, ridicule and belittlement, which, as we have shown here, is still alive and well in contemporary literature, is that that the likes of Harry and Margaret remain structural outsiders to the professions and fields to which they have so much to offer. The effect can be an inability to practice at all – financial, professional and skilled opportunities become either completely inaccessible or remain frustratingly just out of reach.

Harry's three hoaxes – her so-called living masks – are failures. This is the case not because they are critically unsuccessful – in fact the opposite is true – but because, at least until the fictional 'book' (the novel itself) put together by the academic I.V. Hess, they cannot be

properly received by the industry and/or audience to which they are directed. They are failures of perception, or readership and reception that are beyond the control of the artist/author, even while she is making a direct attempt to trick and to parody the status quo. Ironically, by the end of the series of hoaxes, Harry Burden remains even more crucially defined by *what she is not* than she was before the series began.

Conversely, Hustvedt's project as living, contemporary author could not be read as a failure on any grounds. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the calling out the phallogocentric order has had to become a large part of the way Hustvedt goes about engaging in and defending her right to authorship and authority. As Anna Thiemann has argued, "her novels enter into a dialog with traditional feminist perspectives on female creativity and identity by playing with voices and perspectives and reimagining the woman artist as a highly complex and ambivalent figure" (215). Like Cavendish, Hustvedt's mode of thinking (and writing) is predicated on vitality, irreducibility, plurality and relationship. In identifying similarities between the flesh-and-blood author Siri Hustvedt and her fictional creation Harry depicted in *The Blazing World*, we are not seeking to literally mistake flesh-and-blood author for character, nor are we seeking to install Hustvedt on some kind of pedestal that seals her off as the source of all meaning in relation to her creative work. Rather, we are urging our own readers to problematise "the very identity of the body that writes" just as Barthes did in his now infamous essay, "The Death of the Author" (1). For it remains the case that contemporary culture does place great importance on the author's "person" (Barthes 1). In our view, Hustvedt herself provides a model for women struggling to respond to the continuing erasure and belittlement of women's creative work. Her novel *The Blazing World* can be usefully read as both responding to and complicating the work of other silenced, disregarded or masked women in literature, art and science, including Margaret Cavendish

and Alice Sheldon. It is enormously useful to demonstrate the way in which such silencing operates, to call it out, to parody it, to make it visible in all its complexity, as Hustvedt does in *The Blazing World*, but we should also, as Hustvedt does, demand access to the dominant, commercial mode of success, that is, to professionalism and the cultural authority that comes with it. As long as the author's "person" does matter, it needs to matter with or without a cock and balls. Hustvedt insists, and so too, should all of us for whom authorship remains strategically important.

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