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A Duchess “given to contemplation”: The Education of Margaret Cavendish

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Abstract

Margaret Cavendish was an unusually public figure in early modern England. She published widely under her own name on several secular subjects, including natural philosophy, inequality of the sexes, and educational theory. This article explores the development of Cavendish’s educational theories through a detailed account of her life, which took place in three discrete stages. First, it examines her youth, when she was informally educated by family members and private tutors. It then follows her education as she traveled to Europe with her embattled queen and met her husband, William Cavendish. And finally, it shows that with William’s support and patronage, Cavendish returned to England at the Restoration as a confident and mature female author. In doing so, this article addresses questions related to Cavendish’s pedagogical beliefs, why those beliefs sometimes differed from her own experiences, and how she communicated these ideas through her literature.

Keywords: autodidact; early modern England; educational theory; humanism; individualized instruction; women’s education

A learned Woman is thought to be a Comet, that bodes Mischief, whenever it appears.

—Bathsua Makin, *An Essay to Revive the Antient Education of Gentlewomen*

The English author and natural philosopher Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle (1623–1673), reflected on the meaning and purpose of life: “There’s a saying, That men are born to live, and live to dye; but I think some are onely born to dye, and not to live; for they make small use of life, and life makes small use of them.”¹ For Cavendish, the most meaningful use of life was to contemplate and write, which she did from her earliest years.² As she explained in her autobiography, “I was from my

¹Margaret Cavendish, *Sociable Letters*, ed. James Fitzmaurice (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 1997), 16. Since I address Cavendish as a biographical subject whose writing is inextricably linked with her pedagogical beliefs, I use the historical past tense throughout this article. However, all of the works cited are extant and therefore could be referred to in the literary present. For all other authors, even those contemporaneous with Cavendish, I have followed the convention of using the literary present.

²Cavendish, *Sociable Letters*, 23; Katie Whitaker, *Mad Madge: Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, Royalist, Writer, and Romantic* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2003), 18; and Amy Scott-Douglass, “Enlarging

childhood given to contemplation, being more taken or delighted with thoughts than in conversation with a society.”³ Cavendish later cited her childhood manuscripts as evidence of her innate intelligence: “But it pleased God to command his Servant Nature to indue me with a Poetical and Philosophical Genius, even from my birth; for I did write some Books in that kind, before I was twelve years of age.”⁴

Cavendish repeatedly portrayed herself as innately intelligent and largely self-taught—a necessity, given that women in seventeenth-century England were barred from attending the grammar schools and universities of their male peers.⁵ This presentation of natural genius lent credibility and singularity to her corpus, while challenging the contemporary notion that women lacked reason.⁶ In her lexicon, the term *genius* generally referred to “a person’s characteristic disposition” or “a person’s natural aptitude for, or inclination toward, a specified thing or action.”⁷ Cavendish used the term in this way to describe both herself and the age in which she wrote.⁸ In doing so, she emphasized her own agency and originality. The fact that her “genius” was disposed toward contemplation and the study of poetry and natural philosophy enabled Cavendish to overcome her lack of education and write many books. However, she also depicted herself as writing at the speed of thought, reminiscent of the poetic frenzy inspired by supernatural genius: “For my phancy is quicker than the pen with which I write, insomuch as it is many times lost through the slowness of my hand, and yet I write so fast, as I stay not so long as to make perfect letters.”⁹

As an adult, Cavendish published “some thirteen books in scores of editions,” using nearly every conceivable literary genre then available.¹⁰ Arguably the most

Margaret: Cavendish, Shakespeare, and French Women Warriors and Writers,” in *Cavendish and Shakespeare, Interconnections*, ed. Katherine Romack and James Fitzmaurice (Burlington, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2006), 166.

³Margaret Cavendish, “A True Relation of My Birth, Breeding, and Life,” in *Paper Bodies: A Margaret Cavendish Reader*, ed. Sylvia Bowerbank and Sara Mendelson (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2000), 57.

⁴Margaret Cavendish, *The Life of the Thrice Noble High and Puissant Prince, William Cavendish, Duke, Marquess, and Earl of Newcastle* (London, 1667), sig. Bv.

⁵As Rebecca Bushnell notes, “Enrollment in school, whether under a tutor at home or in a town or church, should mark a boy’s separation from the world of women (traditionally at the age of seven).” *A Culture of Teaching: Early Modern Humanism in Theory and Practice* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 28.

⁶Jacqueline Eales, *Women in Early Modern England, 1500–1700* (Bristol, UK: Taylor & Francis Group, 1998), 43. For more on “female inferiority,” see Lisa Walters, *Margaret Cavendish: Gender, Science and Politics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 42; Gweno Williams, “Margaret Cavendish, *A True Relation of My Birth, Breeding and Life*,” in *A Companion to Early Modern Women’s Writing*, ed. Anita Pacheco (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 167; Galen, *De Semine*, ed. Phillip de Lacy (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1992), 195; and Paracelsus, “Man and the Created World,” in *Paracelsus: Selected Writings*, ed. Jolande Jacobi, trans. Norbert Guterman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 36.

⁷*Oxford English Dictionary Online* (Dec. 2020), “Genius,” A.II.6.a, A.II.7.a, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/77607?redirectedFrom=genius>.

⁸Readers should assume that any references to Cavendish refer to Margaret Cavendish. In cases where there might be confusion with her husband William or his brother Charles, then the full name (Margaret Cavendish, William Cavendish) or sometimes just the first name (William, Margaret) is used. This is particularly true when discussing her life prior to marriage.

⁹Margaret Cavendish, *Natures Pictures* (London, 1656), sig. Aaa4r.

¹⁰Fitzmaurice, introduction to *Sociable Letters*, xix.

prolific female author of her era, Cavendish's publications not only ensured her fame but also contradicted the belief that women were intellectually inferior to men. Cavendish used these publications to develop many pedagogical theories of her own and to advocate for women's education—a focus of the current study—which remains the key defining characteristic of her early feminism.¹¹ In terms of gender, Cavendish began with the premise that women *do* possess rational souls and *are* capable of learning and benefiting from education. She provided herself as an example, insisting that her books would have been even more intelligent, more well reasoned, and more orderly if she had been allowed to attend school like her brothers.

As a pivotal figure in the history of women's writing and education, several questions arise related to Cavendish. Why are some of her educational theories different from the types of education she received? How did her own education influence her thoughts on women's education? And how unusual were her ideas at the time she was writing? This article addresses these questions by examining Cavendish's own education through three discrete life stages.

Cavendish died the Duchess of Newcastle, but was born Margaret Lucas, the daughter of a wealthy landowner. When her idyllic childhood home was sacked at the beginning of the English Civil Wars, Margaret fled to Oxford, where she joined the court of Queen Henrietta Maria in the summer of 1643.¹² Margaret served the queen first at Oxford and then in Paris. While in Paris, Margaret met the much older and higher-ranking William Cavendish, Marquis of Newcastle (1592–1676). William, who had served King Charles I as Royalist commander of his northern armies, entered exile upon suffering a shattering defeat at the Battle of Marston Moor in July 1644. After a brief courtship, Margaret and William were married in 1645. They spent another fifteen years in exile together, in Paris and then Antwerp, before returning to England at the Restoration in 1660.¹³

Because of these distinct stages in Cavendish's life—childhood in England, early married life in Europe, and mature adulthood back in England—her education can be described in rather concrete terms. In the first stage of her life (1623–1645), Margaret was educated at home by her mother, her older siblings, and private tutors. In the second stage of her life (1645–1660), after gaining experience in the court of Queen Henrietta Maria, Cavendish went on to read, write, and study under the informal tutelage of her husband, William, and brother-in-law, Sir Charles Cavendish.¹⁴ During her time in Paris, Cavendish also had access to what historian Lisa Sarasohn describes as “a kind of intellectual salon at Newcastle's residence” that

¹¹Here I draw on Mendelson and Crawford's definition of feminism “as a critique of women's position in society and as a desire to improve it.” Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England 1550–1720* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1998), 6.

¹²Henrietta Maria was the Catholic wife of King Charles I. She, with her maids in waiting, fled to her native France shortly after the English Civil Wars began. Whitaker, *Mad Madge*, 58–59.

¹³In 1660, after two decades of civil wars and Parliamentary rule, England abandoned its political experiment and restored its monarchy, inviting Charles II to return to the island and rule in his father's place.

¹⁴Kenneth Charlton, “Women and Education,” in *A Companion to Early Modern Women's Writing*, ed. Anita Pacheco (Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 9.

included Thomas Hobbes, René Descartes, and the atomist Pierre Gassendi.¹⁵ In the third stage of her life (1660–1673), Cavendish returned to England and engaged in a rigorous course of study that enabled her to engage with the philosophical work of her contemporaries, while further developing her own educational theories. Following this tripartite structure, I link Cavendish’s own educational experiences with her developing pedagogical theories. Cavendish argued for an individualized education that emphasized variety, pleasure, and creative freedom. She also suggested that women should be educated to the same extent as men, and that when they were, they would make better wives and partners. In this way, Cavendish used her privilege as an aristocratic self-publisher to forward an early feminist agenda.¹⁶ I show that although Cavendish did not publish a single extended treatise on her educational theories, she did address women’s problems—especially their lack of educational opportunities—repeatedly throughout her corpus.¹⁷

Bathsua Makin offered an early commentary on Cavendish, describing her as autodidactic, or self-educated. Like Makin—the educated daughter of a schoolmaster named Henry Reginald—Cavendish also had a great deal to say about the problem of women’s education.¹⁸ Cavendish’s numerous publications and sustained criticism of gender inequality likely inspired Makin to include Cavendish in *An essay to revive the antient education of gentlewomen* (1673), which includes this description of her: “The present Dutchess of New-Castle, by her own Genius, rather than any timely Instruction, over-tops many grave Gown-Men.”¹⁹ Makin emphasizes Cavendish’s “own Genius” and downplays education in order to counter the argument that women “had not rational souls as well as men.”²⁰ Her effort to educate women drew on the work of the Dutch scholar Anna Maria van Schurman, who advocated for providing women a full humanist education.²¹ As Douglas Grant notes, “Mrs.

¹⁵Lisa T. Sarasohn, *The Natural Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 4; and Douglas Grant, *Margaret the First: A Biography of Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, 1623–1673* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957), 94. For more on the work of these intellectuals, see William Petty, *The Discourse Made before the Royal Society* (London, 1674), sig. A8v-A9v.

¹⁶For more on Cavendish and women’s education, see also Annette Kramer, “‘Thus by the Musick of a Ladies Tongue’: Margaret Cavendish’s Dramatic Innovations in Women’s Education,” *Women’s History Review* 2, no. 1 (1993), 58; and John Rogers, *The Matter of Revolution: Science, Poetry, & Politics in the Age of Milton* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 177–211.

¹⁷As Marina Leslie notes, “Cavendish would directly or indirectly be exposed to nearly every form of education recognized as such in the period.” Cavendish used this exposure to form her own pedagogical theories. Marina Leslie, “The Pre-Neo-Liberal Education of Margaret Cavendish,” paper presented at the International Margaret Cavendish Society Conference, Trondheim, Norway, June 2019, 8.

¹⁸Grant, *Margaret the First*, 215; and Deborah Boyle, “Margaret Cavendish on Gender, Nature, and Freedom,” *Hypatia* 28, no. 3 (Summer 2013), 516–32.

¹⁹“Gown-men” are men who have attended university. Bathsua Makin, *An essay to revive the antient education of gentlewomen* (London, 1673), sig. Bv. Frances Teague describes Makin’s text as “the first essay by an Englishwoman defending women and their abilities in the classroom.” Frances Teague, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v. “Makin [née Reginald], Bathsua,” <https://www.oxforddnb.com/>. For more on Makin see *Educating English Daughters: Late Seventeenth-Century Debates*, ed. Frances Teague and Margaret J.M. Ezell (Toronto: Iter Academic Press, 2016).

²⁰Margaret Cavendish, *Philosophical and Physical Opinions* (London, 1655), sig. B2v.

²¹Paul Salzman, *Reading Early Modern Women’s Writing* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2006), 12. For more on Cavendish’s relationship to van Schurman, see Martine van Elk, *Early Modern Women’s*

Makin suggested as proper subjects for women, grammar, rhetoric, logic, physic, languages, especially Greek and Latin . . . mathematics, geography, history and music.²² However, most gentlewomen were only taught the rudiments of reading, writing, and arithmetic, so they could better function as helpmates to their husbands.²³ For Makin, Cavendish's lack of formal schooling served as a provocative example that women were born as capable as men.²⁴ Philosopher Mary Astell would later pick up and develop this theme of intellectual equity between the sexes in *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694). In it, she suggests forming an intellectual retreat for women reminiscent of Cavendish's fictional all-female communities in *The Female Academy* (1662) and *The Convent of Pleasure* (1668).²⁵

Cavendish's many publications—in which she repeatedly addressed women's education, as well as her own learning—set her apart during a time when evidence of early modern women's reading (and learning) remained “scant and anecdotal.”²⁶ As the influence of Francis Bacon and the new science promised educational reform for men in the seventeenth century, there were relatively few attempts at systematically educating women.²⁷ However, day schools, elementary schools for the poor, and boarding schools for gentlemen's daughters existed during this period.²⁸ Elementary schools were frequently held in people's homes, taught by women, and aimed to teach young boys and girls—often together—the basics of reading and writing.²⁹ The boarding schools some women attended also offered more advanced studies in classical languages, needlepoint, music, and dancing. During the second half of the seventeenth century, efforts to offer women formal education related to midwifery were squashed by men increasingly claiming all medical and scientific fields as their

Writing: Domesticity, Privacy, and the Public Sphere in England and the Dutch Republic (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

²²Grant, *Margaret the First*, 215.

²³Eales, *Women in Early Modern England*, 35.

²⁴Eales, *Women in Early Modern England*, 43.

²⁵Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, ed. Patricia Springborg (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2002), 1; Margaret Cavendish, *The Female Academy, in Plays written by the thrice noble, illustrious and excellent princess, the Lady Marchioness of Newcastle* (London, 1662); and Margaret Cavendish, *The Convent of Pleasure, in Plays, Never before Printed* (London, 1668). For more on Mary Astell, see Ruth Perry, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v. “Astell, Mary,” <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/814>.

²⁶Karen Newman, “Armchair Travel,” in *Crossing Boundaries: Attending to Early Modern Women*, ed. Anne Lake Prescott (Newark, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 2000), 216. For more on letter writing as evidence of women's literacy, see James Daybell, *Women Letter-Writers in Tudor England* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2006).

²⁷Katherine Eggert, *Disknowledge: How Alchemy Transmuted Ignorance in Renaissance England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 2; James Murphy, “Religion, the State, and Education in England,” *History of Education Quarterly* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1968), 3–34; Rebecca D'Monté and Nicole Pohl, introduction to *Female Communities 1600–1800: Literary Visions and Cultural Realities*, ed. Rebecca D'Monté and Nicole Pohl (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 9; and Mary Ann Dzuback, “Gender and the Politics of Knowledge,” *History of Education Quarterly* 43, no. 2 (Summer 2003), 171–95.

²⁸Charlton, “Women and Education,” 10–12.

²⁹Mendelson and Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England*, 321.

own.³⁰ And while a humanist education for men that emphasized classical literature and languages persisted throughout the seventeenth century, “Historians have estimated that [only] 30 percent of adult males could read.”³¹ The number of literate women was even lower, perhaps rising to 10 percent by 1640.³² Importantly, Lara Dodds shows that “Cavendish preserves, or perhaps reinvents, the decorum of the female reader.”³³ The most explicit statements related to Cavendish’s reading can be found in *Sociable Letters* and *Philosophical Letters* (1664). Indeed, Cavendish not only read, but responded critically to, Plutarch, Aristotle, John Donne, Ben Jonson, and William Shakespeare, as well as John Milton, Bacon, Hobbes, Descartes, and several others.³⁴

A lack of education for women was common during this period because, as Grant writes, “The accepted opinion was that it would be a waste to give girls more knowledge than they could use.”³⁵ Unlike her unusually well-educated contemporary Lucy Hutchinson, Cavendish had to overcome her lack of formal education in order to become, according to Sarasohn, “the first woman to publish her own natural philosophy.”³⁶ Margaret Cavendish was a pioneer who published boldly under her own name, and only as humbly as decorum demanded.³⁷ For this reason, Hero Chalmers credits Cavendish for “the birth of the modern woman author.”³⁸

Stage One: Educated at Home (1623–1645)

Margaret Lucas was the youngest daughter of the wealthy landowner Thomas Lucas (d. 1625). She admitted in her autobiography, *A True Relation of My Birth, Breeding, and Life*, that her father was not an aristocrat, although he and his family lived as if they were. Margaret’s autobiography emphasized her genteel upbringing and indicated her desire to be taken seriously, despite a lack of formal education: “I have

³⁰For a greater understanding of verb choice here, see the later discussion on Cavendish’s use of simile to compare women to worms. Isabelle Clairhout and Sandro Jung, “Cavendish’s Body of Knowledge,” *English Studies* 92, no. 7 (2011), 739.

³¹Sharon Achinstein, *Milton and the Revolutionary Reader* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 12.

³²Eales, *Women in Early Modern England*, 39.

³³Lara Dodds, *The Literary Invention of Margaret Cavendish* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2013), 5.

³⁴For more on Cavendish as a reader, see Dodds, *Literary Invention of Margaret Cavendish*, 23. For a list of the books Cavendish possibly owned, see *Bibliotheca nobilissimi principis Johannis Ducis de Novo-Castro, &c. Being a large collection of books Contain’d in the Libraries of the most Noble William and Henry Cavendish, and John Hollis, Late Dukes of Newcastle* (London, 1719).

³⁵Grant, *Margaret the First*, 37.

³⁶Hutchinson was notably “well versed in Latin” and is now known for her early translation of Lucretius’s *De rerum natura* and the posthumously printed biography of her husband, John Hutchinson. David Norbrook, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v. “Hutchinson [*née* Apsley], Lucy”. See also Jonathan Goldberg, *The Seeds of Things: Theorizing Sexuality and Materiality in Renaissance Representations* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), 122–78; and Sarasohn, *Natural Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish*, 2–4.

³⁷Paul Salzman, introduction to *An Anthology of Seventeenth-Century Fiction* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2001), xix.

³⁸Hero Chalmers, *Royalist Women Writers, 1650–1689* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1–2.

been bred to elevated thoughts.”³⁹ While she downplayed her knowledge of literature, Margaret also admitted to having a bookish nature.⁴⁰ To further underscore the studiousness with which she wished to be perceived, at the end of her autobiography, Cavendish insisted:

Though I desire to appear to the best advantage, whilst I live in the view of the publick World, yet I could most willingly exclude my self, so as Never to see the face of any Creature, but my Lord, as long as I live, inclosing my self like an Anchorite.⁴¹

Despite writing almost exclusively on secular subjects, her use of the religious term *Anchorite* here carried with it a potentially provocative Catholic connotation, especially when read in Protestant England. However, it also foregrounded the retired, contemplative life the author went on to lead.

Cavendish returned to the ideas of contemplation and imagination throughout *True Relation*. First, she described how she and her sisters passed their time when in the country. They would read, walk, and then discourse together on what they had learned.⁴² Even though their conversations served “as a major ingredient in the totally informal self-education that would be Margaret’s main preparation for her adult writing career,” they took a backstage to her own thoughts.⁴³ She described herself as “being addicted from my childhood, to contemplation rather than conversation, to solitariness rather than society, to melancholy rather than mirth, to write with the pen than to work with a needle.”⁴⁴ In this way, Margaret Cavendish portrayed herself as compelled to contemplate, to imagine, and to write. She also repeatedly described herself as melancholy, thoughtful, and solitary. She did this in order to underscore the presence of natural reason and downplay any artificial training she had received. She excused her drive to write rather than develop traditionally feminine skills. Cavendish’s addiction to contemplation lasted throughout her life and served as a defining characteristic of her autodidacticism.⁴⁵ The fact that she considered the imagination a helpmate to reason also set her apart from Michel Montaigne and Descartes.⁴⁶ For example, Montaigne writes of the imagination, “All men are shockt therewith, and some overthrowne by it. One impression of it pierceth me, and for want of strength to resist her, I endeavour to avoid it.”⁴⁷ In this instance, Montaigne represents the imagination as something overwhelming and detrimental to reason.

³⁹Cavendish, *True Relation*, 59.

⁴⁰Cavendish, *True Relation*, 60.

⁴¹Cavendish, *True Relation*, 62–63.

⁴²Cavendish, *True Relation*, 45.

⁴³Whitaker, *Mad Madge*, 23.

⁴⁴Cavendish, *True Relation*, 56–57.

⁴⁵Susan James, “The Philosophical Innovations of Margaret Cavendish,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 7, no. 2 (1999), 219.

⁴⁶Descartes considered the imagination a lower order of thinking than reason. René Descartes, *A discourse of a method for the well guiding of reason and the discovery of truth in the sciences* (London, 1649), 63.

⁴⁷Michel Montaigne, *The Essayes, Or Morall, Politike and Millitarie Discourses*, trans. John Florio (London, 1603), 40.

As the youngest in a family of eight children, Margaret received no formal training, but was instead informally educated by her widowed mother, older siblings, and “an Antient Decayed Gentlewoman.”⁴⁸ Cavendish described her education as being standard for someone of her birth, breeding, and sex: “As for tutors, although we had for all sorts of Vertues, as singing, dancing, playing on Musick, reading, writing, working, and the like, yet we were not kept strictly thereto, they were rather for formalitie than benefit.”⁴⁹ Typical of her class and gender, Margaret and her sisters were trained at home, with an emphasis on moral virtue over accomplishment. The theme of not being “kept strictly thereto” her studies endured throughout the course of her life.⁵⁰ Indeed, she often excused the imaginative spelling and punctuation in her published work with a lack of self-discipline.⁵¹ She repeated this self-description multiple times throughout her career, especially when comparing her learning to those who were formally educated. She noted that “those that are bred at Schools, have a smack of the School, at least in their behaviour, that is a constraintness.”⁵² Embracing her own creative freedom, Cavendish believed this constraint negatively affected both social interactions and literary endeavors.

While Margaret acknowledged the presence of tutors, much of her instruction during this time came from books and her siblings:

When I read what I understood not, I would ask my brother the Lord Lucas, he being learned, the sense or meaning thereof, but my serious study could not be much, by reason I took great delight in attiring, fine dressing and fashions, especially such fashions as I did invent myself.⁵³

Here Cavendish described her earliest method of self-education. She would read or contemplate an issue, muse on various aspects and from multiple perspectives, then ask a trusted male figure (first her brother, then later her husband or brother-in-law) for more information.⁵⁴ Her ability to ask questions of her brothers, who supported her intellectual inquiry, set Margaret apart from most women who spent little time with their male siblings or peers.⁵⁵ In this way, she received individualized tutorials from men who were classically trained at university, thereby gaining

⁴⁸Cavendish, *Sociable Letters*, 187.

⁴⁹Cavendish, *True Relation*, 42–43.

⁵⁰Consistent and widespread corrections found in extant copies of Cavendish’s books bely her published claim to *carelessness* and instead suggest the *careful* construction of an authorial persona. See James Fitzmaurice, “Margaret Cavendish on Her Own Writing: Evidence from Revision and Handmade Correction,” *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 85, no. 3 (Sept. 1991), 298; William Poole, “Margaret Cavendish’s Books in New College, and around Oxford,” *New College Notes* 6 (2015), 1–7; and *Poems and Fancies: A Digital Critical Edition*, ed. Liza Blake (2019), <http://library2.utm.utoronto.ca/poemsandfancies/>.

⁵¹Margaret Cavendish, *Philosophical Fancies* (London, 1653), sig. I6r; Margaret Cavendish, *Philosophical and Physical Opinions* (London, 1663), sig. A4r, B2r; Cavendish, *The Worlds Olio* (London, 1655), sig. A3v; Cavendish, *Playes*, sig. A4r; Cavendish, *Philosophical Letters* (London, 1664), sig. b2r; and Cavendish, *Grounds of Natural Philosophy* (London, 1668), sig. A2v.

⁵²Cavendish, *Worlds Olio*, 1.3.62.

⁵³Cavendish, *True Relation*, 60.

⁵⁴Grant, *Margaret the First*, 40.

⁵⁵Mendelson and Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England*, 77–78.

tangential access to a secular education denied most women.⁵⁶ The fact that she included a disclaimer regarding the seriousness of her studies due to the “great delight” she took in dressing and fashions may have been a rhetorical strategy intended to deflect criticism from her contemporaries.⁵⁷ As an adult, Margaret Cavendish’s eccentricity prompted private jokes questioning her sanity. By the nineteenth century, the now overly cited critiques of Cavendish by Samuel Pepys and Dorothy Osborne had developed into the popular myth that people cried out, “Mad Madge!” as her coach traveled the streets of London.⁵⁸ However, multiple scholars have since argued that this eccentricity was an intentional construction used to protect her writing from censure.⁵⁹ Angeline Goreau, for example, suggests that if Cavendish *was* crazy, “maybe she was crazy like a fox.”⁶⁰

Prior to the English Civil Wars and her decision to join the exiled court of Queen Henrietta Maria, Margaret’s early life was remarkably sheltered. She described the unusually insular nature of the Lucas family as persisting—by natural inclination—even after the adult children were married.⁶¹ Historian Sara Mendelson suggests that “the family’s disinclination for sociability affected the development of Margaret’s character.”⁶² Indeed, when Margaret first announced her decision to continue her education and training by serving at court, her siblings were deeply concerned.⁶³ Cavendish later discussed in various prefaces as well as in her largely autobiographical play, *The Presence* (1668), that she was so bashful and uncomfortable at court that many believed her simple.⁶⁴ The author also suggested that it was this very bashfulness that attracted William, writing, “For my Lord the Marquis of Newcastle did approve of those bashfull fears which many condemn’d, and would choose such a Wife as he might bring to his own humours, and not such an one as was wedded to self conceit.”⁶⁵ Although theirs has been described as an “intellectual and literary courtship,” on the surface their early letters contain very little to impress.⁶⁶ Held at the British

⁵⁶Charlton, “Women and Education,” 6.

⁵⁷Sarah Ross and Elizabeth Scott-Baumann, *Women Poets of the English Civil War* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2018), 200; and Fitzmaurice, “Margaret Cavendish on Her Own Writing,” 298.

⁵⁸There is no known evidence that this nickname existed prior to the nineteenth century. Samuel Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, ed. Henry B. Wheatley (London, 1893), 248; and Dorothy Osborne, *Letters from Dorothy Osborne to Sir William Temple (1652–1654)*, ed. Edward Abbott Parry (London, 1888), Letter 24.

⁵⁹Walters, *Margaret Cavendish*, 134; Katie Whitaker, “Duchess of Scandal,” *The Guardian* (Aug. 8, 2003), 1; Fitzmaurice, “Margaret Cavendish on Her Own Writing,” 298; Ross and Scott-Baumann, *Women Poets of the English Civil War*, 200; and Hero Chalmers, “Dismantling the Myth of ‘Mad Madge’: The Cultural Context of Margaret Cavendish’s Authorial Self-Presentation,” *Women’s Writing* 4, no. 3 (1997), 336.

⁶⁰Angeline Goreau, “Hers: Mad Madge Found the Perfect Ruse for Doing Exactly As She Pleas’d,” *New York Times*, Dec. 25, 1986, 38.

⁶¹Cavendish described her family’s persistent preference for one another’s company in *True Relation*, 45.

⁶²Sara H. Mendelson, *The Mental World of Stuart Women* (Sussex, UK: Harvester Press, 1987), 14.

⁶³Cavendish, *True Relation*, 46.

⁶⁴Cavendish, *True Relation*, 52–53; Margaret Cavendish, *The Presence*, in *Plays, Never before Printed*, 49; and Mendelson, *Mental World of Stuart Women*, 17.

⁶⁵Cavendish, *True Relation*, 47.

⁶⁶James Fitzmaurice, “The Intellectual and Literary Courtship of Margaret Cavendish,” special issue, *Early Modern Literary Studies* 14 (May 2004), 7.1–16.

Library, their handmade paper now creased and discolored from age and blotted ink, these letters are bound in a folio guard book with various other manuscripts. Margaret's handwriting is nearly illegible. The spelling is poor. And many of the topics she addressed when writing to William are seemingly mundane.

The extant letters from Margaret Lucas to William Cavendish—the earliest known writing we have for her—were penned during their courtship in Paris in 1645. These letters serve as a bellwether indicating the level of education and training Cavendish had received by the time she first married.⁶⁷ Despite their ordinary appearance, many of these letters show the philosophical and poetic “Genius” of the young Margaret. In letter seven, for example, Margaret described being melancholy because of the civil wars and her exile from England. Her sheltered childhood had done little to prepare her for serving at the exiled court in Paris. The insecurity and doubt she expressed in her letter foreshadowed the sense of human fallibility and skepticism that permeated her later philosophical work.⁶⁸

But supos me now in a very mallancolly humer and that most off my contempalctions [sic] are fext on nothing but dessolutions for i look apou this world as on a deths head for mortefication for i see all things subject to allteration and chaing and our hopes as if they had takin opum [opium] ther fore i will despis all things of this world i will not say all things in it and love nothing but you.⁶⁹

Margaret described herself as “in a very mallancolly humer,” perhaps signaling her unwillingness to conform to feminine conventions. Mendelson argues that Margaret “challenged the gender conventions of the time” by drawing on the Hippocratic theory of the four humors—black bile, yellow bile, blood, and phlegm—to try and describe her emotional state in masculine terms.⁷⁰ Later in life, Cavendish would do the same thing by actively writing against the patriarchal “exclusion of women from the canon of melancholia,” instead casting her “melancholy as creative impetus.”⁷¹ In her letter, Margaret renounced the world, vowing to love nothing but

⁶⁷Margaret Lucas to William Cavendish, 1645, *The Letters of Margaret Lucas Addressed to William Cavendish*, Add. MS 70499 (British Library, London), ff. 259r-98v; Douglas Grant, *The Phanseys of William Cavendish, Marquis of Newcastle, addressed to Margaret Lucas and her Letters in Reply* (London: Nonesuch Press, 1956); and Anna Battigelli, *Margaret Cavendish and the Exiles of the Mind* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998). I follow Cavendish's lead in referring to William as a Marquis, rather than a Marquess.

⁶⁸Sarasohn, *Natural Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish*, 16, 59.

⁶⁹Original spelling from the letters has been retained. Letters contain no punctuation. Lucas to Cavendish, 1645, *Letters of Margaret Lucas*, Add. MS 70499, ff. 270.

⁷⁰Sara H. Mendelson, introduction to *Ashgate Critical Essays on Women Writers in England, 1550–1700, Volume 7: Margaret Cavendish*, ed. Sara H. Mendelson (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2009), xiii-xiv. An excess of black bile was thought to cause melancholia, which was interpreted in women as hysteria rather than creativity. For more on this, see Faith Lagay, “The Legacy of Humoral Medicine,” *AMA Journal of Ethics* 4, no. 7 (July 2002), 1; and Walters, *Margaret Cavendish*, 52–53.

⁷¹Cavendish later wrote, “I have found by experience, that when my mind and thoughts have been benighted with Melancholy, my Imagination hath been more active and subtil, then when my mind has been clear from dark Melancholy.” Cavendish, *Philosophical Letters*, 261. See also Holly Faith Nelson

William. Full of despair at the ongoing civil wars, social instability, and her subsequent exile from friends and family, Margaret presented herself as serious, thoughtful, and loyal. William replied to her letter, as he often did, with verses on her beauty. However, some of his verses also hinted at something more—an essence or potential he could not quite describe: “What I think of thee / Is still too bigg to bee Exprest by mee.”⁷² He went on in another poem to describe Margaret as “incomprehensible” and “unexpressible,” before ultimately concluding, “Thou art what thou arte.”⁷³ Margaret may have seen lines like these as an acceptance of her unconventional nature and a willingness to support her continued desire to learn and to write.

Margaret was deeply inspired by William and often praised him in the highest terms. She responded to his courtship poetry with lines like, “As grace draws the sole to life so natuer the pencell of god has drawn your wit to the birth as may be seene by your verses though the subget is to mene for your mues.”⁷⁴ Using one of her favorite literary techniques, the simile, Margaret compared grace and the creation of life to William’s wit in writing verses.⁷⁵ She then reinforced her exaggerated praise with a self-deprecatory remark that she—“the subget” [subject]—was “to mene” [too mean] for him to write on. She grew bolder and more confident in her praise as the courtship progressed. In another letter to William, she used phrases and images suggestive of her later creativity and ambition:

My lord i have not had much expereanse of the world yet i have found it such as i could willinly part with it but sence i knew you i fear i shall love it to well becaus you are in it and yet me thinkes you are not in it becaus you are not off it so i am both in it and out off it a strong in chantment.⁷⁶

With these lines, Margaret underscored her lack of worldly experience, even as she praised William for being somehow outside the world (‘not off [of] it’). She was so enchanted by his support and attraction for her that she went on to write in a later letter, “I dessir nothing so much as the continuanc of your affection for i think my self recher in haveing that then if i wer a monarch of all the world.”⁷⁷ William’s reputation as a patron of the arts, his aristocratic status as Marquis of Newcastle, his education and wit, as well as his willingness to engage creatively with Margaret all suggested his support of her intellectual development. In addition to demonstrating her early timidity and innocence, these letters and poems set the tone for the next stage of Margaret’s life, in which William served as her primary instructor.

and Sharon Alker, “Memory, Monuments, and Melancholic Genius in Margaret Cavendish’s *Bell in Campo*,” *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 21, no. 1 (Fall 2008), 16.

⁷²William Cavendish, *Phanseys of William Cavendish*, 6.

⁷³William Cavendish, *Phanseys of William Cavendish*, 11.

⁷⁴Lucas to Cavendish, 1645, Letters of Margaret Lucas, Add. MS 70499, ff. 272.

⁷⁵James Fitzmaurice, “Autobiography, Parody and the *Sociable Letters* of Margaret Cavendish,” in *A Princely Brave Woman: Essays on Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle*, ed. Stephen Clucas (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2003), 69–86.

⁷⁶Lucas to Cavendish, 1645, Letters of Margaret Lucas, Add. MS 70499, ff. 282r.

⁷⁷Lucas to Cavendish, 1645, Letters of Margaret Lucas, Add. MS 70499, ff. 297r.

Stage Two: Educated through Marriage (1645–1660)

As a young married woman, Margaret Cavendish was privately tutored by her husband, William, and his brother, Charles.⁷⁸ Renowned for his patronage, William's salon during their time in Paris hosted several English and European luminaries. This salon exposed Margaret to cutting-edge philosophical and scientific theories and likely spawned many of the ideas she would later write about.⁷⁹ Margaret frequently credited William for being her teacher, and she ultimately dedicated her entire corpus to him. In a preface to *The Worlds Olio*, Margaret wrote to William, "But if there be any Wit, or any thing worthy of Commendations, they are the Crumms I gathered from your Discourse."⁸⁰ She echoed this later in the same text, "I think that not any hath a more abler master to learn from, then I have, for if I had never married the person I have, I do beleieve I should never have writ so, as to have adventured to divulge my works."⁸¹ William's support and approval gave Margaret the confidence she needed to publish her books, despite persistent and widespread social pressure not to.⁸² She described listening to William's "edifying discourse" and being governed by his practices and opinions.⁸³ She read the books he recommended and adopted many of his philosophical and artistic approaches. Apparently thrilled with the arrangement, "this grand new educational endeavor was," as biographer Katie Whitaker notes, "a business of delight to Margaret."⁸⁴ For, as Margaret wrote when studying with William, "I dance a measure with the muses, feast with the Sciences, or sit and discourse with the arts."⁸⁵

Prior to his death in 1654, William's brother, Charles, also served as a trusted mentor and friend to the young Margaret.⁸⁶ More learned than his brother, Charles excelled in mathematics and the sciences, and it was through his extensive correspondence network that Cavendish was exposed to many of the ideas circulating

⁷⁸Grant, *Margaret the First*, 95; and Battigelli, *Margaret Cavendish and the Exiles of the Mind*, 39.

⁷⁹Battigelli, *Margaret Cavendish and the Exiles of the Mind*, 39–40.

⁸⁰Cavendish, *Worlds Olio*, sig. A2r.

⁸¹Cavendish, *Worlds Olio*, sig. E3v.

⁸²For more on how early modern society opposed the freedom of women, see Karen Detlefsen, "Margaret Cavendish and Thomas Hobbes on Freedom, Education, and Women," in *Feminist Interpretations of Hobbes*, ed. Nancy Hirschmann and Joanne Wright (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2012), 158–61. For more on women's inferiority, see Mendelson and Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England*, 61–64.

⁸³Cavendish, preface to *Philosophical and Physical Opinions*.

⁸⁴In some ways, Cavendish's "grand new educational endeavor" paralleled the grand tour of Europe that many men completed as part of their education. Whitaker, *Mad Madge*, 116. For more on Cavendish's learning in Europe, see Scott-Douglass, "Enlarging Margaret," 151; James Fitzmaurice, "Margaret Cavendish in Antwerp: The Actual and the Imaginary," *In-Between: Essays and Studies in Literary Criticism* 17–18 (March–Sept. 2000), 29–39; James Fitzmaurice, "Margaret Cavendish and the Cultural Milieu of Antwerp," in *A Companion to the Cavendishes: Literature, Patronage, Material Culture*, ed. Lisa Hopkins and Tom Rutter (Leeds, UK: Arc Humanities Press, 2020), 161–80; and Christina Malcolmson, "'The Empire of Man over the Inferior Creatures': British Women, Race, and Seventeenth-Century Science," in *History of British Women's Writing, 1610–1690*, vol. 3, ed. Mihoko Suzuki (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 245.

⁸⁵Cavendish, preface to *Philosophical and Physical Opinions*.

⁸⁶Grant, *Margaret the First*, 108; Whitaker, *Mad Madge*, 117; and Mendelson, introduction to *Ashgate Critical Essays*, xviii.

in “early modern intellectual thought.”⁸⁷ Of his character, she wrote, “He was nobly generous, wisely valliant, naturally civill, honestly kind, truly loving, vertuously temperate.”⁸⁸ These attributes, as well as his “gentleness of disposition,” made Charles an ideal tutor for Margaret who, as previously noted, was tremendously shy.⁸⁹ Not only did she dedicate her first book to him, she also included a rare poem of praise to Charles at the end of *Poems and Fancies* (1653). Rather than criticize her more fanciful impulses, he had wholeheartedly embraced them. Making Charles a character in a poem, Margaret wrote, “I pray, said he, when *Queen Mab* you doe see, / Present my service to her Majesty.”⁹⁰ These verses demonstrated Charles’s gentle support of Margaret’s creativity. The fact that she provided unqualified praise of Charles also suggested her developing belief in kindness as an educational requirement.

Margaret Cavendish spent 1651 to 1653 in London with Charles petitioning for a pension from William’s estates.⁹¹ Though her petition was unsuccessful, these were particularly important years in her intellectual development and directly resulted in her first two publications in 1653, *Poems and Fancies* and *Philosophical Fancies* (see Figure 1).⁹² Charles’s role was significant. In a dedication to him in *Philosophical Fancies*, Margaret used the type of hyperbolic praise common during the period, writing, “I am your Slave, being manac’d with Chaines of Obligation.”⁹³ She explained that his kindness and generosity set him apart as “the Conquerour of all Merit” and a true friend.⁹⁴ When Margaret returned to Antwerp in early 1653 to be with William, she left Charles behind to recover from a fever.⁹⁵ Charles eventually died while still in England, and neither William nor Margaret ever saw him again. An epistle to her beloved brother-in-law, in which she wished him everlasting fame, appeared at the beginning of *The Worlds Olio*: “So that your Name may live still in Report, / When that your Soul is gone to Heavens Court.”⁹⁶

Margaret continued to read and contemplate while under William’s guidance. She wrote, “I am my Lords Scholer” and described him as a role model she emulated.⁹⁷ She also admired the heroic figures in the books she read, and likely composed most of *Sociable Letters* during her time living in Antwerp.⁹⁸ These semifictional letters contain valuable information related to Margaret’s reading:

⁸⁷Grant, *Margaret the First*, 59; and Sarasohn, *Natural Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish*, 3.

⁸⁸Cavendish, *True Relation*, 50.

⁸⁹Edward Hyde, *The Life of Edward, Earl of Clarendon* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1857), 2.250.

⁹⁰Margaret Cavendish, “A Compliment Sent to the Fairy Queen,” in *Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle: Poems and Fancies with The Animal Parliament*, ed. Brandie R. Siegfried (Toronto: Iter Press, 2018), 250.

⁹¹Oliver Cromwell’s government considered William a traitor. As such, his estates were seized by Parliamentarians and sold off to raise funds during the Interregnum. Cavendish was denied her petition because she married William after his exile.

⁹²Sarasohn, *Natural Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish*, 130.

⁹³Cavendish, preface to *Philosophical Fancies*.

⁹⁴Cavendish, preface to *Philosophical Fancies*.

⁹⁵Whitaker, *Mad Madge*, 163.

⁹⁶Cavendish, preface to *Worlds Olio*.

⁹⁷Cavendish, preface to *Philosophical and Physical Opinions*.

⁹⁸Whitaker, *Mad Madge*, 21.



Figure 1. Portrait of Margaret Cavendish, from the frontispiece to *Poems and Fancies*, 1653.
 Source: Wikimedia Commons, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:MargaretCavendish.JPG>.

And of all the Men I read of, I Emulate Julius Caesar most, because he was a man that had all these Excellencies, as Courage, Prudence, Wit and Eloquence, in great Perfection, insomuch as when I read of Julius Caesar, I cannot but wish that Nature and Fate had made me such a one as he was.⁹⁹

Margaret Cavendish's desire to emulate Caesar was both tied to her frustration at the limitations of her gender and indicative of what she had been reading in the 1650s.¹⁰⁰ She went on to offer specific commentary regarding Plutarch's *Lives* by addressing both Pericles and Lucretia.¹⁰¹ In each instance, Cavendish was careful to defend her virtue by repudiating women who behaved inappropriately. Of modern writers, Cavendish preferred Shakespeare, on whom she provided one of the earliest written critiques.¹⁰² She wrote, "Shakespear did not want Wit, to Express to the Life all Sorts of Persons, of what Quality, Profession, Degree, Breeding, or Birth soever."¹⁰³ Cavendish also criticized Bacon's work, while simultaneously building on his metaphor that "Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested."¹⁰⁴ She wrote, "The truth is, his Works have proved like as some sorts of Meats, which through Time, or mixture of some Flatuous, or Humid Substance, Corrupt, and Breed Magots or Worms."¹⁰⁵ In each of these excerpts, as well as others not cited here, Cavendish identified texts that she had read and provided insightful analyses that demonstrated her thoughtful engagement as a reader.

Although Cavendish became increasingly confident during this time—publishing the first five of her thirteen books—she continued to emphasize her lack of formal schooling: "Wherefore if you weigh my Philosophical, and Physical opinions with the ancient Philosophers, lay by the weaknesse, and incapacity of our Sex; my unexperienced age, my unpractised time, my ignorant studies, my faint knowledge, and dim understanding."¹⁰⁶ She offered an ironic juxtaposition here, presenting herself as especially humble, while simultaneously placing herself in the company of the ancient philosophers. Her references to "ignorant studies," "faint knowledge," and "dim understanding" indicate her awareness of the humility topos, while

⁹⁹Cavendish, *Sociable Letters*, 37. For more on the books Cavendish may have owned see Dodds, *The Literary Invention of Margaret Cavendish*, 111; and Julie Crawford, "Margaret Cavendish's Books," in *Women's Bookscapes in Early Modern Britain: Reading, Ownership, Circulation*, ed. Leah Knight, Micheline White, and Elizabeth Sauer (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018), 94–114.

¹⁰⁰Kate Lilley, "Contracting Readers: 'Margaret Newcastle' and the Rhetoric of Conjugality," in *Princely Brave Woman*, 20. Alternately, references to Caesar may also reflect Cavendish's conflicting political views or her interest in warrior women. For ways in which Cavendish experimented with representations of the female body, see Walters, *Margaret Cavendish*, 56; Scott-Douglass, "Enlarging Margaret," 151; and Rebecca D'Monté, "'Making a Spectacle': Margaret Cavendish and the Staging of the Self," in *Princely Brave Woman*, 109–26.

¹⁰¹Cavendish, *Sociable Letters*, 43, 65.

¹⁰²For more on Cavendish and Shakespeare, see Romack and Fitzmaurice, *Cavendish and Shakespeare*.

¹⁰³Cavendish, *Sociable Letters*, 130.

¹⁰⁴Francis Bacon, "Of Studies," in *The Essays or Counsels, Civil and Moral, of Francis Ld. Verulam Viscount St. Albans* (London, 1597), 267. For more on Cavendish's use of the essay, see Mihoko Suzuki, "The Essay Form as Critique: Reading Cavendish's *The World's Olio* through Montaigne and Bacon (and Adorno)," *Prose Studies* 22, no. 3 (1999), 1–16.

¹⁰⁵Cavendish, *Sociable Letters*, 82.

¹⁰⁶Cavendish, preface to *Philosophical and Physical Opinions*.

underscoring the fact that women were barred from attending either grammar school or university.¹⁰⁷ She qualified her lack of formal training later in the same preface, responding to criticism that her work was plagiarized. Cavendish denied these allegations, while reiterating that she had only ever studied with “my husband, brothers, and the rest of my family.”¹⁰⁸ Although present at many of the so-called Cavendish Circle meetings in Paris, Cavendish claimed no close association with the famous philosophers that William patronized. For, as she noted, having “three or four visits” did not “make an intimacy.”¹⁰⁹ In this way, Cavendish distanced herself from anyone who might weaken her claim to innate intelligence and reason.

Even as she set herself apart from her male contemporaries, Cavendish criticized women for not being more intellectual. Trying to spur them into action, she wrote, “And though we be inferior to men, let us show ourselves a degree above beasts, and not eat, and drink, and sleep away our time as they do, and live only to the sense, not to the reason, and so turn into forgotten dust.”¹¹⁰ Cavendish urged women to take education into their own hands—to read, think, and write for their posterity. Here, and in other places throughout her corpus, Cavendish offered women an alternative to wasting their lives in idleness.¹¹¹ She believed that even “Wild” minds could be civilized by education and suggested that doing so would benefit the whole of society. In this way, she began to articulate her own educational theories: “Those Women are best bred, whose Minds are civilest as being well Taught and Govern’d, for the Mind will be Wild and Barbarous, unless it is Inclosed with Study, Instructed by Learning, and Governed by Knowledge and Understanding.”¹¹² Having experienced—and personally suffered from—the ravages of the English Civil Wars, Cavendish advocated for peace and stability. Expanding on the humanist tradition, she suggested that educating women of the higher classes would greatly benefit society.¹¹³

Cavendish’s work registered a type of anger that was well justified and broadly felt by women of her day.¹¹⁴ In *Sociable Letters*, for example, she described trying to find fit employment for her waiting women while living in Antwerp. Reminded that she could not efficiently spin wool, make silk flowers, or preserve foods—she lacked skills

¹⁰⁷For more on Cavendish’s rhetorical style, see Margaret Cavendish, *Orations of Divers Sorts, Accommodated in Divers Places*, in *Margaret Cavendish: Political Writings*, ed. Susan James (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 118; Ryan John Stark, “Margaret Cavendish and Composition Style,” *Rhetoric Review* 17, no. 2 (Spring 1999), 264–81; and Emma Rees, *Margaret Cavendish: Gender, Genre, and Exile* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2003), 31. For more on Cavendish’s defiance of convention, see Sylvia Bowerbank, “The Spider’s Delight: Margaret Cavendish and ‘Female’ Imagination,” *English Literary Renaissance* 14, no. 3 (Sept. 1984), 392–408.

¹⁰⁸Cavendish, preface to *Philosophical and Physical Opinions*.

¹⁰⁹Cavendish, preface to *Philosophical and Physical Opinions*.

¹¹⁰Cavendish, *Poems and Fancies*, 368.

¹¹¹Cavendish referred here to elite women whose wealth and privilege allowed them leisure time. For more on the daily lives and workloads of nonelite women, see Mendelson and Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England*, 91, 256–300.

¹¹²Cavendish, *True Relation*, 37.

¹¹³David Cunning, *Cavendish, Arguments of the Philosophers* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 305.

¹¹⁴Margaret Ezell, *Writing Women’s Literary History* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 26, 141.

in many of the usual attainments of her sex—Cavendish responded, “Since I am Fit for no other Employment but to Scratch Paper, leave me to that Employment, and let my Attending Maids have Books to Read.”¹¹⁵ Here Cavendish addressed the fact that virtuous women were expected to spend most of their time completing domestic chores. She was also blatant in her determination that she and her maids were better equipped for intellectual pursuits.¹¹⁶ In this instance, she advocated for the training of other women, and not just herself. Furthermore, Cavendish presented herself as a role model for women. In a preface to *Philosophical and Physical Opinions*, she encouraged a warm reception to her work “for the good incouragement of our sex.” She warned that without encouragement, women would “grow irrational as idiots.” And lest her readers doubt the cause of women’s idiocy, Cavendish explained that it would be “through the carelesse neglects, and despisements of the masculine sex to the effeminate,” which she blamed on men “thinking it impossible we should have either learning or understanding, wit or judgment, as if we had not rational souls as well as men.”¹¹⁷ With these words, and throughout her many books, Cavendish deliberately addressed what she saw as the willful misuse of women. She then offered another of her illustrative similes: “We are become like worms that onely live in the dull earth of ignorance, winding ourselves sometimes out, by the help of some refreshing rain of good education which seldom is given us.”¹¹⁸ If given this education, Cavendish argued, women would be more fruitful with their labor, more productive with their time, and more effective as wives and mothers. However, she noted that women were instead often used “like Children, Fools, or Subjects.”¹¹⁹ Cavendish later built on the simile of women as worms in a line Virginia Woolf made famous in *A Room of One’s Own*: “Open the Duchess and one finds the same outburst of rage, ‘Women live like Bats or Owls, labour like Beasts, and die like Worms.’”¹²⁰

Rather than being deformed by rage, Cavendish productively channeled her anger into her writing. *The Worlds Olio* included several short essays exploring her early educational theories. In “Of Languages,” for example, she turned the notion of learning as ornament on its head by describing the attainment of Greek and Latin as a “great ornament to Gentlemen.”¹²¹ While acknowledging the enhancing quality of linguistic training, Cavendish simultaneously cast doubt on its usefulness: “Since mans life is so short, and learning so tedious, there will accrue but little profit.”¹²² This attitude may have reflected Cavendish’s own self-described “naturall stupidity

¹¹⁵Cavendish, *Sociable Letters*, 162.

¹¹⁶Dodds writes that *Sociable Letters* is “a valuable fictional representation of reading and writing,” in part, for this reason. Dodds, *Literary Invention of Margaret Cavendish*, 18.

¹¹⁷Cavendish, *Philosophical and Physical Opinions*, sig. B2v. For ways in which a “cycle of ignorance” led women to “internalize inferiority,” see Walters, *Margaret Cavendish*, 34.

¹¹⁸Cavendish, *Philosophical and Physical Opinions*, sig. B2v.

¹¹⁹Cavendish, preface to *Worlds Olio*.

¹²⁰Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, ed. Mark Hussey (New York: Harcourt, 2005), 61. Additional work on Woolf’s view of Cavendish remains to be done. For more on Woolf and Cavendish, see Lise Mae Schlosser, “Mrs. Dalloway and the Duchess: Virginia Woolf Reads and Writes Margaret Cavendish,” *Literature Compass* 5, no. 2 (March 2008), 353–61.

¹²¹Cavendish, *Worlds Olio*, 1.1.13–14.

¹²²Cavendish, *Worlds Olio*, 1.1.14.

towards the learning of any other language.”¹²³ However, she admitted later in life that this put her at a distinct disadvantage and made engaging in contemporary philosophical debates difficult. Cavendish then extended her purview in “Of the Breeding of Children,” which anticipated John Locke’s contention that children “are to be treated as rational Creatures.”¹²⁴ For Cavendish, this meant avoiding baby talk and gibberish, speaking the truth to children, and not encouraging mistakes that would make children look foolish as adults. Here, and in other places, she articulated the importance of kindness, encouragement, and delight.¹²⁵

Cavendish later expanded on many of the ideas discussed in *The Worlds Olio*. For example, the essay “The Liberty of Women” predated her invention of women’s schools in *The Female Academy* and *The Convent of Pleasure*. Cavendish cautioned, “Liberty is dangerous, especially amongst the Effeminate Sex, if they be not ballanced with wise Admonitions.”¹²⁶ Since women were barred from attending university, the opportunity to receive “wise Admonitions” was necessarily limited. Rather than deny women their liberty because they were ignorant, Cavendish presented an alternative to formal education. In this way, she acknowledged that self-education and innate intelligence were enhanced through serious and timely instruction. Not only were women born with intelligent, rational souls, she suggested, but they also benefitted from education.

Stage Three: Self-Educated (1660–1673)

At the Restoration, Margaret Cavendish returned to England a mature woman writer. With the resources available from William’s restored estates, Cavendish purchased many new books. And “she began a massive reading programme.”¹²⁷ Cavendish did so, in part, to gain the vocabulary she would have learned had she been allowed to attend grammar school and university.¹²⁸ In this way, Cavendish acknowledged her need to engage with contemporary literature. When describing her new course of study, Cavendish once again provided unprecedented detail on how an early modern woman read and interacted with her texts.¹²⁹ She noted experiencing initial confusion, using context clues, writing terms down as others used them, and finally using them herself.¹³⁰ In this way she demystified a woman who could write intelligently and further weakened contemporary arguments that women lacked “rational

¹²³Cavendish, *True Relation*, 60.

¹²⁴John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (London, 1693), 54.

¹²⁵Cavendish, *Worlds Olio*, 1.3.60–61; Cavendish, preface to *Philosophical and Physical Opinions*; and Cavendish, *Natures Pictures*, sig. c2v.

¹²⁶Cavendish, *Worlds Olio*, 1.3.74.

¹²⁷According to Whitaker, “A single bill for books bought for her in London by Mark Anthony Benoist in July 1664 came to £39 14s.—for which she would have received around one to two hundred volumes.” Whitaker, *Mad Madge*, 255; Mendelson, *Mental World of Stuart Women*, quote at 44. See also Dodds, *Literary Invention of Margaret Cavendish*, 17–18; Sarasohn, *Natural Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish*, 16; and Walters, *Margaret Cavendish*, 22.

¹²⁸Whitaker, *Mad Madge*, 254–55.

¹²⁹Cavendish, *Philosophical Letters*, sig. b2r; and Cavendish, *Life of the Thrice Noble*, sig. B2r.

¹³⁰Denise Tillery, “‘English Them in the Easiest Manner You Can’: Margaret Cavendish on the Discourse and Practice of Natural Philosophy,” *Rhetoric Review* 26, no. 3 (2007), 272; and Sarah Hutton, “In Dialogue with Thomas Hobbes: Margaret Cavendish’s Natural Philosophy,” *Women’s Writing* 4, no. 3 (1997), 422.

souls.”¹³¹ Cavendish repeatedly demonstrated not only her ability to reason but also her drive and capacity to create. While her most serious scientific works—*Philosophical Letters* (1664), *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* (1666), and *Grounds of Natural Philosophy* (1668)—date from this period, she was enormously prolific in other genres as well.¹³² Before her death in 1673, Cavendish also published *Sociable Letters*, two volumes of drama containing more than twenty individual plays, her biography of William, a revised and expanded *Philosophical and Physical Opinions* (1663), as well as new editions of her poetry, fiction, orations, and essays.

Like Montaigne and Bacon before her, and Locke after her, Cavendish developed her own theories for educating the young. She agreed with the humanist “insistence on play, pleasure, and kindness” as well as “a respect for the child’s nature, and an admiration of variety.”¹³³ She also suggested that the strict policies of formal education were more likely to turn a child away from studying than to inspire an interest in learning—“There are more Faults in Educators than in Nature”—while advising her fictional correspondent to breed her children up gently so that they grow “to Delight in Poetry and Philosophy.”¹³⁴ Cavendish’s emphasis on delight over rigor echoed Montaigne’s complaint against pedants who “never cease brawling in their schollers eares.”¹³⁵ Harsh enforcement, rote memorization, and a one-size-fits-all approach to learning were things both Montaigne and Cavendish rejected.¹³⁶ Instead, students should have their own natural curiosity indulged to encourage self-directed learning.¹³⁷ In a scathing commentary on society, Cavendish wrote, “So little Understanding is in the World, that if the World of Mankind were Divided into Four Parts, Three Parts and a Half of the Four are Ignorant Dolts.”¹³⁸ These “Ignorant Dolts” were, according to Cavendish, often the product of England’s grammar schools and universities.¹³⁹

As Cavendish progressed in her learning, she grew more confident in her complaints regarding the proper education of women:

Women are not educated as they should be, I mean those of Quality, for their Education is onely to Dance, Sing, and Fiddle, to write Complemental Letters, to read Romances, to speake some Language that is not their Native, which Education, is an Education of the Body, and not of the Mind, and shews that

¹³¹Of William’s role in this demystification, see Whitaker, *Mad Madge*, 191; and Walters, *Margaret Cavendish*, 50.

¹³²See also Stewart Duncan, “Letters in the *Philosophical Letters*,” Digital Cavendish, Nov. 5, 2014, <http://digitalcavendish.org/resources/letters-in-the-philosophical-letters/>.

¹³³Bushnell, *Culture of Teaching*, 18.

¹³⁴Cavendish, *Sociable Letters*, 87.

¹³⁵Montaigne, *Essays*, 1.25.

¹³⁶Margaret Cavendish, *Natures Picture* (London, 1671), sig. 6Q2v.

¹³⁷Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, 134–36.

¹³⁸Cavendish, *Sociable Letters*, 117.

¹³⁹While such critiques were not uncommon among educated men (see Ben Jonson or Alexander Pope, for example), the fact that a woman who had no access to formal schooling was this direct in her assessment demonstrated both Cavendish’s boldness in print and the value she placed on innate intelligence. Cavendish, *Sociable Letters*, 91.

their Parents take more care of their Feet than their Head . . . for this Education is more for outward Shew than for inward Worth, it makes the Body a Courtier, and the Mind a Clown.¹⁴⁰

Cavendish's focus on the "Education of the Body" underscored the idea that women's education was often considered ornamental, or worse, entertaining. When women were seriously educated, as portrayed in *The Female Academy*, it was often so they could better serve their husbands. The rudiments of reading and writing allowed genteel women to more efficiently run their households, serve as secretaries to their husbands, and keep in touch with friends and family through correspondence.¹⁴¹ Cavendish's juxtaposition of the "Body a Courtier" and the "Mind a Clown" recalled what she had written nine years earlier about women being treated "like Children, Fools, or Subjects." Her sustained criticism of gender inequality was likely why Makin included Cavendish in her essay on women's educational reform. The fact that Makin was ultimately forced to compromise her curriculum and focus on "the usual attainments—music and dancing" testifies to the enduring oppression early modern women faced.¹⁴²

Despite the subjugation of women, Cavendish was certain they were capable of learning.¹⁴³ In her scientific utopia, *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing-World* (1666), Cavendish boldly inverted the patriarchal hegemony of seventeenth-century England by creating an entirely new and fictional world in which a powerful female character could demonstrate intellectual and political competence.¹⁴⁴ Marina Leslie reads *The Blazing-World* as "an attempt to rewrite the historical positioning of the female subject."¹⁴⁵ To do so, Leslie examines the ways in which the authoress "delivered her new world into the safekeeping of a brilliant heroine whose meteoric rise to absolute power is treated as a matter of course."¹⁴⁶ Cavendish's Empress was remarkably learned and wise. She formed and resided over her own learned society, created a new religious system, and led her army in a grand invasion of her former home world. This Empress provided an amplified example of the heights to which an educated woman might reach, even as Cavendish reiterated the lack of educational opportunities available to women. In a preface to *The Blazing-World's* sister text, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, she made explicit her belief that women were as intelligent as men:

Our Sex being not suffer'd to be instructed in Schools and Universities, cannot be bred up to it. I will not say, but many of our Sex may have as much wit and be

¹⁴⁰Cavendish, *Sociable Letters*, 37.

¹⁴¹Education as preparation for marriage persisted into the twentieth century. Mullaney and Hilbert, "Educating Women for Self-Reliance," 74.

¹⁴²Grant, *Margaret the First*, 215.

¹⁴³Sarasohn, *Natural Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish*, 124; and Detlefsen, "Margaret Cavendish and Thomas Hobbes," 151.

¹⁴⁴Salzman, introduction to *An Anthology of Seventeenth-Century Fiction*, xii.

¹⁴⁵Marina Leslie, *Renaissance Utopias and the Problem of History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 11.

¹⁴⁶Leslie, *Renaissance Utopias*, 118.

capable of Learning as well as Men; but since they want Instructions, it is not possible they should attain to it.¹⁴⁷

Based on her innate wit, her informal education, and her own lifelong tendency toward contemplation, Cavendish created a new world in which a capable woman could rule. In doing so, she tacitly argued for the education and agency of *all* women.

In Cavendish's portrayal of a learned female ruler, *The Blazing-World* not only offered an alternative way for women to view themselves, it also provided some of the most pointed criticism of contemporary experimental philosophy. And while Cavendish's prose fiction *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity* (1656) and her play in two parts, *Bell in Campo* (1662), also portrayed women who were intelligent enough to lead successful armies into battle, *The Blazing-World's* Empress was unique in her role as the head of a learned society. After her "meteoric rise to power," the Empress assembled her various animal-human hybrid subjects into academic societies according to their innate skills. The Empress met with them in a series of dialogues addressing the nature of her new world. Through these dialogues, Cavendish questioned the value of experimental and mechanical philosophies generally, and Robert Hooke's *Micrographia* (1665) specifically.¹⁴⁸ In *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, Cavendish criticized optical lenses explicitly: "For this art has intoxicated so many men's brains, and wholly employed their thoughts and bodily actions about phenomena, or the exterior figures of objects, as all better arts and studies are laid aside."¹⁴⁹ Having access to her own high-quality microscopes, Cavendish noted that these and other mechanical devices did nothing to reveal the inward motions/figures (or true nature) of examined objects. In this way, she articulated one of her primary complaints against the new science—it was often done to no purpose.¹⁵⁰ In the Empress's final determination, she disbanded the learned societies because of their disputatious natures. In this way, the Empress exacted some small revenge for "the dull earth of ignorance" in which Cavendish and her female peers had been relegated.

Although Makin was happy to cite Cavendish as an exemplarily learned lady when promoting her new school, Cavendish was not entirely settled in her opinion on women's schools. In 1655 she wrote, "It is dangerous to put young Women to board Schools, unless their Parents live so disorderly, as their children may grow wicked or base by their examples."¹⁵¹ At that time, Cavendish instead encouraged the type of in-home tutoring she had received, believing that "if young Women were bred singly, carefully, and industriously one by one, there would be no danger they should learn from each other crafts, dissembling, fraud, spight, slander, or the

¹⁴⁷Margaret Cavendish, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, ed. Eileen O'Neil (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 11.

¹⁴⁸Margaret Cavendish, *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World*, ed. Sara H. Mendelson (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2016), 26–33.

¹⁴⁹Cavendish, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, 51.

¹⁵⁰Hilda Smith, "Women Intellectuals and Intellectual History," *Women's History Review* 16, no. 3 (2007), 359; and Tillery, "English Them," 277.

¹⁵¹Margaret Cavendish, "Of Gentlewomen that are sent to board Schools," in *Worlds Olio*, 1.3.61.

like.”¹⁵² Here she argued for individualized instruction, while noting that women’s vices were learned and not innate.

Yet, even as she sought recognition that women were being misused, she struggled with finding the best way to educate them. Cavendish explored several alternatives in her prose fictions and drama, so that by the 1660s she may have come around to the idea that a boarding school, academy, or convent was indeed the best option for educating women.¹⁵³ The scope of Cavendish’s exploration ranged from the informally tutored heroines in “The Contract” (1656), “The She-Anchoret” (1656), and *Youth’s Glory, and Death’s Banquet* (1662) through the formally educated women of *The Female Academy* and *The Convent of Pleasure*. Karen Detlefsen notes that many of these texts “point to the necessity of good education for women as a crucial social change.”¹⁵⁴ Cavendish was clear that the “good rain of education” would benefit women as well as it did men.

Cavendish explored two potential outcomes of private tutoring in “The Contract” and “The She-Anchoret.” In these stories and throughout her many works of fiction, Cavendish represented the myriad ways in which “to develop the capacities and abilities of individuals to their fullest.”¹⁵⁵ In “The Contract,” the young lady Delitia was promised in marriage to the son of a powerful duke. However, the son broke his promise and instead married a rich widow. Delitia’s uncle responded to this dishonor by providing her with a robust moral and philosophical education. Cavendish carefully described the girl’s curriculum and at least one pedagogical strategy that the uncle had used: beginning at the age of seven, Delitia’s uncle gave her books of moral philosophy, history, and the best poets.¹⁵⁶ Furthermore, the uncle taught Delitia to understand what she read by explaining to her the meaning of hard or obscure passages. He then took her to live in the city, where she learned music and dancing while attending lectures on natural philosophy, physics, chemistry, and the law.¹⁵⁷ With this rigorous masculine education, Delitia gained a strong sense of self, proclaiming, “I can look the world in the face with a confident brow.”¹⁵⁸ In this way, an education that was designed to attract a husband also leant Delitia agency. For, she asked her uncle, “Who are happier than those that are mistresses of their own fortunes?”¹⁵⁹ Following her own judgment, Delitia proceeded to gain the love of the man to whom she had originally been promised. After a series of anonymous appearances at court, the young duke acknowledged his affection for Delitia by echoing the praise William wrote of in his courtship

¹⁵²Cavendish, *Worlds Olio*, 1.3.62.

¹⁵³This shift may have been brought about by the changing social context of the Restoration, the “massive reading programme” she had undertaken, or the many positive role models, like Katherine Philips, then coming out of boarding schools. Charlton, “Women and Education,” 10. Alternately, Cavendish may have never been “interested in proposing a single model” for educating women but was simply exploring the many possibilities. Leslie, “The Pre-Neo-Liberal Education,” 11.

¹⁵⁴Detlefsen, “Margaret Cavendish and Thomas Hobbes,” 152.

¹⁵⁵Detlefsen, “Margaret Cavendish and Thomas Hobbes,” 166.

¹⁵⁶Margaret Cavendish, “The Contract,” in *Margaret Cavendish: The Blazing World and Other Writings*, ed. Kate Lilley (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 5.

¹⁵⁷Cavendish, “Contract,” 5, 8.

¹⁵⁸Cavendish, “Contract,” 6.

¹⁵⁹Cavendish, “Contract,” 7.

poems. The duke told her, “You cannot be comprehended.”¹⁶⁰ Delitia’s incomprehensibility as a complex and competent woman only increased as the story progressed. For, not only did she gain the duke’s love, she also pled her case in court, convincing the judges to rule the duke’s marriage to the widow illegitimate.¹⁶¹ In this way, Delitia used her masculine education to control her own destiny, demonstrating the potential of an educated woman.¹⁶²

However, the protagonist of “The She-Anchoret” was less fortunate. As a young orphaned virgin, the Anchoret cloistered herself in a cell but gave “leave for any to speak to her through a Grate.”¹⁶³ Word spread that she was especially wise, so people began to visit her. Among the many lessons she provided, the Anchoret gave instructions to married men and their wives on the education of children, such as, “If they be nobly born, they should be respectfully bred; their Tutors should instruct them submissively and humbly, and not commandingly; they should rather be perswaded by Reason, than forced to learn by Terrifying.”¹⁶⁴ In this instance, Cavendish delineated her educational policies according to class. Later, the Anchoret advised the nursemaids of the gently born, “Children must hear Truth, and not Lyes; be instructed with Reason, not death with Rods; advised with Kindness, not threatened with Words.”¹⁶⁵ Building on her theory of kindness, Cavendish again anticipated Locke, who observed that children “love to be treated as Rational Creatures sooner than is imagined.”¹⁶⁶ Cavendish abruptly ended this story with the Anchoret committing suicide to avoid the advances of a lusty king threatening to invade her native country.

The sudden death of the extraordinarily learned lady found resonance in Cavendish’s first book of plays. Like the She-Anchoret, Lady Sanspareille of *Youth’s Glory, and Death’s Banquet* was educated privately at home, refused marriage, spoke publicly, and died a sudden and inexplicable death. In the opening scene of the play, Mother Lady Love described how her husband educated his daughter, “No time for recreation, nor no liberty for company, nor freedom for conversation, but keeps her as a Prisoner, and makes her a slave to her book, and your tedious moral discourses, when other children have Play-fellows.”¹⁶⁷ In subsequent scenes, Cavendish revealed that Lady Sanspareille enjoyed the time she spent learning with her father; she loved reading and was ambitious for fame. In this way, Cavendish drew a careful distinction between Mother Lady Love, who considered her husband “strange” and “tedious,” and Lady Sanspareille, who considered her father “such a man that wishes could not hope for.”¹⁶⁸ The older woman foolishly dismissed the “wise Admonitions” of the learned man in her life, while the younger woman

¹⁶⁰Cavendish, “Contract,” 18.

¹⁶¹Cavendish, “Contract,” 38.

¹⁶²For more on women’s potential, see Schlosser, “Mrs. Dalloway and the Duchess,” 358.

¹⁶³Margaret Cavendish, “The She-Anchoret,” in *Natures Pictures* (London, 1656), 547.

¹⁶⁴Cavendish, “She-Anchoret,” 653.

¹⁶⁵Cavendish, “She-Anchoret,” 671.

¹⁶⁶Locke may have had Cavendish in mind when he advocated for the education of girls: “The nearer they come to the Hardships of their Brothers in their Education, the greater Advantage will they receive from it all the remaining Part of their Lives.” Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, 90, 8.

¹⁶⁷Margaret Cavendish, *Youth’s Glory, and Death’s Banquet*, in *Plays* (London, 1662), 1.1.123.

¹⁶⁸Cavendish, *Youth’s Glory*, 1.2.125.

carefully obeyed them. Lady Sanspareille was thus portrayed as wise beyond her years. Her father provided her with “a rigorously learned, masculine education,” which resulted in her determination never to marry.¹⁶⁹ Instead, she wished to publish books and teach.¹⁷⁰ So her doting father arranged a series of lectures in which Lady Sanspareille spoke on several subjects. Shortly after giving her discourse against marriage, Lady Sanspareille also died suddenly and with little explanation.¹⁷¹ Cavendish described Lady Sanspareille’s commemoration: “Her Statue shall be set up in every College, and in the most publick places in the City. . . and the Queen will build a Sumptuous and Glorious Tomb on her sleeping Ashes.”¹⁷² In this portrayal of a lady without parallel, Cavendish suggested an ideal curriculum of private, individualized instruction with a focus on reading, serious contemplation, and rational discourse.

Cavendish created alternatives to the familial education of Delitia, the Anchoress, and Lady Sanspareille in both *The Female Academy* and *The Convent of Pleasure*. The academy was run by “Grave Matrons,” who carefully trained their charges to think and discourse rationally.¹⁷³ To demonstrate their learning, these students took turns speaking on various subjects, ranging from women’s intelligence and the performativity of gender to the nature of truth and friendship. When the young men of the city heard about this Female Academy, they went to listen. Growing jealous of the outspoken women, the men responded by presenting orations of their own, but were ignored. Desperate for attention, the men ultimately played trumpets to disrupt the women’s learning. In the play’s final scene, one of the matrons attempted to broker a peace between the sexes (reflecting the harsh reality that men during this period were the gatekeepers to knowledge and education). The men complained that if the academy continued there would be no women “left out to breed on.”¹⁷⁴ To which the matron responded, “These Ladies have not vowed Virginitie, or are they incloystred; for an Academy is not a Cloyster, but a School, wherein are taught how to be good Wives when they are married.”¹⁷⁵ Rebecca D’Monté builds on this idea to draw a direct link between Cavendish and Makin, indicating that “Cavendish seems to be foreshadowing the work of Bathsua Makin who set up her schools in order to educate women to be good helpmates to their husbands.”¹⁷⁶ In this way, Cavendish encouraged the education of women without overtly challenging the power of men to marry and rule their wives, thereby signaling an awareness that she must work “from within the terms of the law.”¹⁷⁷

¹⁶⁹Sophie Tomlinson, “‘My brain the stage’: Margaret Cavendish and the Fantasy of Female Performance,” in *Readings in Renaissance Women’s Drama*, ed. S. P. Cerasano and Marion Wynne-Davies (New York: Routledge, 1998), 279.

¹⁷⁰Cavendish, *Youth’s Glory*, 2.5.132.

¹⁷¹D’Monté, “‘Making a Spectacle,’” 17.

¹⁷²Cavendish, *Youth’s Glory*, 4.18.173.

¹⁷³Cavendish, *Female Academy*, 1.2.653.

¹⁷⁴Cavendish, *Female Academy*, 5.29.679.

¹⁷⁵Cavendish, *Female Academy*, 5.29.679.

¹⁷⁶Rebecca D’Monté, “Mirroring Female Power,” in *Female Communities 1600–1800: Literary Visions and Cultural Realities*, ed. Rebecca D’Monté and Nicole Pohl (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 96.

¹⁷⁷Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 1990), 119. Cavendish may also have been encouraging companionate marriage here.

Despite both plays exploring the formal education of women, Cavendish's *The Convent of Pleasure* differed from *The Female Academy* in at least one important respect. The women in the convent were avowed virgins, who had sworn off men. However, their curriculum was still notably secular, focusing on epicurean pleasure, literature, and the arts. The play's protagonist, Lady Happy, was a rich heiress who disavowed marriage. Instead, she chose to cloister herself away with other noble virgins to enjoy "all the delights and pleasures that are allowable and lawful."¹⁷⁸ Lady Happy explained, "My Cloister shall not be a Cloister of restraint, but a place for freedom, not to vex the Senses but to please them."¹⁷⁹ The convent's activities involved dramatic scenes written and acted by women that portrayed the hardships of marriage, including death during childbirth, spousal abuse, and infidelity. Focusing on pleasure, Cavendish's secular convent also housed several same-sex couples who partook in the delights of courtship, with none of its consequences.¹⁸⁰ In this way, Lady Happy was courted by a powerful foreign princess. After a series of suggestively steamy scenes, in which Lady Happy acknowledged real love for the other woman, the princess revealed himself to be a prince looking for a bride. This otherwise unconventional play also ended abruptly, but with a conventional wedding scene in which the prince did all the talking. The once fiercely independent Lady Happy stood by in silence as her new husband dismantled her convent, thus restoring the heteronormative power structure.¹⁸¹

Conclusion

By portraying a variety of educated and competent women in her fiction and plays, Cavendish challenged the contemporary belief that woman "had not rational souls as well as men." She portrayed excellent women, who were privately tutored, and rose to eminence before either marrying or dying tragic, even inexplicable, deaths. She presented two different models for formal schooling—one aimed at training young women to be good wives, the other at avoiding the hardships of marriage—both of which inevitably resulted in a return to conventional hierarchy. The fact that Cavendish portrayed marriage as a necessary condition for the sanctioning of women's education reflected her own experience as a woman in seventeenth-century England.¹⁸² Her marriage to William provided her with a safe and supportive place

¹⁷⁸Cavendish, *Convent of Pleasure*, 1.1.7.

¹⁷⁹Cavendish, *Convent of Pleasure*, 1.1.7.

¹⁸⁰Eggert, *Disknowledge*, 245. Alternately, Cavendish may have been toying with the idea of epicurean pleasure here. Perhaps, for example, women were not as sexually insatiable as the male-authored literature would suggest. See Mendelson and Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England*, 26.

¹⁸¹*The Convent of Pleasure* is one of the clearest examples of Cavendish offering same-sex desire as an acceptable alternative to heterosexual marriage. Any interpretation of this ending should consider that William wrote the lyrics preceding the princess/prince gender switch and that he likely wrote the entirety of the play's ending. The subject of William's interference with the ending of this play was addressed at the 2019 International Margaret Cavendish Society Conference. The general consensus was that Cavendish likely intended this play to remain unconventional, while William preferred to rein in his wife's exploration of queer desire.

¹⁸²Susan James, introduction to *Margaret Cavendish: Political Writings*, ix.

from which to voice her educational theories and pursue fame. Publishing during a time when this was a man's prerogative enabled Cavendish to develop her own ideas on effective education and to frequently express these ideas, with growing confidence, throughout her career.

This article opened with a series of questions regarding Cavendish as an educational theorist. Why did some of Cavendish's recommendations for female education differ from the kinds of education she received? How did her own education influence her thoughts on women's education? And how unusual were her ideas in early modern England? These questions have now been addressed through a careful examination of Cavendish's personal education, which took place in three discrete stages.

Cavendish recognized the limitations of her own private, indulgent education and seemed acutely aware of the disadvantage at which it placed her. While barred from attending the grammar schools and universities of her male peers, and skeptical of boarding schools for training and educating virtuous women, Cavendish may have preferred private tutelage for most women of the upper classes. Her own experience with private education revealed itself in her theories on differentiation and individuality. She supported her early argument against boarding schools by asserting that women should be "bred singly, carefully, and industriously one by one." This individualized approach harkened back to the work of Montaigne and projected forward to the work of Locke, though Cavendish was unusual in suggesting the same type of broad humanist education be made available for women.¹⁸³

Although most educational theorists of the early modern period were men writing of other men (like Montaigne, Bacon, or Locke), a few women also made their ideas known. This included van Schurman, as well as Makin and Astell. While van Schurman was one of the first to explicitly assert that "a Maid may be a Scholar," Makin and Astell seemed inspired by Cavendish's work and example.¹⁸⁴ Astell echoes Cavendish in her early feminist belief that women had natural or innate reason, which enabled them to be educated as well as men.¹⁸⁵ Astell "urged serious learning and the claim that such a life does not depend upon a university education or significant library."¹⁸⁶ In this way, Astell follows Cavendish's belief that formal education is not the only education worth receiving.

Cavendish pursued an informal education throughout her life, continuing to read and write until her own sudden and inexplicable death in 1673. Like Lady Sanspareille, Margaret Cavendish was laid to rest in state. Her tomb in Westminster Abbey, beside William, serves as a monument to her natural "Genius," her singular accomplishments, and her desire to improve the education and condition of women. It reads in part: "This Dutches was a wise wittie & learned Lady, which her many Bookes do well testifie. She was a most Virtuous & a Loveing &

¹⁸³Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, 261.

¹⁸⁴Anna Maria van Schurman, *The Learned Maid or, Whether a Maid may be a Scholar* (London, 1659), 6, 8. Van Schurman based her conclusion on Aristotle's claim that "all Mankind have in them by Nature a desire of knowledge." Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. W. D. Ross (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1924), 1.2.

¹⁸⁵Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, 119.

¹⁸⁶Smith, "Women Intellectuals," 361.

carefull wife & was with her Lord all the time of banishment & miseries & when he came home never parted from him in his solitary retirements.”¹⁸⁷

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¹⁸⁷“William & Margaret Cavendish,” Westminster Abbey website, <https://www.westminster-abbey.org/abbey-commemorations/commemorations/william-margaret-cavendish>.]