Cavendish And . . . Critical Receptions of “Mad Madge” in the 17th and 21st Centuries and the Questions of Historiography and Temporality

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“She is not of mortal race, and therefore cannot be defined”
--Mary Evelyn, Letter to Ralph Bohun, 1667

This workshop takes up this conference’s questions of “time and its passing” to think about past, present, and potential receptions of one prolific early modern writer, Margaret Cavendish. Enigmatic and elusive in her own time and in ours, Cavendish remains a divisive figure for scholars, inducing a kind of scholarly madness or frenzy created through her multiplicities—her shifting selves, subjects, and writings. The diversity of her writing has led to a wide range of (often contradictory) articles and books attempting to discern meanings within the fields of early modern women and feminism, history of science, philosophy, domestic labor, poetics, authorship, reading practices, etc. The difficulty scholars face with Cavendish might also be ascribed to the modes in which scholarship is completed in the modern academy. Might Margaret Cavendish’s writings ask us to read them in a different manner than contemporary models of scholarship train us to?

As the field of Cavendish scholarship continues to grow in both depth and breadth, this workshop seeks to bend the linear, historical time of scholarship and reception, theorizing and contemplating Cavendish when two eras are placed side by side: the 17th and 21st centuries. Linda Charnes describes a research method she terms “reading for wormholes”: “[a method] in which we can detect an idea whose time arrives in advance of its historical ‘context’. . . . To put it still differently, future ideas must in some way be ‘embedded’ in the texts of the past in order for us to discern their emergence from the position of hindsight” (3). We further argue that Charnes’ wormholes work both ways—that past ideas are embedded and recur in our present as well. This bi-directionality of ideas and influence may possibly collapse the distance and distinctions we make between the two eras. Though this workshop takes Cavendish as its subject, its larger theoretical concerns will extend to issues of feminist theory, histories of science, and questions of temporality and historiography, among others.

We will begin the workshop with a 15-20 minute introduction to our topic. Drawing on images, textual artifacts, and a brief gesture to statistics, the introduction will provide an overview of Cavendish’s oeuvre and subsequent scholarship, as well as frame some of the major themes of the workshop. Following these preliminaries, we will proceed to group discussion, allowing our agenda to be led by participants’ own interests and loosely structured by our questions below. We will have images, poems, letters, and provocative critical excerpts prepared for the group to examine throughout our discussion, with the goal that different kinds of evidence will garner different types of engagement and highlight varying areas of expertise. We will also make full versions of our selected critical essays available online for participants to read if they wish. Though our discussion will focus primarily on the accompanying materials, we welcome additional insights from participants.
Questions:

- Are there intended modes of receiving authors, possibly determined by the authors themselves? How might Cavendish want us to think about Cavendish? How might we access these desires?
- What sort of readership do Cavendish’s works create, both in her time and in ours?
- What scholarly agendas do we appropriate Cavendish into?
- How might we take Cavendish on her own terms when we are operating from a very different milieu, especially when those terms may be unclear?

- Can we or should we label Cavendish as feminist? What desires motivate this classification or lack of classification?
- Which definition of feminism might we apply to Cavendish: contemporary, historical, political? What changes in scholarly receptions when our definitions/subcategories of feminism change?
- How do her desires and self-fashioning relate to perceptions of feminism through history?

- Those in her own time who viewed Cavendish as mad or antic instigated a stereotype that scholars are just beginning to abandon now. Is there a productive form of madness that we can keep? Is Cavendish constructing herself as mad (to a certain end)?

- How might the practices and methodologies of different disciplines determine or inhibit the constructions of historical subjects?

- Can we view Cavendish’s multiple genres as forms of life-writing? What prevents us from or encourages us to think of her bricolaged writings as life-writing? Why might scholars be so interested in thinking of the works of early modern women as life-writings?

Primary Sources:
Margaret Cavendish, Poems and Fancies (1653). Prefatory Materials and Selected Excerpts
Excerpts from A True Relation of my Birth, Breeding, and Life (1656)
Excerpts from CCXI Sociable Letters (1664)
Mary Evelyn, Letter to Ralph Bohun (c. 1667)
Samuel Pepys, Diary, excerpts from 1667 and 1668
Dorothy Osborne, excerpts from Letters from Dorothy Osborne to Sir William Temple

Selected Critical Works:
Virginia Woolf, excerpts from A Room of One’s Own
Dymphna Callaghan, excerpts, Introduction to The Impact of Feminism in English Renaissance Studies
Kathryn Schwarz, excerpts from “The Wrong Question: Thinking through Virginity.”
Deborah Boyle, excerpts from “Margaret Cavendish’s Nonfeminist Natural Philosophy.”
Randall Ingram, excerpts from “First Words and Second Thoughts: Margaret Cavendish, Humphrey Mosely and “The Book.”
Jonathan Gil Harris, excerpts from “Cleopatran Affinities: Hélène Cixous, Margaret Cavendish, and the Writing of Dialogic Matter.” In The Impact of Feminism in English Renaissance Studies

Suggested Works:
Excerpts from The Blazing World
Hui Wu, “The Paradigm of Margaret Cavendish: Reading Women’s Alternative Rhetories in a Global Context.” In Calling Cards: Theory and Practice in the Study of Race, Gender, and Culture
Excerpts from Margaret Cavendish, *Poems and Fancies* (1653)

The Epistle Dedicatcry: To Sir Charles Cavendish, My Noble Brother-in-Law.

Sir,

*I Do here dedicate this my Work unto you, not that I think my Book is worthy such a Patron, but that such a Patron may gain my Book a Respect, and Esteeme in the World, by the favour of your Protection. True it is, Spinning with the Fingers is more proper to our Sexe, then studying or writing Poetry, which is the Spinning with the braine: but I having no skill in the Art of the first ( and if I had, I had no hopes of gaining so much as to make me a Garment to keep me from the cold) made me delight in the latter: since all braines work naturally, and incessantly, in some kinde or other: which made me endeavor to Spin a Garment of Memory, to lapp up my Name, that it might grow to after Ages: I cannot say the Web is strong, fine or evenly Spun, for it is a Course peice; yet I had rather my Name should go meanly clad, then dye with cold: but if the Sute be trimmed with your Favour, shee may make such a shew, and appeare so lovely, as to wed to a Vulgar Fame. But certainly your Bounty hath been the Distaffe; from whence Fate hath Spun the thread of this part of my Life, which Life I wish may be drawn forth in your Service. For your Noble minde is above petty Interest, and such a Courage, as you dare not onely look Misfortunes in the Face, but grapple with them in the defence of your Freind: and your kindnesse hath been such, as you have neglected your selfe, even in ordinary Accouretments, to maintain the distressed: which shewed you to have such an Affections, as St. Paul expressed for his Brethren in Christ, *who could be accurst for their?l sakes. And since your Charity is of that Length, and Generosity of that Height, that no Times, nor Fortunes can cut shorter, or pull downe lower: I am very confident, the sweetnesse of your disposition, which I have always found in the delightfull conversation of your Company, will never change, but be so humble, as to accept of this Booke, which is the Work of,*

Your most Faithful

Servant

M. N. [Sig A2r-v]

TO ALL NOBLE, AND WORTHY LADIES.

*Noble, Worthy Ladies,*

Condemne me not as a *dishounour of your Sex,* for setting forth this *Work*; for it is *harmlesse and free from all dishonesty:* I will not say from *Vanity:* for that is so *naturall* to our *Sex,* as it were unnaturall, not to be so. *Besides,* *Poetry,* which is built upon *Fancy,* *Women* may claime, as a *worke* belonging most properly to themselves: for I have observ’d, that their *Braines* *wrck* usually in a *Fantastical motion:* as in their *severall* and *various*
dresses, in their many and singular choices of Cloaths, and Ribbons, and the like; in their curious shadowing, and mixing of Colours, in their Wrought works, and divers sorts of Stitches they imploy their Needle, and many Curious things they make, as Flowers, Boxes, Baskets with Beads, Shells, Silke, Straw, or any thing else: besides all manner of Meats to cure: and thus their Thoughts are imployed perpetually with Fancies. For Fancy goeth not so much by Rule & Method, as by Choice: and if I have chosen my Silke with fresh colours, and mstich them in good shadows, although the stitches be not very true, yet it will please the Eye so if my Writing please the Readers, though not the Learned, it will satisfie me: for I had rather be praised in this, by the most, although not the best. For all I desire, is Fame, and Fame is nothing but a great noise, and noise lives most in a Multitude wherefor I with my Book may set a worke every Tongue. But I imagine I shall be censur'd by my owne Sex: and Men will cast of Smile of scorne upon my Book, because they think thereby, Women incroch to much upon their Prerogatives, for they hold Books as their Crowne, and the Sword as their Scepter, by which they rule, and governe. And very like they will say to me as to the Lady that wrote the Romancy,

Work Lady, work, let writing Books alone,
For surely wiser Women nere wrote one.

But those that say so, shall give me leave to wish, that those of nearest Relation, as Wives, Sisters, & Daughters, may imploy their time no worse then in honest, Innocent, and harmlesse Fancies which if they do, Men shall have no cause to feare, that when they go abroad in their absence, they shall receive an Injury by their loose Carriages. Neither will Women be desirous to Gossip abroad, when their Thoughts are well employed at home. But if they do throw sorne, I shall intreat you (as the Woman did in the Play of the Wife, for a Month, which caused many of the Effeminate Sex) to help her, to keep their Right, and Priviledges, making it their owne Case. Therefore pray strengthen my Side, in defending my Book: for I know Womens Toughs are as sharp, as two edged Swords, and wound as much, when they are anger'd. And in this Battell may your Wit be quick, and your Speech ready, and your Arguments so strong, as to beat them out of the Feild of Dispute. So shall I get Honour, and Reputation by your Favours: otherwise I may chance to be cast into the Fire. But if I burn, I desire to die your Martyr: if I live, to be

Your humble Servant,

M. N. [Sig A3r-v]

“The Motion of the Blood.”

Some by Industry of Learning found,
That all the Blood like to the Sea runs round:
From two great Arteries the Blood it runs
Through all the Veines, to the same back comes.
The Muscles like the Tides do ebb, and flow,
According as the several Spirits go.
The Sinewes, as small Pipes, come from the Head,
And all about the Body they are spread;
Through which the Animal Spirits are conveyed,
To every Member, as the Pipes are laid.
And from those Sinewes Pipes each Sense doth take
Of those Pure Spirits, as they us do make.

[sig 3v]

The following two selections, one a prose exposition and the other a partial poem, seem to serve as introductory to the section entitled "FANCIES" which follow them.

To POETS.

There is no Spirit frights me so much, as Poets Satyrs, and their Faiery Wits: which are so subtle, siery, and nimble, as they passe through every small Crevisse, and Cranie of Errors, and Mistakes, and dance upon every Line and round every Fancy; which when they find to be dull, and sleepy, they pinch them black, and blew, with Robbin-hoods Jests. But I hope you will spare me for the Harth is swept cleane, and a Bason of water with a cleane Towell set by, and the Ashes rak'd up; wherefore let my Book sleepy quietly, and the Watch-light burning clearly, and not blew, and Blinkingly, nor the Pots, and Pans, be disturbed, but let it be still from your noise, that the Effemenate Cat may not Mew, nor the Masculine Curs bark, nor houle forth Railings to disturbe my harmlesse Bookes rest. But if you will judge my Book severely, I doubt I shall be cast to the Bar of Folly, there for'd to hold up my Hand of Indiscretion, and confess Ignorance to my Enemies dislike. For I have no Eloquent Orator to plead for me, as to perswade a Severe Judge, nor Flattery to bribe a Corrupt One: which makes me afraid, I shall loose my Suit of Praise. Yet I have Truth to speak in my behalf for some favour: which saith first, that Women writing seldom, makes it seem strange, and what is unusuall, seemes Fantastical, and what is Fantastical, seemes odd, and what seemes odd, Ridiculous: But as Truth tells you, all is not Gold that glitters: so she tells you, all is not Poore, that hath not Golden Cloaths on, nor mad, which is out of Fashion: and if I be out of the Fashion, because Women do not generally write; yet, before you laugh at me, let your Reason view strictly, whether the Fashion be not usefull, gracefull, easie, comely, and modest: And if it be any of these, spare your Smiles of Scorne, for those that are wanton, careless, rude, or unbecoming; For though her Garments are plaine, and unusuall, yet they are cleane, and decent. Next, Truth tells you that Women have seldom, or never (or at least in the latter Ages) written a Book of Poetry, unless it were in their Dressings, which can be no longer read then Beauty lasts. Wherefore it hath seemed hitherto, as if Nature had compounded Mens Braines with more of the Sharp Atomes, which make the hot, and dry Element, and Womens with more of the round Atomes, which Figure makes the cold, and moist Element: And though Water is a usefull Element, yet Fire is the Nobler, being of an Aspiring quality. But it is rather a Dishounour, not a Fault in Nature, for her Inferior Workes can never be so Perfect as her selfe: yet she is pleased, I imitate you. Tis true, my Verses came not out of Jupiters Head, therefore they cannot prove a Pallas: yet they are like Chast Penelope's Work, for I wrote them in my Husbands absence, to delude Melancholy Thoughts, and avoid Idle Time. The last thing Truth tells you, is my Verses were gathered too soon: wherefore they cannot be of a Mature growth: for the Sun of time was onely at that height, as to draw them forth, but not
heat enough to ripen them; which makes me fear they will taste harsh, and unpleasant; but if they were strew'd with some sugar of praises, and bake'd in the oven of applause, they may passe at a general feast, though they do not relish with nice, and delicate palates; yet the vulgar may digest them: for they care not what the meat is, if the crust be good, or indeed thick: for they judge according to the quantity, not the quality, or rarity: but they are oft persuaded by the senses of others, more then their owne. Wherefore if it is be not worthy of commendations, pray be silent, and cast not out severe censures: And I shall give thanks for what is eaten.

I desire all those which read this part of my book, to consider, that it is thick of fancies, and therefore requires the more study: But if they understand not, I desire they would do as those, which have a troubled conscience, and cannot resolve themselves of some doubts: wherefore they are required by the church to go to a minister thereof, to have them explain'd, and not to interpret according to their owne imaginations: So I entreat those that cannot find out the conceits of my fancies, to ask a poet where the conceit lies, before they censure; and not to accuse my book for non-sense, condemning it with a false construction, through an ignorant zeal of malice: nor do not mistake, nor ask a rhimer instead of a poet, least I be condemned as a traitor to sense, through the blindness of the judges understanding. But if the judge be learned in the laws of poetry, and honesty from bribes of envie: I shall not need to fear, but that the truth will be found out, and its innocence will be freed at the bar of censure, and be sent home with the acquaintance of applause. Yet pray do not think I am so presumptuous, to compare myself in this comparison to the church: but I only here compare truth to the church, and truth may be compared from the lowest subject, or object to the highest.

I must entreat my noble reader, to read this part of my book very slow, and to observe very strictly every word is a fancy. Wherefore if they loose, by not marking, or skip by too hasty readings, they will intangle the sense of the whole copy. [Sig Rr-R2r]

"Of Poets, and their Theft"

... Most of our moderne writers now a daies, Consider not the fancy, but the phrase. As if fine words were wit or one should say A woman's handsome, if her clothes be gay. Regarding not what Beauty's in the face, Nor what proportion doth the body grace. As when her shoes be high, to say shee's tall, And when shee is strait-laid, to say shee's small. When painted, or her hair is curl'd with art, Though of it selfe tis plaine and skin is swart. We cannot say, from her a thanks is due To nature, nor those arts in her we view. Unlesse shee them invented, and so taught. The world to set forth that which is stark naught.
But Fancy is the Eye, gives Life to all;  
Words, the Complexion, as a whitened Wall.  
Fancy is the Form, Flesh, Blood, Bone, Skin;  
But Number is the Motion, gives the Grace,  
And is the Countenance to a well-ordained Face.  
[R2v-R3r]

[Selections from] FANCIES. The severall Keyes of Nature, which unlock her severall Cabinets

“Natures Cook.”

Death is the Cook of Nature, and we find  
Meat dress several waius to please her Mind.  
Some meetes shee roasts with Feavers, burning hot,  
And some shee boils with Dryses in a Pot.  
Some for Gelly consuming by degrees,  
And some with Veers, Gravie out to squeeze.  
Some Flesh as Sage she stuffs with Gouts, and Paines,  
Others for tender Meat hangs up in Chains.  
Some in the Sea she pickles up to keep,  
Others, as Brawne is soos’d, those in Wine steep.  
Some with the Pos, chops Flesh, and Bones so small,  
Of which She makes a French Fricasse withall.  
Some on Gridirons of Calentures is broyl’d  
And some is trodden on, and so quit spoyle’d.  
But those are bak’d, when smother’d they do dye,  
By Hectick Feavers some Meat she doth fry.  
In Sweat sometimes she stews with savoury smell,  
A Hodge-Podge of Diseases tasteth well.  
Braines dress with Apoplexy to Natures wish  
Or swimmes with Sauce of Mogrimises in a Dish.  
And Tongues she dries with Snoak from Stomachs ill,  
Which as the second Course she sends up still  
Then Death cuts Throats, for Blood-puddings to make,  
And puts them in the Guts, which Collicks rack.  
Some hunted are by Death, for Deere that’s red,  
Or Stalled Oxen, knock’d on the Head.  
Some for Bacon by Death are Sing’d, or seal’d,  
Then powdered up with Plegaro, and Ruman that’s salt.  
[R4r-R4v]

“Natures Oven”

The Braine is like an Oven, hot, and dry,  
Which bakes all sorts of Fancies, low, and high.  
The Thoughts are Wood, which Motion sets on fire,  
The Tongue a Peele, which draws forth the Desire.  
But thinking much, the Braine too hot will grow,  
And burnes it up; if Cold, the Thoughts are Dough.  
[R4v]

“A Posset for Natures Breakfast.”

Life scummes the Cream of Beauty with Times Spoon,  
And draws the Claret Wine of Blushes soon,  
There boils it in a Skillet cleane of Youth,  
Then thickes it well with crumbl’d Bread of Truth.  
And sets it on the Fire of Life, which growses  
The clearer, if the Bellowes of Health blowes.  
Then takes the Eggs of Faire, and Bashfull Eies,  
And puts them in a Countenance that’s wise,  
And cuts a Lemmon in of sharpest Wit.  
By Discretions Knife, as he thinks fit.  
A handful of Chast Thoughts double refin’d  
Six Spoonfuls of a Noble, and Gentle Mind.  
A Graine of Mirth, to give’t a little Taste,  
Then takes it off, for fear the Substance wast.  
And puts it in a Basin of Rich Wealth,  
And in this Meat doth Nature please her selfe.  
[R4v]

“A Tart”

Life took some Floure made of Complexions white,  
Churnd Butter, by Nourishment, as cleane as might;  
And kneade it well, then on a Board it laies,  
And roules it ouft, and so a Pye did raise.  
Then did she take some Cherry Lips that’s red,  
And Sloe-black Eyes from a Faire Virgins Head.  
And Strawberry Teats from high Banks of white Breast,  
And Juice from Raspes Fingers ends did presse.  
These put into a Pye, which soone did bake,  
Within a Heart, which she strait hot did make;  
Then drew it out with Reason’s Peele, and sends  
It up to Nature, she it much commends.  
[Sig S2r-S2v]
[Selections from the concluding section of Poems and Fancies]

I know, those that are strict and nice about Phrase, and the placing of words, will carp at my Booke: for I have not set my words in such order, as those who write elegant Prose. But I might confess ingenuously, my shallow wit could not tell how to order it, to the best advantage: besides, I found it difficult, to get so many Rhythmes, as to join the sense of the Subject: and by reason I could not attaine to both, I rather chose to leave the Elegance of words, then to obstruct the sense of the matter. For my desire was to make my conceit easy to the understanding, though my words were not so fluent to the ear. Again, they will finde fault with the Numbers, for I was forc'd to fewer or more, to bring in the sense of my Fancies. All I can say for my selfs is, that Poetry consists not so much in Number, Words, and Phrase, as in Fancy. Thirdly, they will finde fault at the Subject: saying, it is neither material, nor usefull for the Soule, or Body. To this I answer, My intention was, not to teach Arts, nor Sciences, nor to instruct in Divinity, but to passe away idle Time: and thought Time might be better spent: yet 'tis oft spent worse amongst many in the world. [Sig Kk3v]

Language want, to dresse my Fancies in,
The Hair's uncurl'd, the Garments loose, and thin;
Had they but Silver Lace to make them gay,
Would be more courted then in poor array.
Or had they Art might make a better show;
But they are plaine, yet cleanly doe they goe.
The world in Bravery doth take delight,
And glittering Shews doe more attract the sight;
And every one doth honour a rich Hood,
As if the outside made the inside good.

And every one doth bow, and give the place,
For not the Mans sake, but the Silver Lace.
Let me intreat in my poore Bockes behalf,
That all may not adore the Golden Calf.
Consider pray, Gold hath no life therein,
And Life in Nature is the richest thing.
So Fancy is the Soul in Poetrie,
And if not good, a Poem ill must be.
Be just, let Fancy have the upper place,
And then my Verses may perchance find grace.
If flattering Language all the Passions rule,
Then Sense, I feare, will be a mere dull Foose.

The worst Fate Bockes have, when they are once read,
They're laid aside, forgotten like the Dead:
Under a heap of dust they buried lye,
Within a vault of some small Library.
But Spiders they, for honour of that Art
Of Spinning, which by Nature they were taught:
Since Men doe spin their Writings from the Braine,
Striving to make a lasting Web of Fame,
Of Cobwebs thin, high Altars doe they raise,
There offer Flies, as sacrifice of praise

When that a Book doth from the Presse come new,
All buyes, or borrowts it, this Book to view:
Not out of love of Learning, or of wit,
But to finde Faults, that they may censure it.
Were there no Faults for to be found therein,
As few there are, but doe erre in some thing;
Yet Malice with her ranckled Spleen, and spight,
Will at the Time, or Print, or Binding bite.
Like Devils, when they cannot good souls get,
Then on their Bodies they their Witches set.

Excerpts from Margaret Cavendish, A True Relation of My Birth, Breeding, and Life (1656)

"...for the truth is, our Sex doth nothing but justle for the Preheminence of words, I mean not for speaking well, but speaking much, as they do for the Preheminence of place, words rushing against words, thwarting and crossing each other, and pulling with reproches, striving to throw each other down with disgrace, thinking to advance themselves thereby,
but if our Sex would but well consider, and rationally ponder, they will perceive and finde, that it is neither words nor place that can advance them, but worth and merit: nor can words or place disgrace them, but Inconstancy and boldness” (in Bowerbank and Mendelson 52).

“I cannot now write very plain, when I strive to write my best, indeed my ordinary handwriting is so bad as few can read it, so as to write it fair for the Press, but however that little wit I have, it delights me to scribble it out, and disperse it about, for I 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, passing my time with harmless fancies, their company being pleasing, their conversation innocent, in which I take such pleasure, as I neglect my health” (56).

**CCXI (211) Sociable Letters (1664)**

“And as for the matter of Governments, we Women understand them not; yet if we did, we are excluded from in:ermaddling therewith, and almost from being subject thereto; we are not tied, nor bound to State or Crown: we are free, not Sworn to Allegiance, nor do we take the Oath of Supremacy: we are not made Citizens of the Commonwealth, we hold no Offices, nor bear we any Authority therein; we are accounted neither Useful in Peace, nor Serviceable in War: and if we be not Citizens in the Commonwealth, I know no reason we should be Subjects to the Commonwealth. And the truth is, we are no Subjects, unless it be to our Husbands, and not always to them, for sometimes we usurp their Authority, or else by flattery we get their good wills to govern; but if Nature had not befriended us with Beauty, and other good Graces, to help us to insinuate ourselves into men’s Affections, we should have been more enslaved than any other of Nature’s Creatures she hath made: but Nature be thank’d, she hath been so bountiful to us, as we ofter inslave men, than men inslave us: they see: to govern the world, but we really govern the world, in that we govern men: for what man is he, that is not govern’d by a woman more or less?” (in Bowerbank and Mendelson 66)

“…and surely Country Huswives take more Pleasure in Milking their Cows, making their Butter and Cheese, and feeding their Poultry, than great Ladies do in Painting, Curling, and Adorning themselves, also they have more Quiet & Peaceable Minds and Thoughts, for they never, or seldom, look in a Glass to view their Faces, they regard not their Complexions, nor observe their Decayes, they Defie Time’s Ruins of their Beauties, they are not Peevish and Froward if they look not as Well one day as another, a Pimple or Spot in their Skin Tortures not their Minds, they fear not the Sun’s Heat, but Out-face the Sun’s Power, they break not their Sleeps to think of Fashions, but Work Hard to Sleep Soundly… But great Ladies at Publick Meetings take not such true Pleasures, for their Envy at each others Beauty and Bravery Disturbs their Pastimes, and Obstructs their Mirth, they rather grow Peevish and Froward through Envy, than Loving and Kind through Society, so that whereas Countrey Peasants meet with such Kind Hearts and Unconcerned Freedom as they Unite in Friendly Jollity, and Depart with Neighbourly Love, the Greater sort of Persons meet with Constrain’d Ceremony, Converse with Formality, and for the most part
Depart with Enmity; and this is not onely amongst Women, but amongst Men, for there is amongst the Better sort a greater Strife for Bravery [display] than for Courtesie, for Place than Friendship, and in their Societies there is more Vain-glory than Pleasure, more Pride than Mirth, and more Vanity than true Content...” (69-70).

Excerpts from *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*

April 11, 1667

“...and I to White Hall, thinking there to have seen the Duchess of Newcastle’s coming this night to Court, to make a visit to the Queene, the king having been with her yesterday, to make her a visit since her coming to town. The whole story of this lady is a romance, and all she do is romantick. Her footmen in velvet coats, and herself in an antique dress, as they say; and was the other day at her own play, “The Humorous Lovers;” the most ridiculous thing that ever was wrote...There is as much expectation of her coming to Court, that so people may come to see her her, as if it were the Queen of Sheba: but I lost my labour, for she did not come this night.”

April 26, 1667

“...This done Sir W. Batten and I back again to London, and in the way met my Lady Newcastle going with her coaches and footmen all in velvet: herself, whom I never saw before, as I have heard her often described, for all the town-talk is now-a-days of her extravagancies, with her velvetcap, her hair about her ears: many black patches, because of pimples about her mouth; naked-necked, without any thing about it, and a black just-a-corps. She seemed to me a very comely woman: but I hope to see more of her on Mayday.”

May 30, 1667

“...After dinner I walked to Arundell House, the way very dusty, the day of meeting of the Society being changed from Wednesday to Thursday...where I find much company, indeed very much company, in expectation of the Duchesse of Newcastle, who had desired to be invited to the Society; and was, after much debate, pro and con., it seems many being against it: and we do believe the town will be full of ballads of it. Anon comes the Duchesse with her women attending her: among others, the Ferabosco, of whom so much talk is that her lady would bid her show her face and kill the gallants. ... The Duchesse hath been a good, comely woman; but her dress so antick, and her deportment so ordinary, that I do not like her at all, nor did I hear her say any thing that was worth hearing, but that she was full of admiration, all admiration. Several fine experiments were shown her of colours, loadstones, microscopes, and of liquors among others, of one that did, while she was there, turn a piece of roasted mutton into pure blood, which was very rare.”
Letter of Mary Evelyn to Ralph Bohun, c. 1667

Sir,

I am concerned you should be absent when you might confirm the suffrages of your fellow collegiots, and see the mistress both Universities court; a person who has not her equal possibly in the world, so extraordinary a woman she is in all things. I acknowledge, though I remember her some years since and have not been a stranger to her fame, I was surprised to find so much extravagancy and vanity in any person not confined within four walls. Her habit particular, fantastical, not unbecoming a good shape, which she may truly boast of. Her face discovers the facility of the sex, in being yet persuaded it deserves the esteem years forbid, by the infinite care she takes to place her curls and patches. Her mien surpasses the imagination of poets, or the descriptions of a romance heroine's greatness; her gracious bows, seasonable nods, courteous stretching out of her hands, twinkling of her eyes, and various gestures of approbation, show what may be expected from her discourse, which is as airy, empty, whimsical, and rambling as her books, aiming at science, difficulties, high notions, terminating commonly in nonsense, oaths, and obscenity... I found Doctor Charlton with her, complimenting her with and learning in a high manner; which she took to be so much her due that she swore if the schools did not banish Aristotle and read Margaret, Duchess of Newcastle, they did her wrong, and deserved to be utterly abolished. My part was not yet to speak, but admire; especially hearing her go on magnifying her own generous actions, stately buildings, noble fortune, her lord's prodigious losses in the war, his power, valour, wit, learning, and industry—what did she not mention to his or her own advantage? Sometimes, to give her breath, came in a fresh admirer: then she took occasion to justify her faith, to give an account of her religion, as new and unintelligible as her philosophy, to cite her own pieces line and page in such a book, and to tell the adventures of some of her nymphs. At last I grew weary, and concluded that the creature called a chimera which I had heard speak of, was now to be seen, and that it was time to retire for fear of infection; yet I hope, as she is an original, she may never have a copy. Never did I see a woman so full of herself, so amazingly vain and ambitious. What contrary miracles does this age produce. This lady and Mrs. Phillips! [Katharine Phillips] The one transported with the shadow of reason, the other possessed of the substance and insensible of her treasure; and yet men who are esteemed wise and learned, not only put them in equal balance, but suffer the greatness of the one to weigh down the certain real worth of the other. This is all I can requite your rare verses with; which as much surpass the merit of the person you endeavor to represent, as I can assure you this description falls short of the lady I would make you acquainted with; but she is not of mortal race, and therefore cannot be defined.

M.E.

(in Bowerbank and Mendelson 91-93).
Letter of Dorothy Osborne to Sir William Temple, Letter 17 circa 1653

“And now on the strength of this ale, I believe that I shall be able to fill up this paper that’s left with something or other; and first let me ask you if you have seen a book of poems newly come out, made by my Lady Newcastle? For God’s sake if you meet with it send it to me; they say tis ten times more extravagant than her dress. Sure, the poor woman is a little distracted, she could never be so ridiculous else as to venture at writing books, and in verse too. If I should not sleep this fortnight, I should not come to that. My eyes grow a little dim though, for all the ale . . .“ (97)

SECONDARY MATERIALS

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*

“Margaret too might have been a poet; in our day all that activity would have turned a wheel of some sort. As it was, what could bind, tame or civilize for human use that wild, generous, untutored intelligence? It poured itself out, higgledy piggledy, in torrents of rhyme and prose, poetry and philosophy which stand congealed in quartos and folios that nobody ever reads. She should have had a microscope put in her hand. She should have been taught to look at the stars and reason scientifically. Her wits were turned with solitude and freedom. No one checked her. No one taught her. The professors fawned on her. At Court they jeered at her. Sir Egerton Brydges complained of her coarseness —‘as flowing from a female of high rank brought up in the Courts’. She shut herself up at Welbeck alone.

What a vision of loneliness and riot the thought of Margaret Cavendish brings to mind! as if some giant cucumber had spread itself over all the roses and carnations in the garden and choked them to death. What a waste that the woman who wrote ‘the best bred women are those whose minds are civilest’ should have frittered her time away scribbling nonsense and plunging ever deeper into obscurity and folly till the people crowded round her coach when she issued out. Evidently the crazy Duchess became a bogey to frighten clever girls with. Here, I remembered, putting away the Duchess and opening Dorothy Osborne’s letters, is Dorothy writing to Temple about the Duchess’s new book. ‘Sure the poore woman is a little distracted, shee could never bee soe rediculous else as to venture at writeing book’s and in verse too, if I should not sleep this fortnight I should not come to that.’”

Kathryn Schwarz, “The Wrong Question: Thinking Through Virginity”

“What happens if women perform, knowingly, the conditions that lend them social value? For sixteenth- and seventeenth-century texts, that kind of knowingness catalyzes the question of what it means to intend, producing . . . identities that are not the free invention of women but are also not only the ventriloquized property of men. To some extent, this ambivalent position reflects the inescapable dilemma of early modern subjectivity (6).”
“The question posed by feminist critics is not simply whether women appear in historical narratives, but how their appearances and disappearances reveal the ideological investments of historicist projects...[This question] at once focuses and begins to unravel the larger opposition between female subjects who define themselves and female objects who find themselves defined, between women who speak and women who are spoken: (20-21).”

“We often find ourselves back at the relationship between subversion and containment, at that early and powerful proposition according to which threats to authority are appropriated and turned to authority’s ends, and at the equally early resistance to this as a closed system. That first, naive question, “Was Queen Elizabeth really a virgin?” might in this sense be rewritten as, “Was she contained by patriarchal impositions, or did she subvert them?” This, too, is perhaps a wrong question, not least because feminist historicism ... like, I would suggest, any number of apparently more conventional feminine acts—changes the ways in which particular structures and practices mean. Rather than weighing the alternatives of capture and escape, we might instead see what happens if we take containment at its word, asking what is being contained and what it means to contain it and how it enacts that containment in a recognizable way, questions that return to the peculiar inscrutability of willed enactment from within (22).”

**Dymphna Callaghan, Introduction to The Impact of Feminism in English Renaissance Studies**

“While the revisionist perspective, then, offers some useful correctives of the feminist critique of patriarchy, it is not a substitute for it. We thus need information from both these approaches if we are to arrive at a properly comprehensive view of women’s relation to cultural representation in the period ... Feminist scholarship thus far, then, presents us with two divergent perspectives, which nonetheless have the potential to add up to a valuably complex, nuanced picture of women’s simultaneous participation in and exclusion from early modern culture. Women’s status in early modern England is, paradoxically, that of excluded participants (7).”

“There is no denying that feminism has been in something of an impasse in recent early modern studies. Largely because of the success of feminist studies, tried-and-true feminist arguments against the evils of patriarchy in the field and in the canon have become obsolete. As a result, some of its detractors now declare, feminism is over. In contrast, [the essays in this volume] argue that feminism is far from over, but it is much altered.”

“Crucially, this volume looks to a post-revisionist phase in feminist scholarship in the field, to a new paradigm that moves away from the adversarial politics of blame and from feminism as advocacy, but also away from the revisionist dilution of feminist politics. While revisionism sought in the interests of accuracy to nuance and correct the sometimes sweeping claims made by feminist “exclusionism,” the revisionist move to “accentuate the positive and eliminate the negative” has had the unfortunate consequence of denying the
reasons for feminist cultural history in the first place. Revisionism has spent its intellectual capital not on a critique of patriarchy, but of feminism itself....The energy of feminism now resides in its full integration into and with other knowledge-making projects. Indeed, feminism has become part of the fabric of nearly all important work in the field. So what does it mean for feminism (and indeed identity in general) to become digested and integrated without evacuating its specificity? Feminism is moving on, metamorphosing, and with all the bounce, brio, and unpredictability of an Ovidian union, coupling with (and sometimes uncoupling from) a range of other political and intellectual projects as it takes its rightful place in the intellectual mainstream (13-14).”

Deborah Boyle, excerpt from “Margaret Cavendish’s Nonfeminist Natural Philosophy”

“I have argued that Cavendish’s vitalist materialism and her rejection of mechanism and atomism are unrelated to feminism, and that recent interpretations such as those of Battigelli, Brown, Keller, Merchant, Price, Rogers, and Wilputte are therefore unwarranted. In Blazing World, Cavendish does display an awareness of the ways in which power can be used to limit knowledge, but her attitude toward such uses of power is one that contemporary feminists would abhor. Nor is there any evidence that she had feminist aims in mind when commenting on her own career as a woman participating in the traditionally masculine activities of writing and thinking about natural philosophy. None of this makes Cavendish’s natural philosophy any less interesting or historically valuable, but it does mean that future scholarship should abandon trying to make her out to be a protofeminist, and should focus instead on explicating and evaluating her arguments on their own terms (227).”

Randall Ingram, excerpts from “First Words and Second Thoughts: Margaret Cavendish, Humphrey Mosely and ‘The Book.’”

“But what if the book in question attempts to expand rather than contract readers’ liberties? What if a book, as Poems, and Fancies does, extends to readers the extraordinary agency to overlook scores of poems of their choosing, even to ignore the poet’s words and language itself as they see fit, and asks them to reflect generously on the poet’s imagination not because of but in spite of the signs printed on her pages? Rebellion against such prescriptions paradoxically involves strict self-regulation, a refusal to indulge in the offered freedom from close, book-bound reading (117-118).”

“Poems, and Fancies also confronts this essay with its own inherent and inherited biases: the essay cannot give Poems, and Fancies the reading that the prefatory material requests, for the textual machinery at work here (the machinery of quotations, endnotes, the suppressed "I") assures readers of the essay’s objectivity. Like Dorothy Osborne, the author of this essay attempts to resist Cavendish’s invitation to extravagant subjectivity, in hopes of contributing to a critical discourse that, like the seventeenth-century objectivity that Solomon discusses, “privileges finding over making, objects over subjects.” The essay accordingly purports to have discovered (not constructed) recurring contrasts in the
prefaces of Humphrey Moseley and Margaret Cavendish and to have re-presented them in quotations where any intelligent, clear-eyed reader can recognize their inherent (not constructed) validity. But Poems, and Fancies brings to the surface the fear that haunts the defensive gestures of critical writing, the fear that, notwithstanding evidence dutifully displayed, one might be making rather than finding. That the apparatus of a critical essay must vigilantly defend against this possibility suggests that the negotiations in which Cavendish and Moseley participated have not been definitively resolved and that “the” seventeenth-century literary book may be as much project as object (119-120).”

Jonathan Gil Harris, excerpts from “Cleopatran Affinities: Hélène Cixous, Margaret Cavendish, and the Writing of Dialogic Matter.” In The Impact of Feminism in English Renaissance Studies.

“Modeled in both Cixous’s and Cavendish’s affinities with Cleopatra is a movement across time that suggests a mode of historiography resistant to identification or purification. It offers an alternative to historicist paradigms within which past and present are absolutely divorced, whether by the telos of the Hegelian Spirit or the rupture of the Foucauldian break. Instead, Cixous’s and Cavendish’s affinities with Cleopatra—and their Cleopatran affinities with each other—produce a history founded in metonymic “conversations between souls.”... Cixous’s and Cavendish’s metonymic historiographies are anachronic, whereby the past nests in the present, and vice versa.... In this, Cixous and Cavendish are hardly singular. Indeed, one of the greatest gifts that materialist as much as French feminism continues to offer, whether to historical study in general or to early modern studies in particular, is its commitment to an anachronic sensibility: that is, its presumption of affinity— but not identity— between women (and, for that matter, men) in the past and the present. This sensibility is increasingly disguised or disallowed in the name of situating the past within its historical “moment.” The dialogue between Cixous and Cavendish, however, suggests that it is time for both feminism and early modern studies to question time—at least the purified time of historicism—and to begin imagining a new historiography grounded in the Cleopatran affinities of past and present (47).”