PURE WIT

The Revolutionary Life of Margaret Cavendish

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Introduction

The empress and authoress of a whole world

In April 1667, Margaret Cavendish was the talk of London society. At the first performance of *The Humorous Lovers* – a play everyone believed was by her though it was, in fact, written by her husband, the Duke of Newcastle – she had chosen an extravagantly provocative outfit. Sitting in the audience, she wore a dress so low-cut that "her breasts" were "all laid out to view". As if that boldness were not enough, she had even completed the look with "scarlet trimmed nipples". In a riotously bizarre letter to his father, the young man-about-town Charles North described the situation succinctly: "the Duchess Newcastle is all the pageant now discoursed on". In North's rather fantastical account, she had apparently tried to enter the playhouse in either a "triumphal chariot" pulled by two horses, or an even more glamorous one pulled by "8 white bulls", before then sneaking in "incognito".[1]

That same spring, the Restoration diarist Samuel Pepys recorded his attempts to catch a glimpse of the now-famous Duchess of Newcastle. "The whole story of this lady is a romance, and all she do is romantic", he wrote in early April when Cavendish was visiting court.[2] Pepys hoped to be able to see her in Whitehall, when she would be there "to make a visit to the Queen". But, for Pepys, she was herself a kind of royalty: that evening, so many people had heard she was coming to court that she was beset by crowds as if she were the "Queen of Sweden". Two weeks later, he managed to catch sight of her as she rode past in her coach, which

was decked out "all in velvet". He describes her appearance in brilliant, obsessive detail – she was wearing a "velvet cap", "black patches" on her face to disguise her pimples, and was "naked-necked" down to her "black just-au-corps", a type of knee-length jacket that was normally reserved for men. "All the town-talk is now-a-days of her extravagancies", he huffed.

Pepys was hardly immune to the general fascination with her. "I hope to see more of her on Mayday", he wrote. He was not the only one who had that idea: on the first of May, Margaret was "followed and crowded upon by coaches all the way she went", to the point that "nobody could come near her".[3] Ten days later, in an image reminiscent of David Bowie being mobbed by adoring fans in the 1970s, or the Beatles being hotly pursued in the 1960s, she was chased by "100 boys and girls running looking upon her". There is something slightly fantastical about these partial sightings: at one moment, all Pepys could see was a "black coach, adorned with silver instead of gold" and everything inside was a dizzying monochrome mix of "black and white".[4] Cavendish was a mysterious, enchanted creature.

But, if much of London thought Margaret was some strange combination of a costumed actress, unreal goddess, and magical princess, not everyone was so convinced. Mary Evelyn – wife of the diarist John Evelyn – visited her at her London home of Newcastle House, Clerkenwell and came away believing that she was insane: "I was surprised to find so much extravagancy and vanity in any person not confined within four walls." She even feared her unnaturalness would be contagious: "I hope, as she is an original, she may never have a copy," she wrote. Mary left in a hurry to avoid "infection".[5] The fact that her husband could not stay away from Margaret could hardly have helped stem her displeasure. In another nugget of gossip, the Lord Chamberlain even had to tell Cavendish to stop dressing her servants at court in "affected velvet caps".[6]

* * *

Who, or what, was this woman? A fairy queen, or insane whore? It wasn't until the end of May 1667 that Pepys had his chance to make Margaret's acquaintance and make up his own mind.

The Royal Society had been founded in 1660, and counted John Evelyn, the chemist Robert Boyle, and the architect Christopher Wren amongst its founding members: it was, unequivocally, the home of male Restoration scientific and scholarly endeavour. Having attacked two of its leading members in her recent publication, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* (1666) just a year earlier, and having satirised the Society as a whole in *The Blazing World* (1666), Cavendish decided that the time was right to press her case to attend a meeting of the Society. "After much debate, pro and con" and a ballot – many of the eminent men of the Society were against the idea, and feared "the town will be full of ballads" mocking the visit – an invitation was extended to Margaret, the first woman to be welcomed into the Society's then home at Arundel House.[7]

Margaret's visit proceeded in typically dramatic fashion. She wore a decadent dress, and was followed by her troupe of attendant ladies as crowds clamoured to see her. But for all the excitement, Pepys's assessment was damning: she was little more than "a good, comely woman" whose "dress so antick" made her little more than an amusing spectacle. She may have made it into the building of the Royal Society, but the men at its heart were all too quick to show her the door. After she had left – with an "elaborate curtsey", of course – the Society returned to their usual preoccupations: they made plans to measure the earth in St James's Park on Monday morning.[8]

* * *

The men of the Royal Society and all the hangers-on who had stood by to watch her visit did not quite understand Margaret Cavendish. Pepys's assessment of her as a "good, comely woman" – with all the normality that that description implies – is laughably meaningless when applied to her life. This was a woman who

lived at the forefront of the turbulence and disorder of the seventeenth century: who went into exile with Queen Henrietta Maria; who associated with Ben Jonson, Thomas Hobbes, and William Davenant; and who published poetry, fiction, prose, and philosophy at a time when an infinitesimally small number of women were writing at all, and an even smaller number dared to use their own name on their published works. She wrote about feminism, lesbianism, and cross-dressing – alongside discussions about the right form of government, the working of microscopes, and how atoms move. The life of Margaret Cavendish – born Margaret Lucas in 1623, to a wealthy but not aristocratic Royalist family – is anything but ordinary.

Why, then, have few people outside academia and dusty archives heard of her? In her own lifetime, she wouldn't have countenanced this as a possibility. She was remarkably confident about her aims: "All I desire is fame, and fame is nothing but a great noise, and noise lives most in a multitude, therefore I wish my book may set a-work every tongue."[9] A bold statement – made bolder by the fact that it is found in the preface to her first printed work; the first non-anonymous published work of literature by an aristocratic woman since 1621, and one of a mere handful of signed works by women published in the first six decades of the seventeenth century. But, as Cavendish would later write in one of her plays, "fame is a double life, as infamy is a double death".[10] Sadly, much of her later critical reputation has been shrouded in infamy.

In her ground-breaking feminist essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Virginia Woolf set Cavendish up for this second death. Woolf famously wrote the story of "Shakespeare's sister", Judith – a woman who was "as adventurous, as imaginative, as agog to see the world" as her brother, but was denied any of his chances and education because of the accident of her sex. Judith ends up dead: she "killed herself one winter's night" when the heartbreak of not being able to fulfil her talent and genius got too much for her. But not content with an imagined, frustrated female talent,

Woolf turned her critical eye to the pages of literary history to find the female writers who were also "born with a great gift" and, as a result of being unable to use it, found themselves "crazed", dead, or spending their days "in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at".[11]

Woolf kindly dismissed the poet Anne Finch, Countess of Winchelsea – "her gift is all grown about with weeds and bound with briars" – and lauded the Restoration playwright Aphra Behn ("for here begins the freedom of the mind"; she showed women they could "make money by [their] pen[s]") before she lit upon "hare-brained, fantastical" Margaret Cavendish. Some of Woolf's comments on Cavendish are so damning they are almost the platonic ideal of insults: she is "crack-brained and bird-witted"; a "giant cucumber" in a rose garden who chokes the other plants; and she "frittered her time away scribbling nonsense and plunging ever deeper into obscurity". Few readers in the twentieth century could, in good conscience, pick up a Cavendish volume after reading such excoriating words. And, in Woolf's view, nobody did: her books "moulder in the gloom of public libraries".

But there's every chance that Woolf wouldn't have wanted to insult Margaret quite as much as she did. Her brilliantly catty comments are contained within a much more nuanced reading. Woolf writes sensitively about how Margaret's burning "passion for poetry" guided her life, and her critique of Cavendish's writings is not so much concerned with their content as with their execution. Her intelligence "poured itself out… in torrents of rhyme and prose, poetry and philosophy which stand congealed in quartos and folios that nobody ever reads". In *The Common Reader*, Woolf even went as far as to admire "something noble and Quixotic and high-spirited" in Cavendish.[12] Woolf did, then, follow this up with the verdict that she had the "freakishness of an elf, the irresponsibility of some non-human creature, its heartlessness and its charm".

There is a moment in the introduction to many academic works about Cavendish when the writer suggests that, whilst Woolf's accusations are cruel, there is some truth in them. What follows is often an *apologia* for focusing on Cavendish – a disclaimer for the more difficult parts of her writing, her difficult style, or her contradictory beliefs. As one scholar has put it, "perhaps more than any other early modern woman writer Cavendish has prompted critical disclaimers, qualifications, and apologies".[13] There is no getting around the fact that some of Cavendish's writing is hard going: too niche for modern readers; too rooted in a philosophical context that feels too distant from us; and too divorced from modern concerns about plot, realism, and concision. But for every moment of heavy-going philosophical argument, there is a spark of wit or satire so sharp that it feels it could have been written yesterday. And, more importantly, no academic or writer ever makes such an apology for some of John Dryden's duller works, or Ben Jonson's more obscure, boring plays. This is not to say that Cavendish is a female Donne, or a feminist, royalist Milton. But her work does deserve to be read seriously – without a pre-emptive apology about its quality or the gender of the author, and with true engagement with her ideas. Margaret Cavendish was a virtuoso; a radical; and one of those historical figures who seem to be spectacularly out of joint with the century into which they were born.

And her life, as well as her writing, deserves to be remembered. Everything Margaret did, from her birth 400 years ago in 1623 to her premature death in 1673, was striking, genre-defying, and – in the true, non-hyperbolic sense – awe-inspiring. In 1653, when Cavendish published her first book, *Poems and Fancies,* women simply did not write and publish books of poetry under their own name. If they did write, they circulated their work in manuscripts. If they did decide to publish, they would do so anonymously, under their initials or the ever-prolific title,

"A Woman". If they did decide to print a book under their own name, it would overwhelmingly often be something on a "safe" subject, such as a book of advice to mothers or a work of religious piety. Margaret – having written her poems whilst she was penniless, stranded without her husband, and in the midst of petitioning the Interregnum government to allow her access to some of the proceeds from the estates Newcastle had owned prior to the war – did none of this: her book went to press with her name dominating the title page. And the subject of her poems? How atoms function, the destruction wreaked by civil wars, and elements of her own autobiography. Over the next twenty years of her life and in her twenty-three books, Cavendish tore up the rules of what was expected of seventeenth-century women and rewrote them on her own terms.

The subjects of her writing are hardly what any reader would associate with the seventeenth century. Her interests are radically, preternaturally modern. She wrote about women who cross-dress in order to fight in wars, travel more safely, and experience adventure. She wrote repeatedly about her antipathy to marriage, and why any wedding is a considerably better deal for a man than a woman. She was intrigued, if not obsessed, by the idea of a women-only separatist utopia – and even wrote about the possibility of lesbian love. "But why may not I love a woman with the same affection I could a man?" asks one of her remarkably forward-thinking characters.[14] She was, despite her contradictions, a (proto)-feminist*: she truly believed that women should have access to a world beyond childbirth, housework, and – for aristocrats – needlework and dancing. She was a talented scientist and philosopher, and was not afraid to disagree with the received opinions and maxims of the day. She even wrote one of the earliest works of science fiction. She did not have children, but she did bring a new genre into the world.

* This is a difficult term, and one that will be discussed further on.

With her uncompromising desire for fame and power, and her (apparent) refusal of traditional roles for women, it seems hardly flippant or historically illiterate to argue that Cavendish's sensibility and writing have as much relevance to our century as they did to her own.

* * *

But history withers if we only consider the parts of it that feel relevant to our own predicaments, and Margaret Cavendish's life sheds light on the weird, and often under-appreciated, world of the seventeenth century.

It's all too often said that England escaped the revolutionary fever that raced through America and France in the eighteenth century, but a revolution which was just as violent and bloody – and, in its own way, as historically significant – had happened a century before. The English Civil War broke out in 1642 and, by 1649, the autocratic King Charles's head was no longer attached to his body. Everything changed – from how the country was governed to how the population prayed – and many of the transformations lasted long after the Restoration in 1660. Cavendish was at the centre of this disturbance: she was a member of a Royalist family and was a lady-in-waiting at the royal court. She was forced into exile in France, and did not live permanently in England for sixteen years. Her life and writing are a brilliant prism through which to view this period, and to ask new questions about early modern women's lives. Margaret was groundbreakingly radical, but she was not alone in transgressing gendered expectations and pushing at ever-flimsier boundaries. In many ways, the tumult and turbulence of the seventeenth century provided new possibilities for women. The wars gave them political roles as petitioners, and, in some cases, active roles in the fighting. And the changes in religion, with the growth of Nonconformist and Quaker communities, gave an ever-growing number of women the chance to prioritise their intellectual, spiritual life. Women in the seventeenth century

were far from the silent, submissive stereotype that has persisted in popular thought.

But for a woman who delighted in bold, attention-grabbing stunts and was so preoccupied by the lure of fame, Margaret was near-debilitatingly shy: she struggled to speak when at Queen Henrietta Maria's court as a young girl, and, three decades later, she would fight the same tongue-tied "bashfulness" when meeting the beau monde of London in her triumphant spring of 1667. And it was not mere shyness that marked Margaret out and prevented her from enjoying society: her life was plagued by periods of "melancholy", and she was equally troubled by the unsavoury cures she prescribed herself to overcome this condition, and by other ailments. Purging, fasting, and potions of all kinds composed of foul-sounding ingredients formed part of her diet from her late teens onwards.

At the centre of Margaret's life – and at the centre of this book – is a difficult love story: Margaret Lucas met William Cavendish, the 1st Duke of Newcastle, when she was twenty-two, and he was thirty years her senior. The slightly unsavoury nature of their age gap (although common for the period) pales in significance when considering the strength of their love. Given her extreme shyness, it is surprising that their courtship prospered. But William was one of the few people that Margaret could speak and open up to. He was unfazed by the ambitious, intelligent woman he married, and tirelessly supported her publishing career: he wrote prefatory poems (in one, he lauds her "pure wit"), collaborated with her on writing projects, sent copies of her books to his well-connected friends and acquaintances, and helped with her day-to-day tasks.[15] His only worry about his wife being a writer – unlike the many critics who damned her as a mad whore – was that she spent too much time sitting down. And the relationship ran both ways: Margaret married William despite knowing that he was a disgraced Royalist commander without a penny to his name, and despite her belief that marriage trapped a woman within the submissive half of a

union. This love story has been placed on a pedestal in studies of Cavendish: as a sign of her husband's goodness for dealing with her "eccentricities", and a sign of her feminine dutifulness, despite the wilder sides of her character. But it was certainly more complex than some historians have argued: in later years, their relationship seems to have faltered and Cavendish's tirades against marriage would increase. Nonetheless, their letters and poems open a window into a wonderfully intimate, passionate, and tumultuous seventeenth-century relationship.

* * *

In 1666, Cavendish published her most famous, and now most anthologised, work: *The Blazing World*. Part scientific treatise, part utopian philosophy, and part proto-science fiction, it was wholly radical and marked the indisputable high point of her literary career. It ends with a predictably modest note:

> By this poetical description, you may perceive, that my ambition is not only to be Empress, but Authoress of a whole world; and that the worlds I have made… are framed and composed of the most pure… parts of my mind; which creation was more easily and suddenly effected, than the conquests of the two famous monarchs of the world, Alexander and Caesar.[16]

She goes on to write that her creation caused fewer "disturbances" and "deaths" than these two famous titans. Not content with mere world domination, or near-divine world creation, Cavendish insists upon proving that she can complete this universal triumph better than any man – or woman, for that matter – who came before her.

Margaret Cavendish was the Empress of her own literary world, and did achieve fame in her lifetime – and for nearly a century afterwards. But in our own, she is far less known than other Restoration literary figures like Lord Rochester,

John Dryden, or Aphra Behn. Nor does she have a place within the canon of female writers who fought for women's writing to be taken seriously, from Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke, to George Eliot, Jane Austen and, of course, Virginia Woolf. But, four centuries after her birth, it's time for that to change. Woolf once wrote that "the crazy Duchess became a bogey to frighten clever girls with": what better time to prove that we're not scared?