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Margaret Cavendish's Mock-Utopia and her Failed Poets

When Margaret Cavendish affixes *The Blazing World* to her *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, she exposes the utopian imagination at work in the Royal Society's experimental philosophy. Thomas Sprat, a founding Royal Society Fellow, attempted to strip the fancy of its connection to the poets, claiming a sanitized imagination for experimental philosophy. The Royal Society harnessed the imagination to recover, at least to some degree, the paradisaical relationship between man and nature lost in the fall. For this reason, Sprat and other Fellows argued that experimental philosophy reveals a world of wonders far greater than any poet could pen. The poet, they concluded, was obsolete in the face of their new science. Not so for Cavendish. I argue that Cavendish crafts *The Blazing World* as a mock-utopia – a utopia that recognizes its own futility and abandons its own ends—to satirize experimental philosophy's utopian goals and to claim the Royal Society as failed poets. As a genre that attests to its status as fiction, Cavendish's mock-utopia demonstrates that the experimental philosophers' appropriation of the imagination cannot be divested from poetry.

Sonia Desai

**Margaret Cavendish and Ben Jonson:
Ladies Spaces, Boy Actors, and Wit**

Margaret Cavendish's *The Convent of Pleasure* and Ben Jonson's *Epicene* have several striking similarities that seem to invite a comparison of the two plays. Both feature female only spaces where women are able to construct their own society which, in turn, causes anxiety amongst the male characters. Jonson's Women's College is painted as a ridiculous attempt from women to imitate the more illustrious organizations of men, while Cavendish's convent is a safe space for women to enjoy each other's company and to learn and experience life. Both of these spaces are infiltrated by male characters in the guise of women. The male characters in disguise trick the women around them, and take the audience for a ride, as well. Unlike other cross dressing dramas we are familiar with, most notably those by Shakespeare, the audience is not in on the plan. There are no soliloquys where *Epicene* or the Princess reveal their true natures and motives to the audience. The audience learns the truth alongside the other characters, in the moment. It is an interesting theatrical move to blindsides the audience in that way and to place them on the side of the dupes, the ones who weren't clever enough to see the truth. While Jonson's trick relies on the gender conventions of the Early Modern stage, Cavendish is working under very different circumstances, notably a lack of access to the stage itself. The play of gender works very differently in both plays, as well. However, their notable similarities, and Cavendish's familiarity with Jonson's work, point to a conscious rewriting on the part of Cavendish of Jonson's popular work *Epicene*. This paper will read these plays in the context of each other and look at the way that gender and desire is constructed and understood in each of these plays. It will also look at the way the

2018 SAA Seminar: Margaret Cavendish Now 2
Leader: Lara Dodds, Mississippi State University

theatrical contract and performance is understood and manipulated by both these authors. Despite the different eras in which they lived, both Jonson and Cavendish were interested in ideas of same sex interactions and female autonomy, though to very different ends.

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Margaret Cavendish's Rhyme and Reason

In *Wit's Cabal* (1662), Margaret Cavendish has her characters engage in a “dialogue” or “discourse,” essentially a game wherein the group communally composes *ex tempore* poetry. Mademoiselle Faction starts them off with one line, and then each in turn makes up a verse to create a pattern of alternately rhymed lines. Given the dominance of prose in Cavendish's drama, the scene stands out as a moment that stages and theorizes the function of rhyme, and it gives voice to a critique as well as celebration for the way rhyme and other poetic devices can mask “nonsense.” On the one hand, as Mademoiselle Superb points out, the “sense” and “reason” of poetry only comes to light through close reading, a process through which rhymes are “dissolved into prose.” On the other, as Mademoiselle Ambition argues, such translations of verse to prose results in the loss of the “Elegance of the Style.” The characters intentionally let the issue drop in order to get on with their sport, but Cavendish leaves us with one of the central questions of literary criticism: what is the relationship between form and content? Making the question even more complex is the fact that Cavendish wrote her own poems in rhyme. This paper considers how Cavendish's representation of rhyme might give us insights into seventeenth-century perspectives on aesthetics, gender, and genre.

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MARGARET CAVENDISH LISTENS

I'm interested in early modern listening, and particularly that done by women: how paying attention to listening might upset the commonplace equation of speech with authority, in a time in which women were supposed to keep quiet. Recently, theorists and sound artists including Pauline Oliveros, Salome Voegelin, and Cathy Lane have been recuperating listening now as a politically-engaged, feminist, active practice, and reimagining the soundscape as a venue for creating what Voegelin calls ‘sonic possible worlds’. Can we reclaim listening—in the renaissance, and in our own, politically fraught time—as an active, rather than passive, engagement with the world?

This paper addresses this question by attending to Margaret Cavendish's practices of listening, and particularly to the sound of church bells. When writing about bells in early modern writing, I've been struck (puns are unavoidable, I'm afraid) by how infrequently women writers discuss these objects, the man-made sounds of which were a noisy, inescapable part of the soundscape. Of course Cavendish is the exception: she talks about

2018 SAA Seminar: Margaret Cavendish Now 3
Leader: Lara Dodds, Mississippi State University

bells when discussing hearing in general, and frequently uses them as a metaphor for fame. In this paper I concentrate on the first editions of *Poems, and Fancies* and *The World's Olio* to discuss Cavendish's listening, and her use of this metaphor. Other listeners in the middle of the century, including Thomas Browne and John Bunyan, use bells to get to an individual sense of loss, or nostalgia, or spiritual conversion. Cavendish's interpretation of these same sounds is very different. By making explicit the communal, unavoidable listening that bells demand, and tying it to the workings of fame (particularly literary fame), Cavendish asserts her place in the soundscape as a skilful hearer, able not just to interpret sounds but also to create public and lasting meanings for them.

John Kuhn

Collaboration, Patronage, and the Cavendishian Shaping of Post-War Comedy

In the past two decades, scholars have shown a variety of connections between the public theaters of Renaissance and Restoration England, demonstrating how later playwrights cannibalized texts, personnel, and properties from the pre-1642 industry. Rather than seeing the Restoration drama as a decisive break from the earlier period, these accounts have uncovered mechanisms through which the aesthetics and production mechanics of pre-war drama persisted long after their nominal end during the closure of the theaters. This paper adds to this conversation by focusing on the Cavendishes' role in the memory and reproduction of pre-war theatrical models of genre and authorship in the early years of the Restoration theater. I focus on three phenomena: William's pre- and post-war collaborations with working public theater dramatists in *The Variety* (1641, with James Shirley), *Sir Martin Mar-all* (1667, with John Dryden) and *The Triumphant Widow* (1674, with Thomas Shadwell); the role both William and Margaret played in the posthumous reputational shaping of pre-war dramatists, particularly Ben Jonson; and finally, the broad features of the plays written with an eye to Cavendish patronage before and after the war. By examining the Cavendish family's decades-long involvement with different forms of dramatic production, we can see how patronage constituted an indirect but meaningful link between the two eras of public theater and played a significant role, particularly, in the shaping of postwar comedy.

Marina Leslie, Northeastern University

Blazing Worlds, Novel Interpretations, and the Burden of Margaret Cavendish

Two recent novels, *Margaret the First* (2016) by Danielle Dutton and *The Blazing World* (2014) by Siri Hustvedt, draw on Cavendish's life and work to bring her into view for contemporary readers. Dutton's biographical novel puts her at the center, offering an impressionistic account of her experience and inner life. In Hustvedt's novel, Cavendish serves as an avatar, muse, and warning for her protagonist, Harry (Harriet) Burden, a New York artist who struggles to receive recognition for her gifts. This paper asks not only how Dutton and Hustvedt understand and reconstruct Cavendish as a woman and

2018 SAA Seminar: Margaret Cavendish Now 4
Leader: Lara Dodds, Mississippi State University

public intellectual but also what it would mean to encounter her first in these fictional forms and settings. Who indeed is Cavendish now if it is the fictive elaborations of the novel (and other popular genres and media in which she has recently appeared) that offer her local habitation and a name, while scholars toil obscurely, writing mainly for one another?

If recent scholarship on Cavendish is not particularly in evidence in the novels, there is a powerful convergence for scholarly and novelistic narratives about Cavendish in Virginia Woolf's iconic and unsettling image of Cavendish in "A Room of One's Own." Indeed, these novels could be argued to register Bloomsbury circa 1929 more powerfully than Cavendish's Civil War and Restoration England, conjuring Judith Shakespeare's story as resonantly as Cavendish's. And in their shadows lurks the exhumed Duchess, the "bogey to frighten clever girls," in fantastical costumes but embarrassing, diminished, and slightly malodorous.

Of course, Woolf's profound ambivalence about Cavendish haunts our scholarly work as well and I want to use the novels as a provocation and a platform for rethinking and renarrating that legacy without either denying its gravitational pull or succumbing to its seductions. Rather than correct or corroborate the novels' Cavendish, I want to take seriously the difference that genre and method make to discuss how the illuminated or obscured interiorities, displaced historicities, and painterly renderings of Cavendish's eccentricities and exclusions in the novels might also suggest new ways of representing and animating the Cavendishean ghost in our own scholarly machines.

Kristen McCants, UC Santa Barbara

**Emotional Creatures:
Animals and Affect in Margaret Cavendish's Poetry**

Throughout her creative works, Margaret Cavendish turns to the animal world to depict her understandings of the human affective landscape: as she writes in "A Moral Discourse of Man and Beast," "*Men, Beasts, Birds*, in Humours much agree." In this paper, I focus on Cavendish's *Poems and Fancies* to interrogate how she envisions the world as populated by feeling beings *of all species*. While not unique among early modern writers in depicting emotional animals, poems like "The Hunting of the Hare" and "The Hunting of a Stag" offer intriguing inroads into how Cavendish understands the spectrum of creaturely emotions, and the effects she believes such an understanding should have on human relationships with animals.

Cavendish's exploration of animal emotions is consonant with her inquiries into the structure of the universe. As she attempts to define what it means to *be* in the world, she uses animal displays of emotion to complicate human notions of superiority. For instance, her poignant depiction of the harrowing last moments of Wat, the hare in "The Hunting of the Hare," enables her to make a wider condemnation of the hunters who "[make] their Stomacks Graves, which full they fill / With Murther'd Bodies." Similarly, in "The

**2018 SAA Seminar: Margaret Cavendish Now 5
Leader: Lara Dodds, Mississippi State University**

Hunting of a Stag,” Cavendish depicts the final moments of the stag as a moment of emotional overflow: “[T]hus did their Three several Passions meet: / First, the *desire* to Catch, the *Doggs* made fleet: / Then *Fear*, the *Stagg* made run, his Life to save; / Whilst *Men*, for *Love* of Mischief, digg’d his Grave.” By using modern theories of affect and animal minds, such as those of affective neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp, I will explore how Cavendish’s animal poetry demonstrates her prescient attempts to understand the minds and feelings of animals. Examining her work through modern scientific understandings of emotion and animal life grants Cavendish entry into the scientific community in which she so earnestly participated, but which largely ostracized her during her lifetime.

Shawn Moore, Florida SouthWestern State College

How We Read Cavendish

In 1993, Margaret Ezell made one of the strongest cases for recovering the literary history of women writers including writers like Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle (1623-1673): “perhaps it is time for a re-visioning of women’s literary history, down to the very methods used when searching for, evaluating, and presenting early women’s writing. Perhaps then we will be able to write women’s literary histories that do insist on the value of these early women writer’s experiences and texts” (165). It’s been twenty-four years since Ezell’s call to action and in the past two decades, Cavendish scholars have met that call with fervor and tenacity. While this work has challenged and reshaped Cavendish’s authorship and her place among the influential natural philosophers and critics of early modern science in many ways, how we read Cavendish and how we reconstruct and write about her literary histories is hindered by our own recovery work. What version of Cavendish are we presenting and preserving in our academic and public work through our textual choices? More specifically, I want to know exactly how we’re reading and recovering Cavendish’ texts? In some ways, we face a serious problem in that while popularity in Cavendish increases there are only limited opportunities to access her writing and almost no complete access to her material texts. To be frank, our access to Cavendish’s textual history is limited. To consider the state of Cavendish now is to contend with the glaring deficit in our textual history of Cavendish’s writing and authorship. Our view of Cavendish is incomplete and reflective of selective textual availability and popularity. This paper will explore how we read Cavendish and briefly examine the limited access and textual availability of her work and analyze how we currently read Cavendish hinders our recovery projects and argue that while our work “re-visioning women’s literary history” is well on its way, we must not forget what texts we are using to write that history (Ezell 165).

Vanessa Rapatz, Ball State University

Remodeled Chastity in Margaret Cavendish’s *The Religious*

In *The Religious*, Cavendish revises Shakespeare’s essentialist maid-widow-wife paradigm associated with *Measure for Measure*’s Mariana, and adds virginity as a fourth

2018 SAA Seminar: Margaret Cavendish Now 6
Leader: Lara Dodds, Mississippi State University

term that destabilizes the paradigm. Lady Perfection's complicated status after her forced annulment is similar to Mariana's status following the bed-trick; however, Perfection amplifies the importance of her lost virginity and sets it apart from the "maid" category that stands in for virginity in *Measure for Measure*. For Perfection, her loss of virginity becomes a key motivation for her actions throughout the play and for the specific ways in which she materializes her chastity. Her retreat to a tower on her father's estate with a single grate as an access point becomes a way to avoid the patriarchal imperative that she choose a new, sanctioned husband; however, it also allows her to control the perception of her status as she reasserts her chastity as fidelity to her first husband. In this essay, I want to focus on the grate, which becomes not only a way to mediate the male gaze, but also serves as an integral plot device as Perfection orchestrates a suicide pact with her husband that involves passing a double-edged sword through the grate's apertures in an act that mimics consummation.

Furthermore, I argue that early modern conceptions of women's chastity resemble the grate's function as a convent fortification. As Kathryn Schwarz reminds us, chastity is a virtue "at once transparent and opaque; transparent, because its advantages seem self-evident to a patrilineally organized society; opaque, because its layers of meaning do not allow a clear line of sight."¹ Additionally, like the grate, whether chastity is associated with a woman's agency over her own body or with the imposition of social standards on her depends largely on a sense of perception, which is easily obscured. However, the real innovation in this play comes not from the renovation of the little tower, but rather from Perfection's attempt to control the paradoxical enclosure even after it has been breached, and ultimately from a union of the two opposed ideological structures—convent and marriage.

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Cavendish, Our Contemporary

Why Cavendish now? When our contemporaries look to an early modern author for insight into current political events, government, war, and what they often call "the human condition," they tend to look to Shakespeare, if anyone. But, arguably, in our current age of terrorism and abuses of power, Cavendish offers even more wisdom than Shakespeare, given her own familiarity with living through these experiences herself and the frequency with which she published works about or inspired by these experiences. Indeed, two recent films exhibit striking parallels to Cavendish's plays, suggesting that Cavendish is particularly appropriate for our cultural climate now. In my paper I consider the parallels between Cavendish's play *Convent of Pleasure* and the film *No Men Beyond This Point* (2015) and Cavendish's play *Bell in Campo* and the film *Wonder Woman* (2017) as a means of illustrating this argument.

¹ Kathryn Schwarz, "Chastity, Militant and Married: Cavendish's Romance, Milton's Masque," *PMLA* 118.2 (2003): 270.

Brandie R. Siegfried, Brigham Young University

Shakespeare's Atomi and Cavendish's Fairies:

Margaret Cavendish's *Poems and Fancies* (1653) is best understood as a conversation with Lucretius's *De rerum natura* (*On the Nature of Things*) and presumes readers' familiarity with that work. Following Lucretius's example, *Poems and Fancies* ranges through topics in natural philosophy, mathematics, political theory, local history, and ethics. Its overall coherence develops through variations on three Epicurean themes: atomic motion and form by which is expressed Nature's creative variability; the pleasures and paradoxes of perception in relation to knowledge; and the tension between the emergence of new life on the one hand, and the inevitability of death on the other. Cavendish had also perused a wide swath of scientific treatises and a good number of other works, including plays, jest books, medical recipes, poem collections, fairy lore, romances, and cookery books (allusions to which are frequent throughout *Poems and Fancies*)—all of which contributed to the first stage of her natural philosophy. Indeed, for Cavendish, literary art models the nature of matter, which is comprised of an amalgamation of rational, perceptive, and receptive faculties in every particle. In this regard, Shakespeare played a special role in her thought, and this discussion pursues the explicit references to Shakespeare in several of Cavendish's atomic poems. Such allusions demonstrate the degree to which her literary endeavors were not merely pleasing devices in which to couch her natural philosophy: on her view of science and the natural world (unlike Hobbes's chaotic war of all against all), modes of dialectical expression define nature's fundamental order as a constantly branching, sometimes tangled, but always fecund process of development. In her later treatises touching on both social and physical sciences, Cavendish refers her readers back to *Poems and Fancies* for precisely this reason. On Cavendish's view, we are not like the Epicurean atoms falling in a void, awaiting an accident of possible reorganization. Rather, as her dialogue poems insist, we are always already entangled and interdependent, part of a Nature in which (to wrest Latour from his proper context) "emancipation does not mean 'freed from bonds,' but *well-attached*."² For this reason, looking back at Shakespeare's work through the lens of Cavendish's atomic poems allows for added views on the philosophical implications bound up with the language of several of Shakespeare's most striking images.

Mary Trull, St. Olaf College

Margaret Cavendish, Francis Bacon, and the Fable in the Philosophy

In this paper, I hope to shed light on Margaret Cavendish's views on the limits of knowledge in a new way through contrast with Francis Bacon's *De sapientia veterum* of 1609, which establishes imaginative fiction as a mode for thinking through problems of epistemology and natural philosophy. *The Wisdom of the Ancients*, enormously popular

² Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 218.

2018 SAA Seminar: Margaret Cavendish Now 8
Leader: Lara Dodds, Mississippi State University

in Cavendish's time, was both an entertaining read full of mythological characters, and a subtle investigation of Bacon's philosophy, with a particular focus on the limits of knowledge. Cavendish's literary-philosophical poems and prose pieces in *Poems and Fancies* and *Nature's Pictures* are, I argue, like *De sapientia veterum* in their use of fancy to outline the limits of knowledge. As Bacon wrote in "Coelum, On the Origins of Things," "as there is philosophy in the fable so there is fable in the philosophy." However, Bacon invokes feminized madness as the cost of philosophical hubris, Cavendish's vision poems dramatize a seeker's profound encounter with a truth that can be glimpsed only briefly and confusedly. For Bacon, such uncertainty is equivalent to frenzy; but Cavendish embraces uncertainty as part of the philosophical project.

Kailey Giordano

Bring Forth Answerable Fruit": Challenging the Exploitation of Land in the Utopian Writings of Margaret Cavendish, Mary Cary, and Anne Trapnel

While scholarship on Margaret Cavendish has gained popularity of late, the writings of Mary Cary and Anne Trapnel have been understudied, and the scholarship that deals with seventeenth-century women writers largely focuses on the ways in which they conceptualize female authorship and subject-hood. This paper will explore the models of land stewardship presented in several mid-seventeenth-century women's utopian writings: Margaret Cavendish's *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing-World* (1666), Mary Cary's *A New and More Exact Mapp* (1651), and Anne Trapnel's *The Cry of a Stone* (1654). More specifically, this paper will pair the utopian writings of Cary and Trapnel with Cavendish's *Blazing World* to examine how these women writers build arguments about how English land has been mismanaged and should be managed, especially under Cromwell's Protectorate government and in the wake of the founding of the Royal Society in 1660. Furthermore, this paper will consider how these writers' social class and political and religious beliefs may have informed such arguments. Although the prophetic writings of Fifth Monarchists Mary Cary and Anne Trapnel have not typically been classified as part of the utopian genre, their critiques of mid-seventeenth century England, which are couched in visionary language of imagined futures, are certainly utopian in scope. This paper will be indebted to much of that scholarship, but it also seeks to expand these discussions in two ways. First, it will consider how these writers' concerns about land stewardship become avenues through which they challenge existing material practices of managing land. Second, it will examine how these writers fashion themselves as more capable managers of land than powerful men.