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CHAPTER 17

Margaret Cavendish's Melancholy Identity: Gender and the Evolution of a Genre

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When writers in the first half of the seventeenth century wanted to describe what possessed them while composing their prose or poems, they would typically name a melancholy muse or temperament. The best known illustration of this creative impulse was the female figure of Melancholia portrayed in Albrecht Dürer's engraving *Melencolia I* (1514), described in Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) as "a sad woman leaning on her arme with fixed lookes, ... halfe mad, ... and yet of a deepe reach, excellent apprehension, judicious, wise and witty."¹ The poets and scholars who professed that they could identify with her somber, preoccupied bearing would immediately be recognized by their audiences if not as geniuses, then as pretending towards such a status. Although the familiar figure of Melancholia was female, neither Burton nor any of the other theorists on the subject imagined there could be any women writers identifying with the forms of introspective intellectualism and inventiveness that she represented. The pseudo-Aristotelian theory (in *Problems* 30.1) that formed the basis for the Renaissance image of the melancholy genius was concerned with extraordinary men, not women, since women were considered more likely to succumb to the pathological effects caused by disturbances in the bodily fluid termed "black bile."² Their most typical symptoms would be immoderate grief and weeping

¹ Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. Thomas C. Faulkner, Nicolas K. Kiessling, and Rhonda L. Blair (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 1:391.

² Juliana Schiesari, *The Gendering of Melancholia: Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Symbolics of Loss in Renaissance Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 14–16, 101–12; Matthew Bell, *Melancholia: The Western Malady* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), esp. 88–89; Jennifer Radden, *The Nature of Melancholy: From Aristotle to Kristeva* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 39–40; Angus Gowland, "The Problem of Early Modern Melancholy," *Past & Present*, no. 191 (May 2006): 97; 99. As primary sources,

and a psychosomatic condition similar to depression.³ For women, marriage was the best cure, implying that women were at the receiving end of either comfort or rejection.⁴ In any event, feminine sadness did not carry the same cultural prestige as the tendency towards contemplation and artistic expression that allegedly made melancholy males capable of producing magnificent philosophy and literature.⁵ Modern scholars have perhaps been too ready to accept these early modern gender distinctions, in a scholarly tradition that ranges from Sigmund Freud's essay on "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917) via Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, and Fritz Saxl's seminal study of *Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion and Art* (1964) to Juliana Schiesari in *The Gendering of Melancholia: Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Symbolics of Loss in Renaissance Literature* (1992). In her influential work, Schiesari criticizes earlier studies such as *Saturn and Melancholy* for ignoring women as subjects worthy of investigation.⁶ Yet by claiming that the "ego-formation" that makes the melancholy subject stand out has only been seen in men, she confirms the assumption that for women, melancholia is not available "as an enabling ethos."⁷

Gowland (ibid., 99 n. 82) lists Burton, including the section on "Womens Melancholy" in *Anatomy of Melancholy*, 1:414–18, and Jacques Ferrand's *Traité de l'essence et guérison de l'amour ou de la mélancolie erotique* (1610, 1623), in Ferrand, *A Treatise on Lovesickness* (1623), trans. Donald A. Beecher and Massimo Ciavolella (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1990), 264–65, 311–12. See also the section on "Sex" in Michael MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam: Madness, Anxiety, and Healing in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 35–40. The problem of melancholy is addressed in the Aristotelian canon in the following way: "Why is it that all men who have become outstanding in philosophy, statesmanship, poetry or the arts are melancholic, and some to such an extent that they are infected by the diseases arising from black bile, as the story of Heracles among the heroes tells?" See *Problems* 30.1 in Aristotle, *Problems*, vol. 2, trans. W. S. Hett, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), 155.

³ Timothie Bright, *A treatise of melancholie* (London, 1586), 144 (Early English Books Online, accessed June 25, 2018). On mourning women, see Schiesari, *Gendering of Melancholia*, 12, 15–16; Bell, *Melancholia*, 76–95; Patricia Philipp, *Women, Death and Literature in Post-Reformation England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1–14; Joanne H. Wright, "Darkness, Death, and Precarious Life in Cavendish's *Sociable Letters and Orations*," in *God and Nature in the Thought of Margaret Cavendish*, ed. Brandie R. Siegfried and Lisa T. Sarasohn (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 43–57; Sharon Alker Nelson and Holly Faith, "Memory, Monuments, and Melancholic Genius in Margaret Cavendish's *Bell in Campo*," *Eighteenth Century Fiction* 21, no. 1 (Fall 2008): esp. 18–19.

⁴ Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, 1:416, discussed in Schiesari, *Gendering of Melancholia*, 250.

⁵ Bell, *Melancholia*, 89–91; Schiesari, *Gendering of Melancholia*, 11–14.

⁶ Schiesari, *Gendering of Melancholia*, 4, and see ibid., n.9.

⁷ Ibid., 15–16.

If one considers how Margaret Cavendish presents herself to readers, this can no longer serve as a general conclusion. The first Englishwoman to publish extensively and the first to print works of philosophy, the Duchess of Newcastle represents a conspicuous case of a woman deploying the well-established genre of posing as a solitary, scholarly genius as the frame for content.⁸ Although she also engages with feelings of sadness and loss that were associated with the private world of feminine melancholy, especially in *A True Relation of my Birth, Breeding, and Life* (in *Natures Pictures*, 1656), her most distinctive melancholy stance is that of a studious poet-philosopher whose solitary ruminations are meant to be printed. In this chapter, we highlight three texts that, together with *A True Relation*, offer the fullest picture of her scholarly melancholy: “A Request to Time” (prefixed to *Philosophicall Fancies*, 1653); “A Dialogue between Melancholy and Mirth” (in *Poems and Fancies*, 1653); and the frontispiece image and epigram, “Studious and all alone” (*Philosophical and Physical Opinions*, 1655). We contend that the images of the lonely writer connect her closely to the period’s signature melancholics, from Burton to Milton. Forever immersed in making new textual worlds and genres, Cavendish compels us to rewrite the history of early modern melancholy.

Melancholic Models

There has not yet been any single study devoted to discussing Cavendish’s melancholy authorial identity, nor has there been any extensive discussion of her self-professed association with the prestigious “disease” of excessive penmanship and studiousness. The

⁸ Nancy Cotton, “Women Playwrights in England: Renaissance Noblewomen” [excerpted from *Women Playwrights in English, c. 1363–1750* (1980)], in *Readings in Renaissance Women’s Drama: Criticism, History, and Performance 1594–1998*, ed. S. P. Cerasano and Marion Wynne-Davies (London: Routledge, 1998), 41; Lara Dodds, *The Literary Invention of Margaret Cavendish* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2013), 167; Lisa T. Sarasohn, *The Natural Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish: Reason and Fancy During the Scientific Revolution* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 4. The term “genre” is here used in its broad rhetorical sense as referring to a set of literary conventions and audience expectations, as defined, for example, by Theresa Enos, *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition: Communication from Ancient Times to the Information Age* (New York: Routledge, 1996; 2010), 279.

tendency has been to relate her alleged melancholic temperament to her “over-active fancy and her rambling, copious style” rather than to her learnedness.⁹ In an important monograph on melancholy author-figures published in 2004, Douglas Trevor mentions Cavendish as an example of a woman who “succeeded in claiming learned personae” by adapting the available “male strategies for diagnosing the self and presenting it in learned writings.”¹⁰ This chapter aims to fill the gap in the existing criticism with regard precisely to these types of self-presentation. However, it is worth observing at the outset that her concern with melancholy was more than just a literary pose. Both she and her husband, William, were diagnosed by a recognized physician as “melancholic hypochondriac[s],” and Margaret contributed in her own right to the period’s medical theorizing and experimentation.¹¹ She generally subscribed to Galenic theory, which continued to serve as a basis for the study of medicine at Oxford and Cambridge throughout the seventeenth century.¹²

⁹ Quoted from Gabriele Rippl, “Mourning and Melancholia in England and Its Transatlantic Colonies,” in *The Literature of Melancholia: Early Modern to Postmodern*, ed. Martin Middeke and Christina Wald (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 58. Based on *A True Relation* and the frontispiece portrait and epigram “Studious and all alone,” Rippl gives the most detailed analysis to date of how Cavendish appropriated “male models of artistic melancholia in order to fashion her singularity and creativity” (ibid., 63). For an alternative interpretation that Cavendish’s melancholy self-images primarily advertise her scholarship and studiousness, see Tina Skouen, *The Value of Time in Early Modern English Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 131–36. For discussions of the author’s personality or temperament, see Katie Whitaker, *Mad Madge: The Extraordinary Life of Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, the First Woman to Live by Her Pen* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 99–100; 194–97; Sylvia Bowerbank and Sara Mendelson, “Introduction” to *Paper Bodies: A Margaret Cavendish Reader*, ed. Bowerbank and Mendelson (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2000), 12–14.

¹⁰ Douglas Trevor, *The Poetics of Melancholy in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 22.

¹¹ Quoted from a letter written by the family doctor, Sir Theodore Turquet de Mayerne (1573–1655), as cited in Whitaker, *Mad Madge*, 99. See also ibid., 100; Hilda L. Smith, “Claims to Orthodoxy: How Far Can We Trust Margaret Cavendish’s Autobiography?” In *God and Nature*, ed. Siegfried and Sarasohn, 21–25; Susan Fitzmaurice, “Margaret Cavendish, the Doctors of Physick and Advice to the Sick,” in *A Princely Brave Woman: Essays on Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle*, ed. Stephen Clucas (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 210–41; Lisa T. Sarasohn, *The Natural Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish: Reason and Fancy During the Scientific Revolution* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 68–70; Deborah Boyle, *The Well-Ordered Universe: The Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 215–39.

¹² Phyllis Allen, “Medical Education in 17th Century England,” *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 1, no. 1 (January 1946): 122, cited in Boyle, *Well-Ordered Universe*, 217. See also Smith, “Claims to Orthodoxy”, 21–25; Sarasohn, *The Natural Philosophy*, 68–70; Jacqueline Broad, “Cavendish, Van Helmont, and the Mad, Raging Womb,” in *The New Science and Women’s Literary Discourse: Prefiguring Frankenstein*, ed. Judy A. Hayden (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 52–53, 60.

Yet Cavendish is widely believed to have cultivated “a histrionic self-image” and to have constructed her authorial personae “through discourse with others,” and this seems equally true of her melancholy voices.¹³ Lara Dodds describes “A Dialogue between Melancholy and Mirth” as “an exercise in ventriloquism: a female poet’s imitation of a masculine response to the largely male tradition of scholarly melancholy.”¹⁴ One could surely argue that the same thing happens in her autobiographical memoirs. Ostensibly describing her natural constitution, *A True Relation* simultaneously creates an image of the writer that agrees with the conventional registers for how to portray artistic and intellectual brilliance. As an example, one may consider her claims that she has always been “addicted ... to contemplation rather than conversation, to solitariness rather than society, to melancholy rather than mirth,” and that her inborn “bashfulness” has made her shy away from the public eye, making her more inclined towards “scribbling” than speaking.¹⁵ Similar remarks about a “reserved and studious” personality can be found in *The Memoirs* of Lucy Hutchinson (discussed in Chapter 6 in this volume), and with both these women writers the remarks about solitariness serve as claims to learnedness. Cavendish’s comment that she much prefers “to write with the pen than to work with a needle” invokes femininity, but only for the purpose of distancing herself from it.¹⁶ The self-comportment that she projects in *A True Relation* thus makes her an outsider, someone who challenges the mainstream values and expectations of her society. This position was also adopted by several other writers considered in the present volume on “world-making” women, but Cavendish’s insistence on

¹³ Quotations from Sarah Hutton, “Anne Conway, Margaret Cavendish and Seventeenth-Century Scientific Thought,” in *Women, Science and Medicine 1500–1700: Mothers and Sisters of the Royal Society*, ed. Lynette Hunter and Sarah Hutton (Stroud: Sutton, 1997), 220; Sandra Sherman, “Trembling Texts: Margaret Cavendish and the Dialectic of Authorship,” *English Literary Renaissance* 24, no. 1 (December 1994): 184. See also Sara Mendelson, “Playing Games with Gender and Genre: The Dramatic Self-Fashioning of Margaret Cavendish,” in *Authorial Conquests: Essays on Genre in the Writings of Margaret Cavendish*, ed. Line Cottegnies and Nancy Weitz (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1997), 201.

¹⁴ Dodds, *Literary Invention*, 110.

¹⁵ Quotations from *A True Relation* in *Paper Bodies*, ed. Bowerbank and Mendelson, 57, 52, 55. Her bashful nature is also specifically mentioned, *ibid.*, 46, 47, 53, 62.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 57.

her melancholic disposition makes her stand out even from these other female figures. Her self-masculinizing gesture toward the work of writing in *A True Relation* makes this brief self-portrait read like a rough sketch of the typical male melancholic. According to Burton, “bashfulness” and an “unsociable” aversion towards conversation are common symptoms in both sexes, the difference being that for men this does not render them dumb or “foolish,” as happens in the medical discourse with women; it simply means that “they had rather write their minds than speak” and that they “love solitariness” above everything else.¹⁷ When Cavendish claims that she tends to devote most of her time to herself in her closet, she adopts the same position as Burton’s persona, who claims to “have liv’d a silent, sedentary, solitary, private life, *mihi et musis*” even while at university.¹⁸ Employing a similar form of self-presentation, Cavendish declares that being “addicted to contemplation” and writing frequently have been at the expense of her health, an observation that also occurs in a historical letter signed by her doctor.¹⁹

Vanity perhaps prevented the Duchess from associating with a malady that could leave one lean and hollow-cheeked, and she stresses how her condition is “not crabbed or peevishly melancholy, but soft melting solitary, and contemplating melancholy.”²⁰ This mood is very similar to that which Milton celebrates in “Il Penseroso” (1645).²¹ Like Milton’s pensive persona, Cavendish comes across as one who delights in solitary musing, both in *A True Relation* and “A Dialogue between Melancholy and Mirth,” which engages with themes

¹⁷ Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, 1:395, 1:415–16. See also Bright, *Treatise of Melancholie*, 124 (misnumbered in the original as 214).

¹⁸ “Democritus to the Reader,” *ibid.*, 1:3, cited by Schiesari, *Gendering of Melancholia*, 245. See also Stephanie Shirilan, “Exhilarating the Spirits: Burtonian Study as a Cure for Scholarly Melancholy,” *Studies in Philology* 111, no. 3 (Summer 2014): esp. 512–13, 492–93.

¹⁹ Quoted from *A True Relation* in *Paper Bodies*, 55, and see *ibid.*, 57. The letter from Dr. Mayerne (the same doctor who diagnosed her with “Melancholyk Hypochondriak”) is cited in Sara Heller Mendelson, *The Mental World of Stuart Women: Three Studies* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), 26.

²⁰ Quoted from *A True Relation* in *Paper Bodies*, 60.

²¹ Lawrence Babb, “The Background of ‘Il Penseroso,’” *Studies in Philology* 37, no. 2 (April 1940): 270. Cited in Dodds, *Literary Invention*, 101. See also Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, and Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy Religion and Art* (Nendeln: Kraus Reprint, 1979), 228–33.

from “Il Penseroso” and its companion poem, “L’Allegro.” Whereas melancholia generally was treated as a type of madness or “unreason,” Milton and Cavendish both suggest that, when duly regulated, the condition can be both pleasant and peaceful.²² We argue that, to a much greater extent than Milton, Cavendish highlights the kinship between melancholic and stoic mentalities, presenting a dispassionate, almost sage-like, authorial persona. According to Angus Gowland, there was a significant overlap between early modern discourses on melancholy and stoic moral philosophy, mainly in their shared concern with how to moderate excessive emotions and maintain a healthy balance in the ego.²³ In what remains her fullest definition of melancholia, offered in *The World’s Olio* (1655), Cavendish claims that there is a special kind arising—not from “the ill-affected Body”—but from the rational soul directly: “Where true Melancholy is a serious Consideration; it examines the Worth and Nature of every thing; it seeks after Knowledge, and desires Understanding; it observes strictly, and most commonly distinguisheth judiciously, applyeth aptly, acteth with ingenuity, useth Time wisely, lives honestly, dies contentedly, and leaves a Fame behind it.”²⁴ This type of comportment must have appealed very strongly to Cavendish, whose desire to secure a lasting literary reputation is notorious.

Impersonating Melancholia

Cavendish’s debut works from 1653 contain images of melancholia that invite interpretation as author portraits. The solitary speaker at the opening of the “Dialogue between Melancholy

²² Quoted from Gowland, “The Problem,” 97, but Gowland does not mention Milton or Cavendish in this context.

²³ *Ibid.*, 100. Gowland refers especially to the neo-stoic writings of Justus Lipsius (1547–1606) and Guillaume du Vair (1556–1621), but also to English thinkers such as Sir Walter Raleigh (1554–1618), Francis Bacon (1561–1626), and Joseph Hall (1574–1656). See also Adriana McCreia, *Constant Minds: Political Virtue and the Lipsian Paradigm in England, 1584–1650* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997). Cavendish notes that “Melancholy persons are never in the Mean, but alwaies in Extremes,” in “Of Melancholy. Allegory 43,” *The World’s Olio* (1655), 104 (Early English Books Online, accessed June 24, 2018).

²⁴ Quoted from “Of Melancholy. Essay 132” and “Of a dull or Melancholy Disposition proceeding from the Body, and the Melancholy proceeding from the Soul. Essay 133,” *ibid.*, 118–19.

and Mirth” in *Poems and Fancies* has some distinct affinities with the character of Melancholy described in the same “Dialogue,” and the preference for lonesome musing is also expressed in “A Request to Time,” one of several poems serving as authorial prefaces to *Philosophicall Fancies*. The author strikes a similar pose in the better known, but somewhat misunderstood, frontispiece portrait and epigram (“Studios and all alone”) in the revised, enlarged edition of the *Philosophicall Fancies*, retitled *Philosophical and Physical Opinions* (1655). In all of these texts, the poetic persona appears blissfully lost in thought, like the woman portrayed in Dürer’s *Melencolia I*. This is especially noticeable in “A Request to Time”:

Time, prethee be content, and let me write;
 Ile use thee better then the *Carpet Knight*,
 Or *Amorous Ladies*, which doe dance, and play,
 Casting their *Modesty*, and *Fame* away.
 I humbly cast mine eyes downe to the ground,
 Or shut them close, while I a *Fancy* found.
 And in a Melancholy posture sit,
 With *musings Thoughts*, till I more *Fancies* get.²⁵

This author portrait bears a striking resemblance to Dürer’s image of a female figure with fixed, downcast eyes, a figure similarly represented in Milton’s “Il Penseroso.”²⁶ One may also encounter her in Cavendish’s poem “On a Mourning Beauty” in *Poems and Fancies*, where she sits quietly “Upon the *hill of Melancholy*” with her eyes in a “humble bow towards the ground” and resting “her *leaning Head* upon her *hand*,” just like the woman in Dürer’s

²⁵ *Philosophicall fancies. Written by the Right Honourable, the Lady Newcastle* (London, 1653), A3v (Early Modern Books Online, accessed June 25, 2018).

²⁶ Lines 43–44 of “Il Penseroso” in *The Complete Works of John Milton*, vol. 3: *The Shorter Poems*, ed. Barbara Kiefer Lewalski and Estelle Haan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 33.

picture.²⁷ Like Milton in “Il Penseroso,” Cavendish in “A Request to Time” envisions melancholy as a satisfactory state of intense self-absorption. This places her within the canon of male authors exhibiting what Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl have termed “the specifically ‘poetic’ melancholy mood of the modern.”²⁸ *Poems and Fancies* presents a writer completely immersed in scientific ideas and instruments, playing with atoms, mathematics and geometrical figures.²⁹ The woman portrayed by Dürer has let her hands holding a pair of compasses fall into her lap, signifying a “compulsive preoccupation” with “interior visions.”³⁰ Similarly, Milton imagines his “pensive” muse becoming so absorbed by her “rapt soul” that she appears immobilized, as if turned into “marble.”³¹

Striking a similar statue-like pose, Cavendish’s author figure closely resembles the Miltonic muse, as well as the conventional image of Melancholia. Yet whereas Dürer’s thoughtful lady appears unable to act upon her inner visions, thus “achieving nothing,” the author of “A Request to Time” moves from self-absorbed musing to writing for publication, as one would expect of a male genius.³² Unlike her male predecessors, however, the woman writer appears obliged to justify this choice by insisting that she will use time better than such “amorous ladies” as dance and play their time away, as well as the “carpet knights” idling around the ladies’ chambers. “A Request to Time” thus establishes a contrast between the poet’s melancholy, yet productive, solitude and other more joyful, sociable lifestyles, a contrast further thematized in “A Dialogue between Melancholy and Mirth.” As we argue, the author portrayed in “A Dialogue” seems more inclined towards the melancholy muse than

²⁷ Cavendish, “On a Mourning Beauty,” *Poems, and fancies written by the Right Honourable, the Lady Margaret Newcastle*, 193 (Early English Books Online, accessed June 25, 2018).

²⁸ Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy*, 231.

²⁹ See Brandie R. Siegfried’s “Introduction” to *Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle: Poems and Fancies with The Animal Parliament*, ed. Brandie R. Siegfried (Toronto: Iter Press, 2018), 22–37.

³⁰ Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy*, 317–18.

³¹ Lines 31, 40, 42 of “Il Penseroso,” *Complete Works*, vol. 3, 32–33.

³² Quotations from Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy*, 320.

her lighthearted rival, who exclaims: “Lets joy our selves in *Amorous delights*;/ There’s none so happy, as the *Carpet Knights*.”³³

Like “A Request to Time,” “A Dialogue” has often been overlooked, the most detailed assessment to date being Lara Dodds’s comparison with “L’Allegro” and “Il Penseroso.”³⁴ A major difference according to Dodds is that Cavendish lets her female characters speak in their own voices, with the effect that the poetic persona remains a passive background figure.³⁵ Our reading sheds light on this shady, yet complex, persona. On one hand, the female characters of Melancholy and Mirth woo the poet for marriage in a way that suggests the first-person speaker is a man. On the other hand, the readers’ knowledge that the real author was a woman may create homoerotic associations. Cavendish loves to play with forms of female homoeroticism, as well as with the term “hermaphroditical,” and Melancholy and Mirth might well represent two aspects of one hermaphrodite.³⁶ Combining Milton’s two poems into one, Cavendish further sets the stage for a vivid closet drama of the mind, with the two alternative poetic muses alternately complaining about each other and seeking to win over the poet. Whereas Milton’s “L’Allegro” only mentions the “loathed” disease very briefly, Cavendish has Mirth paint a detailed image of the various symptoms of excessive black bile, such as indigestion and weight loss.³⁷ Mirth also reminds the poet that there are downsides to having a rich imagination: hearing noises and seeing strange “visions” are common.³⁸ Intending to further discredit her contestant, Mirth describes Melancholy in a way that the reader may suspect will have quite the opposite effect. For when one hears that

³³ *Poems, and fancies*, 78.

³⁴ Dodds, *Literary Invention*, 94–114, and 99 on the poem’s receiving “little critical attention.”

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 109.

³⁶ Sarasohn, *Natural Philosophy*, 11–12; Dodds, *Literary Invention*, 110.

³⁷ Quotation from the opening line of “L’Allegro” in *Complete Works*, vol. 3, 27. Compare “A Dialogue” in *Poems, and fancies*, 77.

³⁸ “A Dialogue,” 77; Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, 1:422.

Melancholy loves to be left “alone” with her “thoughts,” this makes her sound much like the poet who speaks in the first thirty-six verses and can imply they belong together.³⁹

The opening of “A Dialogue” depicts a situation similar to that seen in “A Request to Time,” with the writer invoking her solitary thoughts and emotions: “As I sate *Musing*, by my selfe alone, / My *Thoughts* on severall things did work upon.”⁴⁰ There is a striking resemblance with Burton’s prefatory poem in his *Anatomy of Melancholy*: “When I goe musing all alone, / Thinking of divers things fore-knowne.”⁴¹ In Cavendish’s poem, the materials found in the process of invention (*inventio*) include a wide range of “*Arts*, and *Sciences*,” from architecture and landscaping to logic, law, and theology.⁴² Additionally, an unruly band of thoughts and emotions presents itself on this inner stage before Melancholy and Mirth emerge as the main contrasting pair. As a reader, one may be reminded that the Renaissance humanists considered internal strife as inherent to the human soul; the references to “*strong Townes*” and “*Battels*” can give associations to the literary tradition of *psychomachia*, the war between personified virtues and vices in “the militant soul.”⁴³ Far from being prey to unregulated passions, however, the poet calmly observes the parade of perceptions and impulses competing for attention, as in a detached state of meditation or indeed “musing” (OED Online, *muse* v. 1.a). The poet does not appear to be inflamed with wild, uncontrolled poetic inspiration, either. In other contexts, Cavendish comes across as a swift, spontaneous writer, but the author portraits in “A Dialogue” and “A Request to Time” seem designed to boost her status as a serious philosopher by showcasing her capacity for

³⁹ “A Dialogue,” 78.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 76. Comp. “My Thoughts brought several things to work upon,” in the second, “much altered and corrected” edition of “A Dialogue,” in *Poems and phancies written by ... the Lady Marchioness of Newcastle* (London, 1664), 93.

⁴¹ “The Authors Abstract of Melancholy,” Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, 1:lxix.

⁴² “A Dialogue,” 76.

⁴³ First quotation from “A Dialogue,” 76; second from the verses in Prudentius’ “Preface” to *Psychomachia* (“The Spiritual Combat” c. CE 405) in *The Poems of Prudentius*, vol. 2, trans. M. Clement Eagan (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1965), 79.

dedicated study and concentration.⁴⁴ If anything, the poetic voice of “A Dialogue” testifies to the form of rational self-restraint that was applauded in countless seventeenth-century texts, one being the poem “Upon Her Excellency the Authoress” prefixed to Cavendish’s *Sociable Letters* (1664), which denounces the “Great Disorder” arising in those who lack “A Wise Augustus” to rule their brains.⁴⁵ Order and restraint are pivotal to her Galenic medical thinking, which seeks to control unhealthy imbalances in the body and soul.⁴⁶ The rational self-control exemplified in the opening of “A Dialogue” may also imply a stoic understanding of soundness or contentedness, an understanding that becomes fully pronounced once the character of Melancholy speaks later in the poem.

In the concluding couplet of “A Dialogue,” Melancholy urges the poet: “Refuse me not, for I shall constant be,/ Maintaine your *Credit*, keep up *Dignity*.”⁴⁷ One could thus argue that the text presents the nature and benefits of melancholy in stoic terms as furthering moderation and moral integrity. In his discussion of the stoic elements in Cavendish’s philosophy, David Cuning observes that Cavendish’s fiction features characters such as the “Stoick Lady” (in “Of Two Ladyes different Humours”), who forsakes all worldly ambition, seeking satisfaction in the imagination.⁴⁸ The contrast between this “Stoick, living a retired life” and the vain, restless “Lady Gossip,” we would argue, resembles that between

⁴⁴ See e.g. in “The Clasp” in *Poems, and fancies*, 47; *A True Relation in Paper Bodies*, 56; “A General Prologue to all my Playes,” in *The Convent of Pleasure and Other Plays*, ed. Anne Shaver (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 264. Discussed in Skouen, *The Value of Time*, 120–30.

⁴⁵ *Sociable Letters*, ed. James Fitzmaurice (New York: Garland, 1997), 10 (italics removed).

⁴⁶ Boyle, *Well-Ordered Universe*, 226–28; Angus Gowland, “Consolations for Melancholy in Renaissance Humanism,” *Societate și Politică* 6, no. 11 (2012): esp. 19.

⁴⁷ “A Dialogue,” 80. Compare the earlier, alternative claim that Cavendish may be “favouring the pragmatically Lucretian presentation of the Epicurean doctrine as articulated by Melancholy,” see Emma L. E. Rees, *Margaret Cavendish: Gender, Genre, Exile* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 66. Siegfried traces how Cavendish developed the collection of poems “in part as a conversation with Lucretius,” (“Introduction,” *Poems and Fancies*, 20).

⁴⁸ David Cuning, *Cavendish* (London: Routledge, 2016) 243–78 (258–59). The story of the two ladies is from *Natures pictures drawn by fancies pencil to the life written by the thrice noble, illustrious and excellent princess, the lady Marchioness of Newcastle* (London, 1656), 124–27. See also Eileen O’Neill’s “Introduction” in *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, ed. O’Neill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), xxi–xxxv; Deborah Boyle, “Fame, Virtue, and Government: Margaret Cavendish on Ethics and Politics,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67, no. 2 (April 2006): 251–90.

Melancholy and Mirth in “A Dialogue,” which contains even more elaborate praise of stoic virtues.⁴⁹ Living “luxuriously” “in her Mind,” indulging in the “pleasures” of the imagination, Melancholy is rewarded with spiritual tranquility, the stoic’s most celebrated capacity next to constancy.⁵⁰ However, by suggesting that imaginative impulses—rather than reason and restraint—might make one calm and content, Cavendish turns the ancient Stoicism inside out. “We suffer more often in imagination than in reality,” the Roman Stoic, Seneca asserts.⁵¹ In another text included in *Poems and Fancies*, “A Discourse of Melancholy,” Cavendish simply states: “What *Serious* is, there *Constancies* will dwell;/ Which shewes that *Sadnesse Mirth* doth far excell.”⁵² She also gives voice to various popular prejudices against such “serious” characters, especially in her plays, where the distinctions between stoic and melancholic types are blurred for comic and ironic effects.⁵³ Thus, when Mirth tries to dissuade the poet from marrying “Dull Melancholy” in “A Dialogue,” this reads like a stock accusation against any sober, studious type.⁵⁴ In the end, however, the poetic speaker of the opening verses does not seem likely to choose Mirth (who “hates to be alone”) before Melancholy, who can promise both wisdom and self-knowledge.⁵⁵ For better or worse, the poet’s involvement with Melancholy implies a life of stoic retirement. Her lavish editions emphatically mark the author as a willful, “withdrawn personality” in a literary tradition that

⁴⁹ *Natures pictures*, 124–25.

⁵⁰ “A Dialogue,” 78 (italics removed). For “tranquillity of the mind,” see e.g., Guillaume du Vair, *The morall philosophy of the stoicks written originally in French by that ingenious gentleman Monsieur du Vaix [sic], ... Englished by Charles Cotton* (London, 1663), 64, 85–86, 107 (Early English Books Online, accessed June 28, 2018). For constancy as “the prime concept,” see Gerhard Oestreich, *Neostoicism and the Early Modern State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 19.

⁵¹ Epistle 8.4, in Seneca, *Epistles, Volume I: Epistles 1–65*, trans. Richard M. Gummere (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1917), 75.

⁵² *Poems, and fancies*, 108.

⁵³ “Sir Peacable Studious” in *Love’s Adventures Part 1* and “William Fullwit” in *The Sociable Companions* are ridiculed for their studious endeavors. In *The Bridals*, “Mirth and Good Company” are preferred above the life of a Stoic. See *Love’s Adventures Part 1* (from *Playes*, 1662), Act V, Scene 32, in *Convent of Pleasure*, ed. Shaver, 62; *The Sociable Companions*, Act 2, Scene 1, in *Playes, never before printed written by the ... Princess the Duchess of Newcastle* (London, 1668), 12; *The Bridals* (from *Playes*, 1668), Act 4, Scene 3, in *Convent of Pleasure*, ed. Shaver, 202.

⁵⁴ “A Dialogue,” 77 (italics removed).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 79, 78.

includes John Donne, Abraham Cowley, John Milton, Andrew Marvell, and Katherine Philips.⁵⁶

Studious but Not Alone

Musing in quiet solitude, the author portrayed in *A True Relation*, “A Request to Time,” and “A Dialogue between Melancholy and Mirth” simultaneously participates in a wider conversation with authors of the same kind and their readers. Presenting herself as all alone, she helps to build an imaginary world that is “transauthorial” rather than wholly original.⁵⁷

Melancholy geniuses insist they are special, but in so doing, they form a collective. The best-known visual illustration of the melancholy world that Cavendish helped to make is the engraved portrait serving as a frontispiece to the *Philosophical and Physical Opinions* (1655). The picture shows the author sitting alone beside her writing desk, an accompanying epigram providing the following explication:

Studious She is [and] all Alone
 Most visitants, when She has none,
 Her Library on which She looks
 It is her Head her Thoughts her Books.
 Scorning dead Ashes without fire
 For her owne Flames doe her Inspire.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Andrew Shifflett, *Stoicism, Politics, and Literature in the Age of Milton: War and Peace Reconciled* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 4.

⁵⁷ Mark J. P. Wolf uses “transauthorial” to describe “world-building” activities by words, images, and sounds that one may see in contemporary film and media, but we find it equally helpful in describing melancholy as an early modern cultural phenomenon. See Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (New York: Routledge, 2012), esp. 2–3, 269, cited in Jessica Aldred, “Authorship,” in *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds*, ed. Mark J. P. Wolf (New York: Routledge, 2018), 199.

⁵⁸ Quoted from the epigram inscribed in the line engraving by Pieter Louis van Schuppen, after Abraham Diepenbeeck, reproduced online by the National Portrait Gallery (NPG D30185) at <https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw138664/Margaret-Cavendish-ne-Lucas-Duchess-of-Newcastle-upon-Tyne> (accessed July 1, 2018).

Contrary to Catherine Gallagher's influential interpretation that the author's "feverish solitude" reveals her absolute "self-referentiality," the famed portrait accords with the conventional registers for representing genial authorship.⁵⁹ James Fitzmaurice argues that the frontispiece fulfills her wish to present herself as a harmless, and therefore, untouchable eccentric, while it also casts her in the fashionable role of the solitary, melancholy genius.⁶⁰ Her professed "scorning" of the "dead Ashes" of bookish learning additionally foreshadows the wish to dispense with "the Ashes of the Dead" that was soon to become programmatic among the proponents of the new experimental sciences.⁶¹ The frontispiece insists that "studious she is," but her learnedness is marked by genial integrity. In her address "To the Reader" of *The Blazing World*, the utopian fiction included at the end of the *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* (London, 1666, 2nd ed. 1668), the author notes that the reason she "made a world of [her] own" was "to divert [her] studious thoughts" from all of the "serious contemplations" that otherwise occupied her mind.⁶² If this new invention does not please the reader, she says, then so be it: "I must be content to live a melancholy life in my own world."⁶³ Instead of proving her abject loneliness, this declaration sounds defiant in a way that resonates with Burton, another writer prone to denounce the world by escaping into "fanciful utopia."⁶⁴

Cavendish famously preferred "studying or writing Poetry, which is the Spinning with the braine" to spinning with her hands, and when projecting a melancholy identity in her publications, she entered into a domain that was normally reserved for men.⁶⁵ As a cultural

⁵⁹ Quoted Gallagher, "Embracing the Absolute: The Politics of the Female Subject in Seventeenth Century England," in *Genders* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988), 30.

⁶⁰ Fitzmaurice, "Fancy and the Family: Self-Characterizations of Margaret Cavendish," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 53, no. 3 (Summer 1990): 202.

⁶¹ Compare the Cavendish epigram with Thomas Sprat, *The History of the Royal Society (1667)*, ed. Jackson I. Cope and Harold Whitmore Jones (Saint Louis: Washington University Studies, 1958), 24.

⁶² "To the Reader," in *The Blazing World and Other Writings*, ed. Kate Lilley (London: Penguin, 1994), 124.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Gowland, "The Problem," 115.

⁶⁵ "Epistle Dedicatory to Sir Charles Cavendish" in *Poems, and fancies*, A2 (italics removed). See also *ibid.*, 213. The image is analyzed in Sherman's "Trembling Texts," 192–94, 202, 205.

phenomenon, melancholy constituted a thought-world of its own, providing materials to be spun out by new brains and pens, but women were not supposed to flaunt their black-browed, brooding self-images in print. The intense study and contemplation described in “A Request to Time,” “A Dialogue between Melancholy and Mirth,” and *A True Relation* also place the writer within a larger philosophical tradition for withdrawing, as it were, from the world of sense. Looking intensely inwards, the poetic personae assume the same position as the melancholy muse described in “A Dialogue”: “Her Eares are stopt with *Thoughts*, her *Eyes purblind*;/ For all shee *heares*, or *sees*, is in the *Mind*.”⁶⁶ Some four hundred years later, Hannah Arendt maintained in *The Life of The Mind* (1971) that all serious thinking necessarily involves an attempt to suspend one’s awareness of time and space.⁶⁷ The ensuing feeling of being dissociated from one’s surroundings arguably shared by every “great thinker,” in Arendt’s opinion, explains the “cosmopolitan spirit” among philosophers of all times.⁶⁸ Similarly, Cavendish attempted to transcend the physical boundaries that kept women in her society from frequenting, for example, the Royal Society’s meetings in London. Her visit to its lodgings at Gresham College on May 30, 1667, caused a stir.⁶⁹ By presenting herself as a melancholy poet-philosopher in several printed writings, however, she became part of an invisible college of canonical thinkers and writers. As a woman writer, she was perhaps more able to identify with the female figure of Melancholia than were any of her male predecessors. Although this chapter has been less concerned with the real writer than with the authorial identity emerging from her writings, one may speculate about whether she wanted the future reader to see her as a feminist icon, to disregard her sex, or simply to make an exception for an exceptionally gifted woman.⁷⁰ As a woman philosopher, she might have

⁶⁶ *Poems, and fancies*, 78.

⁶⁷ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*. One-volume edition (New York: Harvest/HBJ, 1978), 1:198–99.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 1:199.

⁶⁹ Sarasohn, *Natural Philosophy*, 5–6, 25–33.

⁷⁰ Although Cavendish occasionally gives voice to a “radical feminism,” her written work typically “vascillates between the defense and condemnation of women,” see Lisa T. Sarasohn, “A Science Turned Upside Down:

associated herself with a few female forerunners, including Hypatia of Alexandria (b. ca. 355 CE—d. March 415), Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), or Teresa of Avila (1515–1582).

Hence, in the preface to *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*—with so few female predecessors with whom to keep company—she claimed to suffer from the same “disease of writing” as “Seneca, Pliny, Aristotle, Cicero, Tacitus, Plutarch, Euclid, Homer, Virgil, Ovid, St. Augustine, St. Ambrose, Scotus, Hippocrates, Galen, Paracelsus, and hundreds more.”⁷¹

Cavendish demands a place in this literary and philosophical hall of fame by claiming she had the honor of being infected with the very same illness as “the devoutest, wisest, wittiest, subtlest, most learned and eloquent men.”⁷² By making this demand and creating her melancholic world, the Duchess of Newcastle shatters our axiomatic assumption that the melancholy author-scholar was a man.

Feminism and the Natural Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 47, no. 4 (1984): 298. For an argument regarding her exceptional “singularity,” see Mendelson, *Mental World of Stuart Women*, 55. Boyle has claimed that her views on gender were consistently conventional, and that they should therefore “not be taken as early expressions of feminism or proto-feminism,” see *Well-Ordered Universe*, 166.

⁷¹ “The Preface to the Ensuing Treatise,” *Observations*, ed. O’Neill, 7.

⁷² *Ibid.*