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"The Brain of a Man is the Globe of the Earth": On Cavendish and the Melancholy of Mattered Thought

Abstract: This paper engages with Cavendish's philosophy of mind, which, as outlined in the first section, is always-already, by virtue of nature's sentience, imbricated with matter. In the second section I examine a cycle from *Poems and Fancies*, her first published volume, in which Cavendish resorts to a generally discredited rhetorical device, paradiastole, to disavow the logic of factionalism and to assert her aptness to chronicle melancholy as a war-engendered affect, while also contemplating the possibility of mattered thought. In the last section I move on to explore a series of fragments from different other works that show Cavendish's preoccupation with melancholy, a humoural affliction whose etiology conjoins mental and physical causes, and its cure.

Keywords: Margaret Cavendish; Extended Mind; Warring Mind; Paradiastole; Melancholy; Fancy.

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Thinking Matter: Cavendish and the Extended Mind¹

"Thus my mind is become an absolute Monarch, ruling alone, my thoughts as a peaceable Common-wealth, and my life an expert Souldier"².

In Margaret Cavendish's utopia *The Blazing World* (1666), whose ending simultaneously harks back to the necro-political machines of the English Civil Wars and gestures towards the brutal, albeit sophisticated death-technologies of the future, including submersible fleets and nuclear devastation, one of the conundrums that the Empress grapples with during her debates with the ape-men or chemists in the philosophical society that she is chair of concerns the issues of bodily rejuvenation and life extension. She learns that what enables her "imperial race" to look young is an oleoresin excreted by a rock that if administered "to an old decayed man, in the bigness of a little pea", will induce bouts of vomit, humoural purgation, and the shedding of teguments, after which "the patient is wrapped into a cere-cloth [...], wherein he continues until the time of

nine months be expired from the first beginning of the cure, which is the time of a child's formation in the womb”³. Positioned at the nexus of humoralism and iatrochemistry⁴, Cavendish's medical thought entertains the “chimera” of panacea and elixirs but has her protagonist conclude that “art, being nature's changeling, was not able to produce such a powerful effect, but being that the gum did grow naturally [...] ; for she knew that nature's works are so various and wonderful, that no particular creature is able to trace her ways”⁵. In short, artificial intelligence founders in the face of nature's sentience, which is all-encompassing and infinite.

Moreover, rather than equating this sentience with epistemic inquiry, consciousness, or a form of panpsychism, we ought to understand it, as Alison Peterman shows, in terms of responsive perception or action patterning⁶. Cavendish herself states in *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* (1666), the scientific corollary of her fictional text, that perception is “the chief and general action of nature”⁷. Perception, in her view, is not restricted to the sense organs and is not limited to animate matter, but entails a form of attention and contextual sensitivity to the specific motions composing and decomposing the physical world⁸. In the episode above, the human body perceives and responds to the inherently motile substance it is administered, adjusting its physiological rhythms to the natural pace of the organic nature that surrounds and interacts with it.

Cavendish, as Erin Webster shows, “not only emphasises the embodied nature of all forms of knowledge but also celebrates the diversity of nature's knowledges as its greatest strength”⁹. Situating herself at odds with the mechanist mind models endorsed by

Thomas Hobbes and René Descartes, Cavendish conceives a theory of vitalist materialism, stating that “There is but one Infinite, and that Infinite is the Only Matter”¹⁰ and claiming that matter's vitality coheres around the coordinates of self-knowledge, self-movement, and perceptual agentiality¹¹. “Self-moving matter”, Cavendish asserts, “is sensitive and rational” and is “the only cause and principle of all natural effects”¹². Opposed to the Cartesian notion of an inner mind, discrete and detached from the creatureliness and thingliness of the world, Cavendish's philosophy of thought foreshadows what cognitivists Andy Clark and David Chalmers describe as the “extended mind”, with sentience being disseminated across the plenum of matter¹³. The coextensiveness of mind and world is the topic of “Allegory 3”, from *The World's Olio* (1655), where the brain's expansive span is seen to subtend the earth's globe and where the mind patterns its understanding in tune with the motions of the moon, “that changeth according as it receives light from the Sun of Knowledge”¹⁴. Moreover, in the chapter “Of a Butterfly”, from *Observations*, the natural philosopher outlines a non-invasive perceptual tactic for comprehending the insects' pupation and hatching from a chrysalis by adjusting her natural gaze to the invisible pulsations of their morphing bodies and building a form of speculative thought that allows it to be moulded in response to the logic of their transformation¹⁵.

In Cavendish's earlier atomistic thought, illustrated by the poem “A warr with Atomes”, it was still possible to envision particles with factious appetites colliding and “mak[ing] Motion Generall in their war”¹⁶. However, whereas in a Hobbesian universe corpuscular matter's

motion is the effect of such violent conflict, Cavendish's later concept of self-motion is predicated on the ecological alignment of rational, sensitive and inanimate nature within what Rosi Braidotti defines as "a moveable assemblage within a common life-space"¹⁷. Perceptual mirroring allows for a variable arrangement of human and non-human agency within networks of shared dynamism, for, as Cavendish explains, "no particular creature or effect of composed nature, can act upon another, but [...] one can only occasion another to move thus or thus"¹⁸. A horseman's progress through space, she goes on to say, patterns itself after the horse's own gallop, as the latter merely "occasions him [...] to move after such or such a manner"¹⁹. Conversely, a stick cannot be said to be forced into movement by a hand, since it only senses and responds accordingly to the hand's own motion²⁰. It is paradox, therefore, that in the final sections of *The Blazing World*, Cavendish should entertain the Baconian aevum in which matter – the incandescent star-stone and the combustible fire-stone – is subjugated to the mind and technologically wielded to destructive ends.

Mattering Thought: Paradiastole and the Mind at War

"War is a disturber and causeth a violent motion, like a tempest at Sea, or a Storm at land, it raiseth up discord, fear, and furie, it swallows up industry, it pulls up the root of plenty, it murthers natural affection"²¹.

The spectre of war relentlessly crops up in Cavendish's oeuvre. Overtly thematised in her closet play *Bell in Campo*

(1662), which flirts with the idea of an Amazonian army, and in her utopia *The Blazing World* (1666), where the Empress mounts a cataclysmic offensive to protect her native land, bellicosity is often deployed in Cavendish's sprawling oeuvre in a bid to both explore England's affective mindset, perturbed in the aftermath of the civil wars, and to outline cognition as the quelling of sometimes disjunctive, incongruous thoughts. In what follows, I start by looking at a cycle from *Poems and Fancies*, her first published volume, in which while distancing herself from what Diana G. Barnes calls "bellicose passions"²², Cavendish resorts to a generally discredited rhetorical device, paradiastole, to disavow the logic of factionalism and to assert her aptness to chronicle melancholy as a war-engendered affect. In the last section I move on to explore a volley of fragments from different other works that show Cavendish's preoccupation with melancholy, a humoural affliction bridging the cerebral and the visceral²³, and its cure.

As she would have it impressed upon the readers she addresses in her so-known "battle poems" cycle²⁴, her closest brush with open warfare happened not on the battlefield, but in her mind. With the mix of diffidence and flamboyant self-display that defines the tenor of her densely latticed paratexts, "An Epistle to Soldiers", introducing the last part of *Poems and Fancies*, which she released upon her brief return to England from exile in 1653, professes unfamiliarity with the "valiant Art, and Discipline of Warre", but fires a barrage of rhetorical strikes to marshal focus on her unfitness for combat²⁵. By virtue of her sex, the implication is, she is ill-equipped to face the sensory pandemonium of "cruel

assaults", or bear the sight of bloodstained swords and the sound of firearms²⁶.

For all its stylistic infelicities, or the "bad writing" that Lara Dodds has analysed in relation to Cavendish's poetic discourse, more precisely the "additive" rather than teleological structure of her arguments²⁷, this letter illustrates the writer's penchant for paradiastole. Etymologically derived from the Greek *para*, meaning arrangement side-by-side, and *diastole*, implying separation or division, this trope brings together opposing entities and qualities, destabilising their conceptual divide and imprinting a favourable nuance to that term of this improbable pair that tends to be negatively connoted. It is true that in *The Garden of Eloquence* (1593), Henry Peacham dismissed paradiastole as a self-serving, reality-contorting "faultie tearme of speech" that "opposeth the truth by false tearmes, and wrong names, as in calling dronkennesse good felloship, insatiable avarice good husbandrie, craft and deceit wisedome and pollicie"²⁸. However, as an elocutionary figure that reframes opposing qualities in such a way as to highlight their reversibility, to the effect that, as Quentin Skinner holds, vices or flaws can "be redescribed as virtues" and the other way around²⁹, paradiastole is instrumental to Cavendish, who is determined to assert her singularity and to convert slanderous charges against her natural wit into bulwark defences of female creativity.

In the letter's last sentence, faint-heartedness, previously set forth as a marker of women's ill-suitedness to fight, is repackaged as the fortitude "to heare a sad relation, but not without grieve, and chilnesse of spirits"³⁰. Not only can the poet bravely tap into an emotional repertoire of grief,

but she can muster conflict arenas within the confines of her mind: "these Armies I mention", she forces the point across the line, "were rais'd in my braine, fought in my fancy, and registered in my closet"³¹. If, as Rachelle Gold and Jim Pearce suggest, paradiastolic discourse drills the skill of pondering an issue simultaneously from adversarial perspectives and hones the "ability to reach contradictory conclusions"³², Cavendish can be said to intuitively employ a tactic of retreats and advancements not just to gain discursive ground but to allow thoughts to jostle against one another, to divide and reconcile, while continuing to strive for pre-eminence.

Paradiastolic juxtaposition is at work in the sequence of martial poems. Some, like "A Battle between Honour and Dishonour", "A Battle between Courage, and Prudence" or "Doubts Assault, and Hopes Defence", exploit the breakdown of moral compass in battle and can be seen as allegorical transpositions of inner strife onto physical battlefields,³³ replete with military stratagems and with the trappings and topographies of warfare, from cannons, musket balls, and poleaxes to castles, forts, bulwarks, ditches, rampiers and curtain walls³⁴. Still reeling from personal loss, Cavendish provides, in "A Description of the Battle in Fight", a gruesome, unromanticised depiction of the aftermath of combat. The lengthy poem takes shape from the accrual of harrowing images of human and equine suffering, amidst the din of sighs, groans and rattles. Crushed skulls, smashed brains, eyes torn from sockets, chopped limbs, twined guts, quivering flesh exposed through pierced skin and rotting carcasses compose a visceral anatomy of the dismembered body politic,

etched against a battle-scarred landscape³⁵. Even though Cavendish's vitalist conception of matter emerges in the description of weapons partaking of the agony of the throbbing mounds of flesh and beckons to nature's swift resumption of its motility as it forges new forms out of decomposing ones, the poem, with all its vibrant materiality, dramatises the affective memory of England's fresh political wound³⁶. Melancholy, mourning's pathological twin, takes a personal hue in the poem commemorating the death of Charles Lucas, Cavendish's brother, who in 1648 faced execution for siding with the royalists in their conflict with the parliamentarians. Included in the subsection "A Register of Mournful Verse", which sees funereal affect disseminated amongst mothers and daughters and shifts the focus onto the home front where women's lives were also profoundly altered by the war, "An Elegy on my Brother, kill'd in these unhappy Warres" captures the vagrancy of affect. Sorrow arises in the interstices of the living and the non-living and binds the melancholy mourner to her loss, as the ritual of entombment is reiterated in her memory's vault: "thy Idea in my minde doth lye/ And is intomb'd in my sad memory"³⁷.

According to Alison Peterman, Cavendish's anti-Cartesian, materialist philosophy gave a peculiar spin to her conception of the human mind, positing thought itself as a manifestation of nature, seen as an infinite aggregate of "self-moving, self-organising composites that change by dividing and composing"³⁸. All matter, from insects to stones, is sentient and perceptive in Cavendish's view, which should not be mistaken for a panpsychic stance on animate and inanimate life being

endowed with conscience or "human epistemic capacities"³⁹. As Peterman explains, "The human mind, like everything else, is material, and it is just another way that creatures regulate themselves and interact with their environments. Thought [...] is first and foremost a biological category"⁴⁰. The martial section of *Poems and Fancies* includes a long verse tale about thought moving through, and becoming one with, nature. Entitled "Of a Travelling Thought", it pictures thought clad in knightly attire, galloping across the "severall Countries in the brain" astride "strong imagination"⁴¹.

Implicitly autobiographical, the poem foregrounds not so much an allegorical canter through an inner geography, in the manner of Bunyan's pilgrimage, even though the foul avenues of the brain conceal "high mountains of great fear", "Steep Precipices of Despair" and "Woods of forgetfulness"⁴². No teleological arc and no promise of redemption shape this perusal of a war-shattered landscape that thought is becoming closely meshed with, exploring a perilous post-war topography that features "the city of power" ruled by tyranny, "great colleges" that "breed up fools", and "houses of extortion" gilt with prodigality⁴³. These would have been the very places that snubbed Cavendish in her petitions to vindicate her husband's slandered reputation, to reclaim his sequestered estates and to grant her recognition as a scholar. The poem spews scene upon scene of grievance and dismay at the turn things have taken in the world. What promised to be a heroic exploit founders in a quagmire of gross appetites as thought stumbles across a butchered body in a store. Its grotesque physicality – "a head with wit and fancies filled", "many hearts by grief and sorrow killed",

“weak livers of great fear”, swollen “spleens of malice” and hardened “lungs of wilfulness”⁴⁴ – signals a paradiastolic rescripting of pre-Restoration England’s grandeur as the obscenity of a headless body politic, mutilated by vile passions.

Equally, however, Cavendish, here repositioned as the chronicler of a historical debacle, includes herself in the anticlimactic finale: imagination, first seen as a noble steed, is now a mere “Asse”⁴⁵. Does paradiastole, reviled by rhetoricians for sparking semantic slipperiness and instability, blindside the poet? Does she gesture toward imagination’s failure to assist thought in coping with time’s injuries? Considering her claim, in the preface to *The Blazing World*, that reason and fancy are both “made by the rational parts of matter” and the colossal output of her subsequent oeuvre, the answer would be no⁴⁶. Cavendish makes it clear that the “laborious and difficult” effort of reason to attune itself to nature “requires sometimes the help of Fancy, to recreate the Mind”⁴⁷.

“Addicted to Contemplation”: Melancholy and the Regimen of Fancy

“We are kept like birds in cages to hop up and down in our houses, not suffered to fly abroad to see the several changes of fortune. [...] We are shut out of all power, and Authority, by reason we are never employed in civil nor marshall affaires, our counsels are despised, and laughed at, the best of our actions are trodden down with scorn”⁴⁸.

So what are we to make of Virginia Woolf’s recurrently cited dismissal of the writerly incontinence of “hare-brained,

fantastical Margaret of Newcastle”, and of the imagery of reckless vegetative growth through which the Duchess’s dilatory imagination spills over into “folly” and prompts frantic, “nonsensical” scribbling⁴⁹? Unwittingly, I think, this captures a concern with writing as the antidote to, rather than the precipitant of, mental affliction, a concern that is thematised in Cavendish’s work. Woolf argues that because Cavendish was not properly habituated to “scientific reasoning”, solitariness and autonomy turned her wits⁵⁰. True, Cavendish frequently uses the ruse of an ill-functioning, disquieted or unsettled mind to stave off detraction and rejection. The motto above, from *The Philosophical and Physical Opinions* (1656), externalises her compound anguish of being, as a woman, rendered captive in structures of domesticity and hindered from self-validation in either intellectual debates or “marshall affaires”, despite her desire to be hailed as a trail-blazing thinker who does not shy away from confrontation with the eminent philosophers of her time, yet whose work, she hopes, “may have a glorious resurrection in following ages”⁵¹.

She resorts to the imagery of embattled intellect in the prefaces to *Philosophical and Physical Opinions* (1655), saying that, “to my conceit I see it in my brain as perfectly, as if the battle was pitched, and fought there, and my fancy will build discourse therefrom”⁵². She speaks of various ideas being launched from opposing sides in a conceptual warfare, or of disparate voices orchestrating layered arguments inside her head. In “The Dedication” to *Playes* (1662), Cavendish metadramatic comment centre stages thought as being inextricably embedded in the material milieu of performance: “For all the time

my Playes a making were,/ My brain the Stage, my thoughts were acting there”⁵³. Yet aside from figurations of the mind as a “theatre of war”⁵⁴ or as an overcrowded stage, the representation of “natural reason” being nursed by a throng of fancies “like a swarm of bees in a round heap” points to the co-constitution of reason and imagination⁵⁵.

The neoclassical mellitological analogy is expanded into a dynamic poetic of crosspollination, which subtends nectar foraging, comb building and honey-yielding as the correlative of the poet’s intersubjective composition process. “My own natural phancies”, she says, “sometimes [...] fie abroad to gather honey from the sweet flowry rhetoric of my Lords discourse, and wax from his wise judgment which they work into a comb making chapters therein”⁵⁶. As Cavendish intimates, imagination and reason are far from divided or mismatched faculties. Not only are fancies not a hindrance to cognition, but their polyphony is the very barometer of sanity, so much so that she sombrely muses upon the prospect of being bereft of them, “as sicknesses may destroy them, as dropsies may drown them, fevers may burn them, consumptions may waste them, or griefs may wither them”⁵⁷.

The mood of pensive sorrow dominates “A True Relation of my Birth, Breeding, and Life”, attached to the end of *Natures Pictures drawn by Fancies Pencil to the Life* (1565). The memoir talks of “this unnatural War [that] came like a Whirlwind,” and explains how, bereaved by the deaths of her mother and two brothers, she is affected by time’s aptness “to waste remembrance as a consumptive body, or to wear it out like a garment into rags, or to

moulder it into dust”⁵⁸. Relentless self-disiplining is, she confesses, a prophylactic against violent passions like anger, jealousy, envy and spite, and she is resolved to never let them “ly smouldering in my breast to bread a malignant disease in the minde”⁵⁹. Evocations of disease are rife: she is tormented by “a bashfull distrust of myself,” suffers from persistent despondency, and “despaire[s] of a perfect cure”⁶⁰. Unsurprisingly, the miracle consolation and cure is writing, an intuitive technology tailored to cater to fancy’s irregular rhythms, bolster its capacity to flesh out ideas, and etch into the materiality of the paper the inked traces of contracting and expanding thought. In Cavendish’s feminine poetics, writing is materially embedded and emulates Nature’s craft in “mixing, cutting, and carving” infinite matter “out into several Forms and Figures”⁶¹. In a passage from “A True Relation” that condenses Cavendish’s materialist poetics, the memoirist touches upon the idea of writing as a midwife or prosthetic to thought:

I pass my time rather with scribbling than writing, with words than wit, not that I speak much, because I am addicted to contemplation [...], yet when I am writing any sad fain’d stories, or serious humours or melancholy passions, I am forc’d many times to express them with the tongue before I can write them with the pen, by reason those thoughts are sad, serious and melancholy, are apt to contract and to draw too much back, which oppression doth as it were over power or smother the conception in the brain, but when those thoughts are sent out in words, they give the rest more liberty to place

themselves, in a more methodicall order, marching more regularly with my pen, on the ground of white paper, but my letters seem rather as a ragged rout, than a well armed body, for the brain being quicker in creating, than the hand in writing, or the memory in retaining, many fancies are lost, by reason they oftentimes out-run the pen, where I, to keep speed in the Race, write so fast as I stay not so long as to write my letters plain⁶².

As Klibansky, Panofsky and Saxl demonstrate, Renaissance portrayals of melancholy adjoined the indexes of frenzy (“energetic and joyous activity”) and catatonia (slothfulness and idleness) in marking out a volatile divide between the surfeit of imagination and paralysing stupor – a conceit vividly epitomised in Dürer’s 1514 engraving *Melancolia I*, which fused “the allegorised ideal of a creative mental faculty” with “a terrifying image of a destructive state of mind”⁶³. The extract from Cavendish’s memoir above hinges on the sometimes laborious retrieval and exteriorisation of thought, when melancholy contracts the flow of ideas and quashes the brain’s generative clout, which she describes as prolix yet vacuous scribbling. This is, nonetheless, followed by alternating bouts of effervescent imagination, when the avalanche of fancies bursts forth with the exuberance of a “ragged rout” rather than the docility of a “well armed body”, the mind outpacing the hand⁶⁴. The static blend of ingenuity and paralysis in conventional accounts of melancholy gives way here to a scriptorial dynamic – enabled by the agency, perceptiveness and responsiveness of matter – that projects thought

either materialising or failing to gain consistency in the interstices between the body (brain, tongue and hand) and writing implements (white paper and ink). A similar point about sentience being embedded in the material continuum is made in “Of the motion of the thoughts in Speaking and Writing”, from *The World’s Olio* (1655). Here, evanescent spoken thought – loose, unconstrained and “carelesse” – is contrasted with the cohesiveness of “slow and strong thoughts” that in writing “come well armed and in good order”⁶⁵. The correlative image of thought sedimenting into writing, like “water in a cup, that the mouth is held downward: for every drop striving to be out first, stops the passage”⁶⁶, teases out a non-subsumptive stance on inanimate matter exhibiting agency and prosthetically assisting human comprehension.

Melancholy also plagues the characters in the fictional stories included in *Natures Pictures*. In terms of genre, these are “natural descriptions” or case studies in heartache and loss, rather than “romancical tales”, since despite using this designation, she confesses to having “never read a Romancy Book throughout in all my life”, and hopes these works “will quench Amorous passions, [rather] than inflame them”⁶⁷. In “The She Anchoret”, whose dialogism reminds one of the mid-section of *The Blazing World*, a woman cloistered in “solitary Habitation” dispenses wisdom to natural philosophers, barristers, statesmen, and physicians, to whom she discourses about the distempers of the spirit and about diets that “fill the Body with too much Melancholy Humours, and the Head with Malignant Vapours”⁶⁸. Also included in this collection is the cycle of “Several Feigned Stories in Verse”. A framed narrative, it

comprises inset tales in which men and women take turns to recount cases of female versus male strategies of coping with bereavement and melancholy, providing mutual consolation, succumbing to pain, or developing moral fortitude. For instance, as this snippet from the tale of "The Mourning Widow" suggests, Cavendish was personally invested in comprehending the humoral system, in which an excess of black bile or an undersupply of choler, phlegm, or blood could spark splenetic disorder: "O Sir, said she, the Sun that gave me light,/ Death hath eclips'd, and taken from my sight./ In Melancholy Shades my Soul doth lie,/ And grieves my Body which will not yet die"⁶⁹.

Grounds of Natural Philosophy (1668) speaks of humours as bodily components that are essential for survival but that also demand regulation in case their balance tilts towards either Superfluity or Scarcity⁷⁰. The account is terse, matter-of-fact and largely reiterates established humoral beliefs. In the section "Concerning Restoring-Beds, or Wombs", however, the argumentation comes to life, as the different parts of the philosopher's mind unite in congress to debate the possibility of not an artificial, alchemical elixir concocted by humans, but one ingeniously conjured into existence by nature's fancy: an insular rock in an oceanic expanse where sentient matter regenerates itself. Clearly, Cavendish points to a co-extensiveness of her creative wit with nature's ingeniousness, for "After the Wisest Parts of My Mind had ended their Arguments, there being some of the Dullest, and the most Unbelieving, or rather Strange Parts of my Mind, that had retired into the Glandula of my Brain, which is a kind of Kernel; which they made use of, instead of a Pulpit"⁷¹.

By contrast with the impersonal and objective approach to humours in *Grounds of Natural Philosophy*, *The World's Olio* is offered to irritable readers as a "sumptuous banquet for the brain" dressed with "Aromatick Spice of Phancy"⁷², and talks of melancholy as a clouding of the brain, whose resplendence can be restored with the aid of imagination. In Allegory 43, entitled "Of Melancholy", Cavendish speaks of this malaise as an aggregate of passions that confound understanding: "Melancholy persons", she says, "are never in the mean, but always in extremes; as to be sometimes in a humour of extreme laughter, other times possessed with high fears, passionate weeping, violent anger or rage, and so with stupid dullness"⁷³. In working out a palliative, she devises a philosophy of creation that posits wit as an enlivening of the melancholic mind: "wit", she says, "chears the Heart, refreshes the Spirits, delights the Mind, entertains the Thoughts, sweetens Melancholy [...]. Wit is the sun of the brain"⁷⁴.

Moreover, wit "incircles all things" and, in doing that, it cathects the poet's mind to nature's limitless materiality⁷⁵. In Allegory 30, subtitled "The Life and Death of Wit," Fancy is a volatile component of wit: "once it is conceived and quickned in the Brain, if it be not brought forth and put into Writing, it dyes"⁷⁶. Writing, in other words, is simultaneously an exercise in mental temperance and a sublimation of the body's humoral irregularities into illuminating wit, for, in Cavendish's view, "a true Poet is like a Spider that Spins all out of her own bowels"⁷⁷. Balancing out variegated areas of human and nonhuman experience, from digestion to contemplation and cogitation, motile wit interlaces

reason and fancy and is the “purest element” that electrifies the mind, as well as the “elixir that keeps nature always fresh, and young”⁷⁸.

In her study on early modern *Regimens of the Mind* (2011), Sorana Corneanu shows that Cavendish's contemporaries, Royal Society fellows, gestured towards Francis Bacon's epistemological project of curing mental distempers through a prophylactic that was directed against the seductive fallacies of the imagination and was designed to achieve the “purification, rectification, and reordering of the human mind”⁷⁹. As evidenced by her *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* (1666), Cavendish's mind therapeutics runs against the grain of the empiricist project. Adamant that to nurture, rather than to expunge fancy, is tantamount to intensifying intellection, she addresses her undisciplined propensity to write in terms of an elitist pathology of the mind in “The Preface to the Ensuing Treatise”, in an attempt to pre-empt attacks that “my much writing is a disease”⁸⁰. Paradiastole is again at work here, as Cavendish appears to both pay tribute to, and disrupt, the idea that disimpassioned reason alone should steer cognition.

Shunning the extremes of frenzy and acedia, incontinent writing is not “an apoplectical or [a] lethargical” infirmity, but a source of delight and the prerogative of “the wisest, wittiest, subtlest, most learned and eloquent men”⁸¹. In an attempt to reframe quietude as a precondition for singularity, the natural philosopher dissociates between “crabbed or peeviously melancholy” and “soft melting solitary, and contemplating melancholy”, ushering in a need for redefining the antithetical coordinates of

female and male symptomalogies of this disease⁸². However, by situating herself as histrionic rather than hysterical self-diagnostician, Cavendish embraces this form of surplus writing as a “disease of the brain”, assuming that this validates her vulnerability to “infection” as a form of contamination with the genius of male authors⁸³. Moreover, while reiterating Robert Burton's prescription of the labour of writing as a remedy for idleness⁸⁴, she also parades its restorative force to forestall the stigmatisation of women's aesthetic and intellectual fecundity.

Laura Knoppers argues that Cavendish was committed to a project of re-scripting medical knowledge and supplying therapeutic advice of her own in both her philosophical tracts and in her fiction, adding that her recalcitrant refusal to abide by her physician's medical ministrations may “provide a window on the gendered struggle for medical knowledge in early modern England, as male professionals sought to define and delimit what was appropriate for women”⁸⁵. On the other hand, Begley and Goldberg make a case that domestically designed therapies indicate a non-gendered utilisation of early modern spaces like “kitchens and still-rooms [that] often doubled as laboratories” and that hypochondriac melancholy, which rendered the upper regions of the brain susceptible to a relentless onslaught from the gaseous effluvia exuded by a malfunctioning spleen, was equitably deemed to affect Cavendish and her husband, who were both afflicted with psycho-emotional wounds⁸⁶. The arsenal of warm liquid cures prescribed to offset the surfeit of coldness and dryness that was thought to contribute to melancholy was, however, customised to offset

the mutinous spirit of “her Ladiship”, who was admonished by her therapist for persisting in “the occupation in writing of books”, vilifying it as a sedentary pursuit⁸⁷.

This insurgency may have derived, as Begley and Goldberg astutely note, from a conscientiously assumed “trade-off between motherhood and writing”, as well as from a resilient refusal to have her melancholy demoted to a somatic, rather than intellectual affliction⁸⁸. Moreover, the physician’s intrusive regimen of laxatives and emetics, including the so-called “steel liquore”, a noxious iron-based chemical compound thought to be a failsafe antidote to melancholy⁸⁹, will have struck a nervous chord in Cavendish, who is wary about panacea in *Observations*, disproving, in the chapter entitled “Of the Universal Medicine, and of Diseases”, the hypothesis of a fix-all medical relief, given the infinite variability of diseases that reflect nature’s irregular motions⁹⁰ – except, that is, for the regimen of fancy, which is, indeed, unfailingly praised in *The Blazing World* for its curative effects.

Set in a world of chromatic resplendence, the utopia starts off in a blackened

atmosphere. Even nature, Cavendish admits tongue-in-cheek, pretending to concede to the experimentalists’ disavowal of colour being intrinsic to bodies, can be “a very sad and melancholy lady”⁹¹. When the story risks getting arrested in a romancical abduction plot, splenetic nature quickly jumps to the protagonist’s rescue, marshalling a tempest reminiscent of the mesenteric vapours threatening the higher regions of the mind in humoral accounts of melancholy. Despondency also overtakes the Duchess, who gets “very sad and melancholy” because of her ambition to be Princess, while the “very melancholic humour” of the Empress of the Blazing World springs from her desire to be author⁹². The issue is resolved in the “Epilogue to the Reader”, where the extradiegetic Duchess confirms that she has fulfilled her “ambition [...] not only to be Empress, but Authoress of a whole world”⁹³. Authorship and authority are therefore concocted into an amalgam that is tendered as the cure of melancholy, which tallies with Cavendish’s self-stylised image as a reclusive genius, beleaguered by moody introspection yet singularised by the exuberant vitality of her imagination.

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NOTES

1. This paper reworks and expands some of the ideas I developed in two conference papers: "My much writing is a disease": Melancholy and the Regimen of Fancy in Cavendish's 'Romancical' Fiction", invited online paper delivered in the Seminar "Utopía política, género y ciencia en la Modernidad a través de Margaret Cavendish" (University of Navarra, 25 April 2025, and "Troubled with melancholy vapours": Cavendish and the Warring Mind", delivered at the conference "Conflict", Constructions of Identity XII, Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj, 16-18 October 2025.
2. Margaret Cavendish, *The World's Olio*, London, J. Martin and J. Allestrye, 1655, p. 96.
3. Margaret Cavendish, *The Description of a New World, Called The Blazing World and Other Writings*, edited by Kate Lilley, New York, New York University Press, 1992, p. 155-156.
4. See Justin Begley and Benjamin Goldberg, in *The Medical World of Margaret Cavendish. A Critical Edition*. Palgrave MacMillan, 2022.
5. *Ibidem*, p. 157.
6. Alison Peterman, *Cavendish*, London and New York, Routledge, 2025. Kindle.
7. Margaret Cavendish, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, edited by Eileen O'Neill, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 13.
8. Peterman, *op. cit.*
9. Erin Webster, *The Curious Eye. Optics and Imaginative Literature in Seventeenth-Century England*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2020, p. 87.
10. Margaret Cavendish, *Philosophical Letters: or, Modest Reflections Upon some Opinions in Natural Philosophy*, London, 1664, p. 6.
11. Peterman, *op. cit.*
12. Cavendish, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, p. 18.
13. Andy Clark and David Chalmers, "The Extended Mind", in *Analysis*, vol. 58, no. 1 (1998), p. 7-19. See David Cunning, "Cavendish, Philosophical Letters, and the Plenum", in Lisa Walters and Brandie R. Siegfried (eds.), *Margaret Cavendish. An Interdisciplinary Perspective*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2022, p. 98-111.
14. Cavendish, *The World's Olio*, p. 96.
15. Cavendish, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, p. 61.
16. Margaret Cavendish, *Poems, and Fancies: Written by the Right Honourable, the Lady Margaret Marchioness Newcastle*, London, J. Martin and J. Allestrye, 1653, p. 16.
17. Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2013, p. 193.
18. Cavendish, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, p. 27.
19. *Ibidem*.
20. *Ibidem*.
21. Cavendish, *The World's Olio*, p. 3.
22. Diana G. Barnes, "Bellicose passions in Margaret Cavendish's Playes (1662)," in Stephanie Downes, Andrew Lynch and Katrina O'Loughlin (eds.), *Writing War in Britain and France, 1370-1854: A History of Emotions*, London and New York, Routledge, 2019, p. 127.
23. See Molly Bridges, *Womanhood, Melancholy and the Problem of Genius in the Work of Margaret Cavendish, Duchess Of Newcastle-Upon-Tyne (1623-73)*, PhD Thesis, University of Birmingham, 2019, p. 10.
24. Margaret Cavendish, *Poems and Fancies with The Animal Parliament*, edited by Brandie R. Siegfried, Toronto, Iter Press, 2018, p. 311.
25. Cavendish, *Poems, and Fancies: Written by the Right Honourable*, p. 167.
26. *Ibidem*.
27. Lara Dodds, "Bawds and Housewives: Margaret Cavendish and the Work of 'Bad Writing'", in *Early Modern Studies Journal*, vol. 6 (2014), p. 54.
28. Henry Peacham, *The Garden of Eloquence, Conteining the Most Excellent Ornamenta, Exornations, Lightes, flowers and forms of speech, commonly called the Figures of Rhetorike*, London, H. Jackson, 1593, p. 168.

29. Quentin Skinner, "Paradiastole: redescribing the vices as virtues", in Sylvia Adamson, Gavin Alexander and Katrin Ettenhuber (eds.), *Renaissance Figures of Speech*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 156. Lara Dodds discusses modern attempts to undo the disparagement Cavendish's stylistic faults would tend to invite but does not inquire into the natural philosopher's own recourse to this figure, *ibidem*, p. 29.

30. Cavendish, *Poems, and Fancies: Written by the Right Honourable*, p. 167.

31. *Ibidem*.

32. Rachelle Gold and Jim Pearce, "Ferox or Fortis: Montaigne, Hobbes, and the Perils of Paradiastole", in *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, vol. 48, no. 2 (2015), p. 187, 189.

33. Margaret Cavendish, *Poems and Fancies with The Animal Parliament*, footnotes 1088, p. 309 and 1101, p. 311.

34. Cavendish, *Poems, and Fancies: Written by the Right Honourable*, p. 167-173.

35. *Ibidem*, p. 173-177.

36. Brandie R. Siegfried, "Introduction", in Margaret Cavendish, *Poems and Fancies with The Animal Parliament*, p. 42.

37. Cavendish, *Poems, and Fancies: Written by the Right Honourable*, p. 196.

38. Peterman, *op. cit.*

39. *Ibidem*.

40. *Ibidem*.

41. Cavendish, *Poems, and Fancies: Written by the Right Honourable*, p. 190.

42. *Ibidem*.

43. *Ibidem*, p. 191.

44. *Ibidem*.

45. *Ibidem*, p. 192.

46. Cavendish, *The Description of a New World*, p. 123.

47. *Ibidem*, p. 124.

48. Margaret Cavendish, *The Philosophical and Physical Opinions*, London, J. Martin and J. Allestrye, 1656, p. 7.

49. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992 [1929], p. 79-80.

50. *Ibidem*.

51. *Ibidem*, p. 8.

52. Margaret Cavendish, "The Text to My Natural Sermon", in *The Philosophical and Physical Opinions*, J. Martin and J. Allestrye, 1656, p. 4.

53. Margaret Cavendish, *Playes Written by the Thrice Noble, Illustrious and Excellent Princess, the Marchioness of Newcastle*, London, Printed by A. Warren, for Hohn Martyn, James Allestry, and Tho. Dicas, 1662, p. 5.

54. See Alexandra G. Bennett, "Margaret Cavendish and the Theatre of War", in Sara H. Mendelson (ed.), *Ashgate Critical Essays on Women Writers in England, 1550-1700*, London, Routledge, 2016, p. 263.

55. Cavendish, *The Philosophical and Physical Opinions*, p. 5.

56. *Ibidem*, p. 6, 5.

57. *Ibidem*, p. 5.

58. Margaret Cavendish, *Natures Pictures Drawn by Fancies Pencil to the Life*, London, J. Martin and J. Allestrye, 1656, p. 372, 378.

59. *Ibidem*, p. 388.

60. *Ibidem*, p. 382.

61. Margaret Cavendish, *The World's Olio*, section A2, London, J. Martin and J. Allestrye, 1655, n.p.

62. Cavendish, *Natures Pictures Drawn by Fancies Pencil*, p. 384.

63. Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, and Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy. Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion, and Art*, Montreal & Kingston, London and Chicago, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019, p. 316-317.

64. Cavendish, *Natures Pictures Drawn by Fancies Pencil*, p. 384.
65. Margaret Cavendish, *The World's Olio*, p. 5.
66. *Ibidem*.
67. *Ibidem*, C2.
68. *Ibidem*, p. 237.
69. *Ibidem*, p. 4.
70. Margaret Cavendish, *Grounds of Natural Philosophy*, edited by Anne M. Thell, Peterborough, Broadview Press, [1668] 2020, p. 118.
71. *Ibidem*, p. 222.
72. Cavendish, *The World's Olio*, n.p.
73. *Ibidem*, p. 104.
74. *Ibidem*, p. 65.
75. *Ibidem*, p. 5.
76. *Ibidem*, p. 102.
77. *Ibidem*, p. 7. See Sylvia Bowerbank's seminal discussion of Cavendish's inauguration of a materially grounded form of poetic imagination in "The Spider's Delight: Margaret Cavendish and the 'Female' Imagination", in *English Literary Renaissance* vol. 14, no. 3 (2008), p. 397.
78. Cavendish, *The World's Olio*, p. 5.
79. Sorana Corneanu, *Regimens of the Mind. Boyle, Locke, and the Early Modern Cultura Animi Tradition*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 2011, p. 2.
80. Cavendish, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, p. 7.
81. *Ibidem*.
82. Cavendish, *Natures Pictures Drawn by Fancies Pencil*, p. 388. See also Juliana Schiesari, who speaks about differently inflected meanings of melancholy associated with men *versus* women, so much so that what passed for a "higher", "exquisite illness" and a "privileged" psycho-affectual condition in men was disparaged as a "lower" form of somatic, inarticulate and ineloquent suffering in women, who were imagined to have "an incapacity to translate symptoms into a language beyond its own self-referentiality as depression", in *The Gendering of Melancholia. Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Symbolics of Loss in Renaissance Literature*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1992, p. 16.
83. Cavendish, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, p. 7.
84. "If all women that have no employment in worldly affairs, should but spend their time as harmlessly as I do, they would not commit such faults as many are accused of", *Ibidem*.
85. Laura L. Knoppers, "Gender, Knowledge, and the Medical Marketplace. The Case of Margaret Cavendish," in Kimberley Anne Coles and Eve Keller (eds.), *The Routledge Research Companion to Women, Sex, and Gender in the Early British Colonial World*, London and New York, Routledge, 2019, p. 271, 274.
86. Cf. "A Book, wherein is Contained Rare Minerall Receipts Collected at Paris from those who had great Experience of them," an exilic archival text recently edited by Justin Begley and Benjamin Goldberg, *op. cit.*, p. 50, 122.
87. *Ibidem*, p. 220, 126.
88. *Ibidem*, p. 22.
89. *Ibidem*, p. 79-81, 220. Arnaud Zimmern goes so far as to claim that Cavendish's denial of elixirs becomes an "*idée fixe* linking the infinity of Nature to the impossibility of cure-alls", even though the prospect of metamorphic regeneration is entertained in her utopia, in "Silkworms and Panaceas: Margaret Cavendish, Infinite Nature, and the Progress of Utopia", in *ELH*, vol. 89, no. 1 (2022), p. 89.
90. "I am not of the opinion, that there can be a universal medicine for all diseases, except it be proved that all kinds of diseases whatsoever, proceed from one cause; which I am sure can never be done, by reason there is as much variety in the causes of diseases, as in the diseases themselves. You may say: All diseases proceed but from irregular motions. I answer: These irregular motions are

so numerous, different and various, that all the artists in nature are not able to rectify them", in Cavendish, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, p. 241.

91. *Ibidem*, p. 85.

92. Cavendish, *The Description of a New World*, p. 183, 179.

93. *Ibidem*, p. 224.