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Bawds and Housewives: Margaret Cavendish and the Work of "Bad Writing"

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Introduction

Virginia Woolf described Margaret Cavendish as woman thwarted by her lack of education. Her work suffered from a lack of discipline: her ideas poured out "higgledy-piggledy in torrents of prose, poetry, and philosophy," but she "she should have had a microscope put in her hand. She should have been taught to look at the stars and reason scientifically."¹ Woolf's negative commentary on Cavendish's style—she also describes her prose as a "giant cucumber" that "had spread itself over all the roses and carnations in the garden and choked them to death" (65)—is familiar to all Cavendish scholars. Indeed it is conventional to begin an essay on Cavendish's writing with these or similar comments as a prelude to arguments that redefine the so-called defects of Cavendish's writing in more positive terms.² Paradiastole, the rhetorical figure by which vices are redefined as virtues,

therefore, provides the (perhaps necessary) structural foundation of the feminist project of recovery of early modern women's work.³ The stylistic traits that earlier readers found reprehensible—the failure of decorum, the excess, the indiscriminate mixing of science and art—may be re-described more positively as proof of, among other things, Cavendish's protofeminism or her prescient critiques of scientific empiricism.⁴

I begin with this citation of Woolf's diagnosis of Cavendish's stylistic failure for a different reason, however. As all scholars of Cavendish know, her critical heritage has been, if not defined, significantly influenced by a tradition of detraction directed equally toward her supposed personal characteristics—a recent biography is titled *Mad Madge*—and the deficiencies of her writing.⁵ The negative judgments from her own lifetime are well known. Cavendish's poems led Dorothy Osborne to claim that “there are many soberer People in Bedlam,” while Pepys saw a play he believed to be by Cavendish and called it the “most sily thing that ever came upon the stage.”⁶ As I have argued elsewhere, the detraction Cavendish attracted during her lifetime is a result of the discourse of singularity that plagued the representation of women's intellectual work in the seventeenth century.⁷ As these comments show, the critique directed at Cavendish often combined social and aesthetic complaints. Cavendish's literary transgressions were linked to her transgressions of gendered decorum, and this mixture could be particularly threatening to other female poets. Consider the comments of Katherine Philips, a poet of great technical skill and good reputation. Philips tells the story of Edmund Waller, a male poet who was pleased to condescend to Cavendish:

I remember I have been told he [Waller] once said he would have given all his own Poems to have been the Author of that which my Lady Newcastle writ of a Stag: And that being tax'd for this Insincerity by one of his Friends, he

answer'd that he could do no less in Gallantry than be willing to devote all his own Papers to save the Reputation of a Lady, and keep her from the Disgrace of having written any thing so ill. Some such Repartee I expect he would make on this occasion.⁸

Philips suggests that Cavendish's bad writing harms other writing women because men will not take the time to distinguish between true skill and Cavendish's inept experiments. Even Virginia Woolf, who can be a very good reader of Cavendish, cannot separate the literary and cultural elements of Cavendish's bad writing: her failed poetry threatens women's literary history, as Cavendish becomes a "bogey to frighten clever girls with."⁹

Of course Woolf was interested to provide an economic and political explanation for women's lack of literary achievement. Early Cavendish scholars who lacked Woolf's feminist consciousness, however, treated her bad writing as a given. Indeed, the baroque excess, failure of decorum, and ineptness that many readers find in Cavendish's writing and person often elicits excess on the part of the critic as well. For instance, Henry Ten Eyck Perry's commentary on the *Oration*s in his 1918 literary history is comical in its lack of self-awareness:

These orations are well enough in their way, but it is such an undramatic, monotonous way that they have practically no claim upon posterity. It was their author's habit to lay hold upon an idea, to envelop it with her formless images, and to hammer at it continuously.¹⁰

Complaining about Cavendish's bad writing produces bad writing: proliferating metaphors reproduce the "hammering" that the critic finds so offensive. Such detraction was persistent.¹¹ As recently as 1986, Rose Zimbardo made the bold assertion that "As a playwright Cavendish

is a strong contender for the worst in the tradition."¹² Zimbardo goes on to offer a useful overview of Cavendish's drama, but it is notable that discussion of Cavendish is here justified by an acknowledgment of the writing's lack of literary value. While this tradition of detraction is no longer prevalent—Cavendish is read more widely and with more seriousness than Woolf, Perry, or Zimbardo could imagine—I believe that the critical heritage of detraction has shaped the kinds of questions posed.¹³ Following Jean Gagen's pioneering work and in concert with the prevalence of historicism in the discipline more broadly, we have learned to look at the cultural conditions for Cavendish's rhetorical choices, but scholars have given less attention to the formal elements of Cavendish's prose and poetry or to aesthetic judgment.¹⁴

In this essay I take Virginia Woolf's considerable critical acumen as a starting point and ask: what is the potential analytical yield of an acknowledgment of Cavendish's stylistic failures? The dominant tendency in Cavendish criticism, understandably of course, has been to defend Cavendish from accusations of bad writing. Here I argue that she does not need our defense. Now that Cavendish's significant contributions to natural philosophy, drama, fiction, and politics have been established beyond a doubt, we can acknowledge the significance of bad writing—whether defined as stylistic error, obscene or lewd references, or perceived violations of decorum and taste—as a part of Cavendish's literary achievement. This essay, therefore, serves as a polemic and an invitation. I propose to document and celebrate—rather than apologize for—Cavendish's bad writing in all of its forms. Further, I invite a reopening of the critical problems posed by Cavendish's style. It is my contention that a reconsideration of Cavendish's so-called bad writing will provide the basis for a new and more comprehensive account of the formal and aesthetic qualities of her writing. This essay offers a preliminary

investigation, primarily focused on Cavendish's poetry, of the problem of bad writing. As we have already seen, Cavendish's critical legacy has been shaped by a tradition of detraction. In this essay I suggest that the work performed by this negative commentary itself requires analysis. It is tempting to dismiss these comments as the product of an earlier age; however, comments such as Woolf's, Perry's, or Zimbardo's represent a rhetorical stance that has shaped Cavendish's reception and, I would argue, women's literary history more broadly.¹⁵ Cavendish's literary achievement is inextricably tied up with the denial of that achievement. By defining specifically how Cavendish's writing is and is not bad, I show that it is not in spite, but because, of the stylistic defects identified by Woolf and others that Cavendish continues to deserve our attention.

Woolf's critique draws attention to two characteristics of Cavendish's writing: first, her writing is excessive, in bad taste in its "higgledy-piggledy torrents"; second, her writing is indecorous and fails to respect the boundaries that divide and define the genres and the disciplines. Cavendish's mind, Woolf suggests, was truly of a scientific temper, yet her lack of appropriate education prevented her from making a lasting contribution to the understanding of the natural world as contemporaries such as Boyle, Newton, or Hooke did. At the same time, her interest in questions of matter and motion led her to try to create art out of inappropriate material that now appears as a "monument to dead ideas" rather than the expression of timelessness and universality that Woolf and her contemporaries sought in art.¹⁶ In this essay I will examine this diagnosis of bad writing through case studies of two figures of women and work: the bawd and housewife. These tropes serve my purpose because they are significant figures in the early modern cultural imaginary and each appears repeatedly in Cavendish's work in a wide range of genres and contexts. The bawd can be

found in Cavendish's earliest poetry ("Motion makes Atomes a Bawd for Figure," *Poems and Fancies* 1653), as a key character type in the fiction and drama (e.g. "Assaulted and Pursued Chastity," 1656) and as a vulgar joke in *Sociable Letters* (1662), while the housewife, likewise, appears in the early metaphysical poetry of *Poems and Fancies* and again in the later philosophical prose (*Observations* 1666). Appearing alternately, and sometimes simultaneously, as poetic image, cultural commentary, rhetorical argument, and theoretical investigation, the tropes of bawd and housewife allow Cavendish explore her most pressing philosophical themes in a wide range of contexts and also to articulate the complexities of her situation as a writer. In this essay, I use these figures to provide examples of Cavendish's so-called bad writing. Though clearly identifiable as moral and metaphorical opposites, I suggest that the two tropes pose similar problems to Cavendish as an artist and a stylist. Both separately and together, bawd and housewife suggest the necessity of bad writing. These tropes provide the occasion for a demonstration of how Cavendish falls prey to what early modern rhetoricians call the vices of style. More significantly, however, these tropes suggest that the vices of style are what allow for the greatest innovation in Cavendish's poetry. Finally, my attention to bad writing serves as the starting point for an investigation into the effects of detraction on Cavendish's critical heritage and women's literary history more broadly. Woolf may be right that Cavendish's style is a failure by most standards of literary and aesthetic value; however, these same stylistic traits are also central to the way that Cavendish's tropes of women and work function. The bawd and housewife are important precisely because they signify excessively and promiscuously in a wide range of different, sometimes wildly inappropriate, registers.

Bawds and Housewives

It's difficult to think of two figures that are more opposed to one another in the early modern cultural imaginary than the housewife and the bawd. While the housewife signifies real feminine virtue and a well-ordered domesticity, the bawd is the epitome of female vice and a scapegoat for all kinds of social and sexual depravity. Cavendish's use of these figures draws upon these received cultural associations and, as we shall see, significantly extends them into a wide range of different discourses, including natural philosophy and political commentary. In this way, Cavendish's use of these tropes reflects a dynamic that is common throughout her works, as she at once accepts the conventions of women's writing while simultaneously flouting them. In this respect, Cavendish resembles some of her own female critics in her use of a rhetoric of detraction. When she describes women's writing, she says that women typically read rather than write. If they do write it is "Devotions, or Receipts of Medicines, for Cookery or Confectioners, or Complemental Letters, or a Copy or two of Verses, all which seems rather as Briefs than Volumes." But though Cavendish published many volumes, she does not see herself as a model for other women writers because it "is no Commendation to give them Courage and Confidence, if I cannot give them Wit."¹⁷

Cavendish distances herself from other women writers with commentary that is structurally equivalent to the censure directed at her by other women from Dorothy Osborne to Virginia Woolf. She ostentatiously signals her submission to social norms regarding women's literary activities by denigrating those activities, but through her own writing she challenges and transforms the conventions of decorous female literacy. Her repeated turn to the figures of the bawd and housewife works in a similar way. They are social and cultural touchstones that allow Cavendish to be entirely conventional; however, these figures are not thus confined.

Instead, they are transformed and refracted by the rhetorical and generic demands of Cavendish's many creative endeavors, whether natural philosophy, poetry, drama, fiction, or political theory, into meanings that are much richer and stranger.

The diametric opposition between the two tropes is conveniently illustrated by Nicolas Breton's 1616 book of "characters," *The Good and the Badde*, a book that includes "Descriptions of the Worthies and Vnworthies of this age." Among the women described in the book, the "good wife" is a clear ideal. She is:

a world of wealth, where iust cause of content makes a kingdome in conceit: She is the eye of warinesse, the tongue of silence, the hand of labour, and the heart of loue: a companion of kindnesse, a Mistris of Passion, an exercise of Patience, and an example of experience: She is the Kitchen Physician, the Chamber comfort, the Halls care, and the Parlours Grace: She is the Dairies neatnesse, the Brue-house wholesomenesse, the Garners provision, and the Gardens plantation. . . she is a care of necessity, and a course of thrift, a booke of Huswifery, and a mirror of modestie. In summe, she is Gods blessing, and Mans happinesse, Earths honour, and Heavens creature.¹⁸

A "good" wife is by definition a housewife, as she is described metonymically through the distinct spaces of the household—the kitchen, the chamber, the hall, the dairy, the brewhouse, and the garden—and metaphorically with the material and ideological products of each of these spaces. The wife is therefore herself a synecdoche for the household but at the same time subsumed by the products of the household. When she is the "good" wife, her subjectivity is nothing more than the "comfort," "care," "grace," "neatness," "wholesomeness," and "provision" that are the internal and external signs of a well-functioning domestic space.

By contrast, the bawd is the worst of Breton's feminine archetypes. She is a "kinde of Woman-Beast, who having lost the honour of her Virginitie in her youth, meanes to goe to hell in her Age," She revels in the opportunity to do wrong; "shee is partly a Surgeon, but most for the allaying of swellings in the lower parts, and hath commonly a charme to coniure the Diuell into hell: Shee grieues at nothing more, then at disability to sinne."¹⁹ The most common traits attributed to the bawd include her grotesque appearance, advanced age, and rhetorical skill. A bawd corrupts innocent young women but also represents the logical consequence of such corruption. A whore in her youth, in age the bawd creates whores to replace her. In another book of "characters," she is "an old *Char-cole*, that hath beene burnt her selfe, and therefore is able to kindle a whole greene Coppice."²⁰ The bawd's physical and moral odiousness allows her to serve as a repository of, and scapegoat for, social anxiety regarding female sexuality. Breton's summary of her traits reverses those of the housewife: she "is the loathsomenesse of Nature, the hate of Vertue, the spoile of wealth, and the ruine of Mayyden-heads."²¹

The housewife and bawd are not significant merely as moral images of virtuous and vicious women (though they are that) but also as tropes that mediate women's relationships to labor. The housewife typically functions as a trope for constraint and control. Wendy Wall and Natasha Korda have shown how housewifery became a site for the expression of conflict within the early modern gender system.²² As a result, narratives of women's work as housewives often strove, as Michelle Dowd has argued, to link household order with the housewife's personal piety, thus imposing a "semblance of stability and epistemological clarity even when these were absent or, at best, uncertain."²³ The dominant activity associated with the housewife is "keeping." "Good housewives at home, seeketh all well to save," in

Tusser's memorable, and frequently reprinted, verses.²⁴ The housewife, herself contained by the home, becomes both analogy and synecdoche for other forms of control, ensuring the coherence of early modern England's parallel and interlocking forms of hierarchy. As Gervase Markham explains, the housewife is "mother and mistress of the family" and thus has most of her employments "within the house," which serves as a space for "the general example of her virtues, and the most approved skill of her knowledges," to teach her family to "serve God, and sustain man in that godly and profitable sort which is required of every true Christian."²⁵

By contrast, the bawd is a go-between, a sex worker who profits by finding prostitutes for those who want to buy sex and clients for those who want, or more likely, are forced to sell. As such, she is a trope that is open and, somewhat ironically, endlessly fertile. In George Wilkins's prose rewriting of *Pericles*, the Bawd defines her role in a broader economy of goods and people: "We whome the worlde calles Bawdes . . . more properly are to be stiled Factors for men."²⁶ The bawd's meaning exceeds her role in the underground economy and takes on additional and frightening significance. She is transformed from a specific to a general metaphor for exchange and hence into a figure for metaphor itself. This process can be seen most clearly in John Taylor's mock-panegyric *A Bawd, A Vertuous Bawd, a Modest Bawd* (1635). In this tract the bawd is a figure who first brings different senses of value into contact with one another and then, through her mysterious powers of rhetorical transformation, collapses one into the other. As Taylor writes in his dedication, "a Bawd, being a universall creature, whose function is publikely scatterd, I thought it not pertinent or accommodating, that she should be privately protected by any."²⁷ The bawd is "universall," so cannot be licensed by a single patron. Likewise, Taylor's satire cannot be restricted to a single

target. Taylor warns that “So many severall sorts of *Bawds* doe grow/ That where there’s not a *Bawd*, ‘tis hard to know.”²⁸ The tract begins as religious satire in which the bawd is metaphor for dishonest exchange in spiritual matters, but eventually Taylor detects the bawd everywhere: among the lawyers, the merchants, the doctors and the rest. The problem with the bawd is that she is, somewhat paradoxically, too fertile as a metaphor for exchange. Once her power is revealed, it cannot be restricted to the illicit sexual economy or attributed to the bad motivations of sinful women; instead the transformative power of the bawd infects every relationship and every profession: “There is scarce any Art, Mystery, Trade or Manuall Occupation, but a *Bawd* hath a reference or allusion to it, or it to her.”²⁹ In this way, we see that the bawd stands in contrast to the housewife not only as a moral emblem, but also as a resource for literary invention. Where the one stands as a metaphor for the containment of meaning, the other shows this to be impossible.

Cavendish uses these tropes in diverse ways and various contexts. Her references initially appear to confirm the opposing cultural judgments of bawd and housewife; however, upon closer examination, it is clear that Cavendish’s use complicates this binary. In this respect, it is not surprising that Cavendish found the housewife useful. In her early work, *Poems, and Fancies*, the figure of the housewife is one of the unifying features of the book as a whole. Cavendish uses this image to introduce herself as writer. References to the work of housewifery are threaded throughout the prefatory material of the volume, culminating in a letter to the readers, where Cavendish explains that she writes this book because she has been excluded from the work of housewifery.

If any do read this Book of mine, pray be not too severe in your Censures. For first, I have no Children to imploy my Care and Attendance on; And my Lords

Estate being taken away, had nothing for Huswifery, or thrifty Industry to
 Employ my selfe in; having no Stock to work on.³⁰

Cavendish uses the high moral status and prestige of the housewife to authorize the non-conforming nature of her literary activities. Cavendish paradoxically transforms her lack of housewifery into a public performance of the housewife's duties through the construction of an analogy between different forms of "work."³¹ Cavendish continues, however, to make a distinction between housewifery and thrift; while the latter is solely concerned with preservation, the former—for an aristocratic family like her own—"may be used in great Expenses," a distinction that aligns housewifery with Cavendish's extravagant poetics of fancy. The domestic associations of the housewife make the trope useful to Cavendish when she is justifying her own transgression, yet the housewife is not simply a metaphor for containment. Instead, she ushers in her own kind of figurative excess. Later in *Poems and Fancies*, Cavendish writes a series of poems—"Natures House," "A Hodge-Podge for Natures Breakfast," a "Tart," "Natures Cooke"—with titles and subject matter that could have been taken from an early modern household manual. In these poems, as we shall see below, the metaphorical transformations elsewhere attributed to the bawd are performed under the sign of the housewife.

Cavendish's poetry suggests the generative potential of the figure of the housewife, and her philosophy extends it. In *Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy* Nature herself becomes a housewife in service of Cavendish's critique of her rivals, the experimental natural philosophers.

Nature being a wise and provident lady, governs her parts very wisely,
 methodically, and orderly: Also, she is very industrious, and hates to be idle,

which makes her employ her time as a good housewife does, in brewing, baking, churning, spinning, sowing, etc. as also in preserving, for those that love sweetmeats; and in distilling, for those that take delight in cordials; for she has numerous employments; and being infinitely self-moving, never wants work.³²

This passage demonstrates the remarkable polysemy that can be generated with the housewife. While for Markham, Breton, and others, the housewife signifies containment; here she functions at once as rhetorical argument, cultural commentary and satire, and theoretical investigation. Cavendish's actual identity as a housewife gives her rhetorical authority on questions of natural philosophy, while simultaneously excluding the experimental philosophers: why should a man "beat his brains, and weary his body with labours about that wherein he shall lose more time, than gain knowledge?"³³ Through an ironic appropriation of a discourse of feminine supplementarity, the housewife answers key questions in natural philosophy by providing an epistemological model or method. This example suggests the importance of these tropes to Cavendish's writing; while some references to the housewife may be explained as a canny manipulation of the conventional discourses of housewifery, others go much further to suggest that the housewife is a crucially shaping metaphor for apprehension of the world.

The bawd, of course, does not head Cavendish's works as a part of the legitimating paratext as the housewife does; however, she is equally present and serves an equally complex function as a cultural stereotype and generative metaphor. As might be expected, the bawd appears as a character in Cavendish's fiction and drama, where she fulfills the conventional narrative function of the bawd, which is to persuade.³⁴ In the *Matrimoniall Troubles* we find

the explicitly named Madame Procurer, while Madam Matron has a more chaste name but similar function in *The Presence*. The Bawd of *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity* is representative of these characters. The bawd's role is to convince the prospective prostitute to enter illicit sexual relationships and advise her on how to do so most profitably. In *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity*, her strategy is to offer "Lectures of Nature": "Nature only lives by Survivers," it is a "sin against Nature to be reserved and coy." The Bawd's argument confirms the conclusions of Taylor's pamphlet: the bawd changes sex for money, power for reputation, pleasure for honor. As Cavendish's bawd explains to Travelia, the bawd's power is Nature's power, to "transform all things out of one shape into another."³⁵

Like the housewife, the bawd appears frequently as a figure of speech. In some cases the metaphor fits the content and context well, as when Cavendish writes that some books are "Bawds to intice the minds, as Amorous Romancy."³⁶ Just as frequently, however, Cavendish uses the trope in circumstances that would not otherwise be sexualized. A "crafty knave" uses the laws as his "bawds, for his Adulterate wayes"; and Nature is a bawd when she makes a "handsome Creature."³⁷ Money is a bawd and flattery is a "Bawd to self-conceit."³⁸ Why does Cavendish resort so frequently to language that simply gives ammunition to critics who would call her writing not only indecorous, but indecent? The figure can be effective, but it is usually in bad taste. Consider the dirty joke that ends Cavendish's discussion of Aspasia in *Sociable Letters* 30. In this letter Cavendish recounts a story from Plutarch's life of Pericles about Aspasia, who was a courtesan well known for her political and rhetorical prowess. Aspasia's "Power lay in her Tongue, which was a Bawd for the other end."³⁹ In each of these cases, the bawd signifies an illicit transformation from one state or quality to another and she is chosen as a metaphor because she is a vehicle for scorn that is gendered and sexualized.

These passages may best be described as instances of what James Grantham Turner's calls *pornographia*. Turner coined this term to distinguish early modern sexual discourse from modern pornography, and he uses it to describe the linking of politics and sexuality in seventeenth-century discourse. *Pornographia* uses sexual mockery to make political points before and after the Restoration, but one consequence is to "sexualize the very idea of autonomous social or political action by women."⁴⁰ Cavendish's bawds show her reveling in a rejection of decorum—she is not confined to the modest and circumscribed speech recommended for the housewife—but the cost of that rejection seems to be an ostentatious performance of misogyny. Her concluding reflection on the lesson of Aspasia's story is that "honest Women take not so much care to Speak well as to do that which is Virtuous," a statement that is highly ironic in effect, if not intent.⁴¹ We will return to the bawd and housewife at the end of this essay when I turn to a more specific analysis of the vices of Cavendish's style. For now it is enough to observe that these figures perform excess such that each takes on some characteristics of its opposite.

The Vices of Style

One potential interpretation of the recurrence of these tropes in Cavendish's writing is that they represent another expression of the dilemma of the early modern woman writer. One signifies the eruption of what the other strives to (but cannot) contain. This argument is attractive because it can explain some of the apparent contradictions in Cavendish's work. Cavendish knew that she had to appear to be chaste and modest if she was to gain legitimacy as a writer. She claims that she's only writing because she has "no children to imploy her care," or that she won't write about the political parts of Hobbes's philosophy because that would be outside a woman's ken.⁴² The problem is that Cavendish is not very good at this

pose. Before you know it she's Margaret the First or, and this is what I find perhaps more interesting, taking on a position of such abject misogyny that the entire project of patriarchy is revealed to be a shaky rhetorical construction indeed.⁴³ Cavendish's critics—from her own time to quite recently—called her a bad writer because she didn't follow the rules, but twenty-first-century readers also like her because she didn't. Her work is usually most interesting where it is least like what she should have been writing, even if that means it doesn't quite scan, or rhyme, or has narrative or philosophical inconsistencies, or is in bad taste.

Cavendish's so-called bad writing deserves more attention, both in itself, as a set of formal principles that can be used to provide a rigorous description of her style, and also as a form of critical judgment that has shaped her critical heritage. Early modern rhetoric provides resources for the former through a well-developed terminology for the diagnosis and analysis of the vices of style. As William Poole writes, since rhetoric is the "art of speaking well," then it must also "recognise what it is to speak badly."⁴⁴ Most rhetorical manuals included a list of "faults" or "abuses" that writers or orators must avoid. It is possible for a bad writer to turn a virtue of style into a vice. As George Puttenham writes, "by ignorance of the maker, a good figure may become a vice, and, by his good discretion, a vicious speech go for a virtue in the poetical science." There are some types of speech, however, that are "always intolerable and such as cannot be used with any decency, but are ever indecent: namely barbarousness, incongruity, ill disposition, fond affectation, rusticity, and all extreme darkness."⁴⁵ Faults that writers and speakers must avoid include, but are not limited to, solecism (grammatical error), cacozelia (use of newly coined words), cacosyntheton (misplaced word order), tautology, ambiguity, and several kinds of excess or "surplusage."⁴⁶ Avoiding these faults is a necessary,

though not sufficient, condition for the achievement of decorum, which is the underlying principle of all effective communication: words must be arranged with “decency” at all times, which ensures harmony between speaker, audience, and social situation.⁴⁷ As Puttenham’s well-known discussion of decorum demonstrates, however, “decency” is a criterion that threatens to undo itself. The faults or abuses of style are often presented absolutely, but the principle of decorum requires judgment that is socially and historically specific. By the time that Cavendish was writing in the second half of the seventeenth century, critics were more likely to define rhetorical figuration itself as excessive. As Jenny Mann has most recently argued, the anti-rhetorical critiques of Hobbes, Locke, and others produced “a new valuation of rhetorical ornament, one that redefines all rhetorical devices as disorderly speech and connects that linguistic disorder to tumult within the nation.”⁴⁸

This rhetorical framework reveals the complexity of the concept of bad writing. While critical judgment is always culturally specific, some of the vices of style, because they are directly related to qualities of the English language and the conventions of verse forms, can be objectively identified. Those associated with decorum and decency, by contrast, can more easily be relegated to the realm of taste and are more likely to change significantly over time. It is the latter, the mismatch between current literary preferences and those of the past, that allows for the flourishing of a curious subgenre of novelty book: the catalogue of bad writers. These books are significant to this discussion because Cavendish has often been featured in them.⁴⁹ For instance, in *In Search of the World’s Worst Writers* (2000), Nick Page ranks his bad writers, and Cavendish receives 4 stars, which means that she is the “*grand cru* of awful writing.”⁵⁰ These volumes reveal a very different idea of the vices or faults of style than the early modern rhetorical manuals. The early modern manuals tend to emphasize technical

faults, while the twentieth-century books focus on absurdities of content that can ultimately be traced back to class or gender transgressions. These anthologies are heavily weighted toward nineteenth- and early twentieth-century poets who wrote rhymed verse, often on “improving” topics such as religion, morality, and science—even dentistry. As Nicholas Parsons explains in *The Joy of Bad Verse*, the “heyday of the poetaster” was between the late eighteenth and late nineteenth century because “the enormous and rapid expansion of reading matter, which in turn reflected the swelling ranks of the middle classes in England and America, meant for a while that anyone with a half-baked reflection or a stale platitude to offer could find someone to print it.”⁵¹ Parsons’s point seems right if uncharitable. A more objective description might be that expanding literacy produced both new markets for reading matter and new opportunities for authors who could provide material that was entertaining and edifying to readers with a variety of different preferences and needs. With some modifications, this point is relevant in considering Margaret Cavendish as well. The entry of her extensive body of work into print is inextricably linked to the changing conditions of reading and writing caused by the tumultuous political changes of the English Civil Wars. Likewise, if she can be said to produce bad writing, one important factor must be her limited, or at least unconventional, education.

Parsons’s framing of the issue does, however, point to a basic truth about this sub-genre: books of bad poetry are necessary when anxiety about the expansion of literary activities beyond a small, elite group of predominantly male writers threatens the canons of good taste. This anxiety about shifting standards of value lies behind Page’s indignation regarding Margaret Cavendish. At one time, everyone could agree that she was ridiculous, but, he writes with considerable chagrin, “she has become an icon. She is now praised in some

academic circles as an early feminist author," even though "what her work actually demonstrates is the empowering possibilities of bad writing."⁵² Unfortunately, most of the books of bad poetry suffer from this kind of bad faith; the collection of bad verse serves only to confirm the superiority of the editor and readers of the volume. However, the first and best of these anthologies, D.B. Wyndham Lewis and Charles Lee's widely reprinted 1930 anthology *The Stuffed Owl*, has a more generous outlook and as a result a more robust model of the aesthetic and ideological effects of bad verse. Lewis and Lee have considerable affection for the poems they print, and they warn their readers against "despising or patronising good Bad Verse."⁵³ Bathos is, of course, the dominant mode of what they call good Bad Verse, "that sudden slip and swoop and slither as down a well-buttered slide, from the peaks into the abyss."⁵⁴ The sudden movement from the sublime to the ridiculous may produce its own kind of beauty. In his commentary on the reprint edition of *The Stuffed Owl*, Billy Collins re-describes this kind of aesthetic effect in terms that are valuable for looking at Cavendish: good Bad Verse achieves the "tipping point where Bad becomes an inverted form of Good, thereby reaching a literary version of Camp."⁵⁵ The bad verse anthology therefore suggests that the bad writing label serves two distinct functions. First and more obviously, this label polices literary boundaries, as demonstrated by, for instance, Mary Evelyn's unfavorable comparison of Cavendish to Katherine Philips.

What contrary miracles does this age produce. This lady and Mrs. Philips! The one transported with the shadow of reason, the other possessed of the substance and insensible of her treasures; and yet men who are esteemed wise and learned, not only put them in equal balance, but suffer the greatness of the one to weigh down the certain real worth of the other.⁵⁶

Evelyn worries that Philips's "real worth" will not be recognized because Margaret Cavendish's "greatness" (i.e. high social station) provides an opportunity for men to patronize women without truly reading or appreciating their literary achievement.

Cavendish's folly dilutes the limited attention that Evelyn, probably correctly, perceives to be available for women writers. Similarly the bad writing anthologies defend literature through their explicit mockery of a flood of bad poetry that disrupts the cultivation of good taste.

More provocatively, however, these anthologies also suggest that bad writing, when acknowledged and appreciated as such, can open up a range of aesthetic and ideological effects that are not available within the typical canons of good taste. Collins points to Susan Sontag's famous essay on Camp as a theoretical framework for this type of aesthetic. For Sontag, one key difference between Camp and bad writing, is that the merely bad is "too mediocre in ambition." By contrast, the "essential element" of naïve or pure Camp is "seriousness, a seriousness that fails" and which contains "the proper mixture of the exaggerated, the fantastic, the passionate, and the naïve."⁵⁷ This notion of serious failure is what Collins means by his category of good Bad Poetry: poetry in which readers can detect both the significance of the poet's ambition and the mismatch between that ambition and the poem's form or content. Sontag maintains that Camp privileges aesthetics over morality and irony over tragedy. Camp is characterized by a preoccupation with surfaces, exaggeration and excess. It teaches us to find pleasure in gaps, disjunctions, and mismatches or, in other words, to recognize that "good taste is not simply good taste" but that there is, "indeed, a good taste of bad taste."⁵⁸

While Sontag's definition of naïve Camp is not a perfect match for Cavendish's aesthetic, I think it does provide a valuable frame of reference for assessing her "bad writing."

Cavendish's writing is also characterized by a seriousness of ambition, gaps and disjunctions between her ambition and cultural norms of literary achievement, and, in her drama in particular, a concept of character that aligns with the Camp preference for a "state of continual incandescence—a person being one very intense thing" rather than a realist model of character development.⁵⁹ Some of these qualities are on display in the poetry included in the bad verse anthologies. "Natures Cooke," a poem whose badness is inextricably linked to its idiosyncratic representations of women's work, is a representative example.⁶⁰ In this poem, Cavendish describes the housewife's duties of food preparation, and the metaphorical representations of these activities are at once instances of the vices of style and responsible for the poem's aesthetic success.

Death is the Cook of Nature; and we find
 Meat drest severall waies to please her Mind.
 Some Meates shee rosts with Feavers, burning hot,
 And some shee boiles with Dropsies in a Pot.
 Some for Gelly consuming by degrees,
 And some with Ulcers, Gravie out to squeeze.
 Some Fleshe as Sage she stuffs with Gouts, and Paines,
 Others for tender Meat hangs up in Chaines.
 Some in the Sea she pickles up to keep,
 Others, as Brawne is sous'd, those in Wine steep.
 Some with the Pox, chops Flesh, and Bones so small,
 Of which She makes a French Fricasee withall.
 Some on Gridirons of Calentures is broyl'd

And some is trodden on, and so quite spoyl'd.
 But those are bak'd when smother'd they do dye,
 By Hectick Feavers some Meat She doth fry.
 In Sweat sometimes she stues with savoury smell,
 A Hodge-Podge of Diseases tasteth well.
 Braines drest with Apoplexy to Natures wish,
 Or swimmes with Sauce of Megrimes in a Dish.
 And Tongues she dries with Smoak from Stokmacks ill,
 Which as the second Course she sends up still.
 Then Death cuts Throats, for Blood-puddings to make,
 And puts them in the Guts, which Collicks rack.
 Some hunted are by Death, for Deere that's red,
 Or Stal-fed Oxen, knocked on the Head.
 Some for Bacon by Death are Sing'd or scal'd,
 Then powdered up with Flegme, and Rhume that's salt.⁶¹

This poem could be judged bad writing for its commission of vices of style as well as its challenge to decorum. It suffers several of the errors catalogued in the early modern rhetorical handbooks. The meter and rhymes, as in many of Cavendish's verses, are often strained or predictable. Technical faults, such as solecism or cacosyntheton, which Puttenham calls the "Misplacer" and which refers to the use of grammatical inversion to fulfill the demands of meter or rhyme, are quite common in Cavendish's poetry and can easily be attributed to her lack of rhetorical training.

Where the identification of vices becomes more complicated, however, is when we move from those that are strictly technical or grammatical to those that shade into the principles of “decency.” Puttenham describes *tapinosis* or “the Abaser” as a significant fault when a poet uses “words and terms as do diminish and abase the matter he would seem to set forth by impairing the dignity, height, vigor, or majesty of the cause he takes in hand.”⁶² The examples Puttenham gives to demonstrate this fault are linguistic articulations of status violations: a reference to the Queen’s coach as a “cart” or a prince’s wealth as “pelf.” “Natures Cooke” insistently raises questions about “decency.” Is Death’s power and dignity abased by the conceit of the Cook, a domestic figure whose actions are described in terms that are debased and debasing? “Gelly,” “gravie,” “squeese,” “Brawne,” “broyl’d,” “spoyl’d” are words that have unpleasant sounds and unpleasant referents. Cavendish uses them to connect the body and its failings to a process of food preparation that is wholly unappetizing. Perhaps it is better to refer to the conceit of the cook who metes out illness and death as catachresis, which, as a metaphor that is abusive by wrenching a word or phrase from its natural context, has historically been slightly more respectable than the other faults we have examined. There is a gap or contradiction between the cook’s typical task, which is to prepare food that nourishes the household and hence preserves life, and this poem’s dealing in death, yet this contradiction remains unresolved and unaddressed within the text itself. The poem’s fourteen couplets pile up, but they do not build toward a particular conclusion. The first couplet announces the poem’s conceit, and each subsequent line lists yet another way in which the transformation of meat through cookery is like the transformation of the body by illness. Some meats are roasted by a fever, some boiled with dropsy, and others drowned in the sea like pickles. The poem forces an acknowledgment of the body as body; it produces an

uncomfortable awareness of the similarity between human flesh and the animal products that the cook prepares for her household's consumption. Or, more accurately, the poem demonstrates that on some level these things are exactly the same. Here, then, is the poem's ambition, but also its failure. "Natures Cooke" challenges the social and religious presumption of human exceptionalism, but to do so, it produces an excess of figuration that threatens to overwhelm rather than encourage such reflections.

The commentary on this poem in the twentieth-century *Bad Verse* anthologies focuses on its apparent lack of decency, and this fault is presented as evidence that Cavendish does not understand the aesthetic demands of poetry. The poem's metaphors are self-evidently "repulsive" and its subject matter demonstrates Cavendish's "strong interest in domestic science."⁶³ In a famous essay on poetry of the seventeenth century, T.S. Eliot describes the ideal poetic sensibility as one that is "constantly amalgamating disparate experiences." An ordinary man "falls in love or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking." In the mind of the poet, by contrast, "these experiences are always forming new wholes."⁶⁴ If the responses to "Natures Cook" are to be believed, however, this creation of new wholes is not always what people want from poetry. Some readers have been disturbed by the conjunction of the "smells of cooking"—in this case a graphic and detailed presentation of the violence of the early modern kitchen—and the physical and philosophical problems of death. This poem's representation of women's work is challenging and distasteful, but, of course, these distasteful qualities also seem to be essential to the poem's meaning. The poem aligns the violence often associated with the early modern kitchen with the violence of death. Published among a series of poems that produce a blazon of Nature as

housewife, "Natures Cooke" testifies to the power of the housewife, as a figure with authority even over Death.⁶⁵

The interpretive problems posed by "Natures Cooke" highlight the intersection of women's writing and the "work" of the discipline. For the past several years I have used this poem as the basis for a research exercise on the first day of my seminar on research methods for incoming MA students in English. Students are asked how they would make sense of the poem and set loose in the library to find relevant primary and secondary sources. I designed this exercise as an introduction to the library and its resources, but I've found that it is also valuable for the insight it provides into how we grapple with "bad writing." Students are initially turned off by this poem, but quickly become intrigued as their research takes them into the history of cookery and medicine, or the iconography of Nature, or the obstacles that early modern women faced in writing and publishing their writing, or any number of other possible contexts for the poem. The historical and theoretical sources that my students have discovered have improved my understanding of the poem. It is interesting to see how Cavendish brings together so specifically the archaic vocabularies of medicine and cookery, and to speculate about what that suggests about gender and power in domestic spaces. By focusing on historical and cultural contexts, their research follows the methodology currently dominant in literary studies, and it reveals both the strengths and weaknesses of that methodology. As Richard Strier observes, "much that is rich and strange is turned up in this way, but the object of this kind of study is not literature, or any text, but some aspect of a culture in general."⁶⁶ The danger is that the poem recedes as a poem to become a symptom of something else.⁶⁷

Strier's solution to the problem of symptomatic reading is a redefined and renewed formalism. In place of aesthetic formalism, which privileges literary value and the New Critical qualities of ambiguity, unity, and wholeness, Strier proposes an alternative, indexical, formalism in which "questions of style, minutely conceived, can be indices to large issues."⁶⁸ As the commentary cited at the beginning of this essay demonstrates, aesthetic formalism cannot appreciate Cavendish's "bad writing." It is my contention, however, that indexical formalism is a necessity. The value of a new formalist approach to Cavendish's poetry can be demonstrated by a brief comparison to perhaps the most famous early modern poem about death, John Donne's Holy Sonnet X, "Death be not proud." Donne's sonnet illustrates how, for Eliot and other twentieth century critics, aesthetic and indexical formalisms were aligned. The perfection of the sonnet form corresponds to a reassuring presentation of a Christian view of death. The sonnet's structure (three quatrains and a couplet in this instance) allows the poet to develop a rhetorically complex argument with clarity and power. The repetition of "death" and "die" in different contexts throughout the poem contributes to the sense of overall unity even as these concepts are transformed over the course of the poem. "Death, thou shalt die," is a rousing conclusion that is both a culmination and transcendence of the poem's previous references to Death because it guarantees that the poem's literary effects and religious consolation correspond.⁶⁹ "Natures Cooke" does not have literary value in this sense, and Strier's indexical formalism can show why. In contrast to the rhetorical complexity of "Death be not proud," the fourteen couplets of "Natures Cooke" follow a much simpler rhetorical pattern. Rather than creating complex logical and verbal relationships between the different parts of the poem as Donne does, Cavendish's method is simply additive. As I have already suggested, after the first couplet, each couplet (and sometimes each line) contributes a

new version of the poem's central conceit, but the poem does not suggest that these particular instances represent a unified or ideal expression of the poet's thought. A comparison with the other conceit poems in this section of *Poems and Fancies*, which range from six lines ("Natures Oven") to thirty-six lines ("Natures Wardrobe"), suggests that the poem might be equally effective with a lesser or greater number of comparisons. This additive poetic structure is one of the prime indices of Cavendish's style. Though this additive poetic structure is to be found throughout *Poems and Fancies*, it has a particular resonance with the housewifery poems. Housework is repetitive, even endless; likewise these poems do not build toward closure, but are iterative.⁷⁰ The second most significant indexical feature is the prevalence of concrete diction. "Natures Cooke" contains a plethora of nouns and adjectives that are used to define a wide range of different objects and bodily states. While Donne's poem circles back around to several key words, Cavendish continues to generate new physical detail through an expansive and expanding technical vocabulary. The potentially endless multiplication of different ways in which sickness turns the human body into meat is unsettling, but then, so is the materialist view of death found in the poem. The dominant aesthetic response provoked by "Natures Cooke" is the shock of its badness and I think that is a good thing. As Nature's cook, Death will not die, but will find ever new ways to perform her work. There is a powerful irony in the fact that Eliot's famous description of "metaphysical poetry," in an essay that set the terms for the formal appreciation of verse in the American academy for much of the twentieth century, describes so well a poem by a woman whose work has been denigrated both for its formal qualities and for the author's personal characteristics. "Natures Cook" is no well-wrought urn. Rather, it suggests that the

good that can come from Cavendish's bad writing is a renewed formalism that finds a place for both the vices and the virtues of style.

Many of these same problems are at play when we turn our attention to Cavendish's other figure of women's work, the bawd. Consider "Motion makes Atomes a Bawd for Figure," one of several poetic explorations of the theory of atomism that open *Poems and Fancies*.

Did not wild *Motion* with his subtle wit,
 Make *Atomes* his *Bawd*, new *Formes* to get.
 They still would constant be in one *Figure*,
 And as they place themselves, would last for ever.
 But *Motion* she perswades new *Formes* to make,
 For *Motion* doth in *Change* great pleasure take.
 And makes all *Atomes* run from place to place;
 That *Figures young* he might have to imbrace.
 For some short time, she will make much of *one*,
 But afterwards away from *them* will run.
 And thus are most things in the World undone,
 And by her *Change*, do *young ones* take *old's* roome.
 But till butt like unto a *Batch* of *Bread*,
 The *Floure* is the same of such a *Seed*.
 But *Motion she* a *Figure* new mould, bak'd
 Because that *She* might have a new hot *Cake*.⁷¹

Given what we have seen already of the bawd in Cavendish's works, we should not be surprised that she combines *pornographia* with the theory of matter, particularly given the very bad reputation of atomism during the middle of the seventeenth century. Robert Kargon maintained that Cavendish's atomic poems "presented a problem to the defenders of atomism," because her "fanciful" poetry "obviously laid the atomists open to attack on the charge of impiety."⁷² While other philosophers downplayed the religious and philosophical challenges of atomism, Cavendish's poetry, and "Motion Makes Atomes a Bawd for Figure" in particular, flaunts the unconventionality of atomism and seems to invite moral condemnation by drawing out the economic and sexual relationships between the poem's three main characters. Motion uses Atoms as his Bawd with Figure. Her role is to persuade Figure to join with Motion in an illicit union, which results in an exchange of Figure's stasis for a state of change and variety. The atom-bawd secures for Motion not only delight or pleasure but also offspring who will be subject to Motion's desire in their turn. The immorality of Motion and his bawd seems to have a net positive effect, however, as the union of Motion and Figure is what guarantees the succession of one generation by another. As a figure for a collective of numerous atoms, the Bawd seems to be the most powerful force in the universe, because it is through her persuasion that Figure combines with Motion to make new Figures. *Pornographia* explains that the man's love and desire will dissipate once sated, which is why the bawd must constantly seek out new virgins to corrupt. Thus the relationship between Motion and each of his Figures is short-lived, but these unions also ensure the possibility of movement from one state of being to another. Curiously, however, the bawd cannot achieve Motion's desires on her own; instead she enlists the housewife, who enters with the poem's final domestic simile to bake, not bread, but a "new hot Cake," a final

image that fuses the sexualized female body with the housewife's creativity and her symbolic function as synecdoche for civilization and social order.

This poem, therefore, serves as the bawd's apotheosis: only the disreputable motions of the bawd can adequately represent the radical potential, for good and ill, of the mid-seventeenth-century philosophical transformation of which atomism is one small part. Cavendish, or one of her agents, however, was not satisfied with the poem, and reworked it for the second edition of *Poems and Fancies* in 1664. Indeed, the revised version of the poem demonstrates how the lack of a sustained tradition of serious attention to Cavendish's style—we still lack a scholarly edition of her poetry—limits both our knowledge of Cavendish's poetry and the kinds of questions we can ask.⁷³ The second edition includes several revisions that seem designed to correct "bad writing":

Motion makes *Atomes* by his subtile Skill,
 His *Bawds*, to get new *forms* him to his will;
 For they would still, as they themselves had plac't,
 Be in one *Figure*, and so for every last:
 But *Motion*, he perswades new *Forms* to make,
 Because *he* doth in *Change* great pleasure take;
 And makes all *Atomes* run from place to place,
 That *Figures young* he might have to imbrace.
 For some short time he loves to make a stay,
 But after he is tyr'd, hee'l run away;
 And by his *Change* most *Figures* are undone,
 For *Young* take place of th' *Old* when they are gone;

Yet 'tis but like a *Batch of Bread*, which still
 Is of the same *Flower* and *Seed*. Thus will
 Inconstant *Motion* a new *Figure* bake,
 Only that he may have a new hot *Cake*.⁷⁴

The revisions to this poem fall into two main categories: 1) corrections of rhyme and meter; and, 2) the alteration of pronouns, often from she to he.⁷⁵ In the first edition, for instance, Cavendish uses a slant rhyme on “undone” and “room.” In the second edition, all of the rhymes have been tightened, with this couplet using the more conventionally rhymed pair “undone” and “gone.” The pronoun changes seem designed to remove grammatical and syntactic ambiguity. For instance in line 5 of the first edition, the antecedent of *she* is ambiguous, while the revisions to the second edition make it clear that Motion is directing the Atoms in their actions. Both types of revision could be seen as corrections of the vices of style, as attempts to ameliorate “bad writing.” However, though these changes improve clarity, they do so at the bawd’s expense. These revisions neutralize the bawd’s agency by subsuming them to Motion’s direction and, in doing so, erase the agency of the housewife as well.

I conclude, therefore, with a plea for greater attention to the bad in Cavendish’s writing. This conclusion, by its very nature, must be ambivalent. Cavendish, of course, had no intention of being remembered as a bad writer, nor am I arguing that she was a bad writer in any true, objective, or absolute sense. There is too much evidence to the contrary in Cavendish’s real and substantial achievements as a writer. What the bawd and housewife demonstrate, however, is that in defending Cavendish against centuries of detraction, we may miss some of what that achievement is. On the most basic level the accusations of bad

writing—whether from the seventeenth century or the twentieth—are significant because they point very specifically to the ways that Cavendish’s work troubles literary expectations. More broadly, however, this attention to Cavendish’s so-called bad writing also reveals the very important work that the discourse of detraction, and feminist critics’ resistance to it, has performed in the writing of women’s literary history. Most directly, I believe this tradition of detraction has led Cavendish scholars to avoid questions of style. More subtly, the impulse to develop a discourse of defense has perpetuated the power of detraction. It is true that old-style formalist analysis—what Strier calls aesthetic formalism—was not well suited to early modern women’s literary activities. Perhaps a more neutral consideration of bad writing—as a matter of style rather than denigration—can point the way to a renewed formalism that may open up the possibility for new forms of work on early modern women’s writing.

¹ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (New York: Harvest Books, 1989), 64.

² The essays that begin by citing negative critical judgments are too numerous to list. A few notable examples include Karen L. Raber, "'Our wits joined as in matrimony': Margaret Cavendish's Playes and the Drama of Authority," *English Literary Renaissance* 28, no. 3 (1998); Marta Straznicky, "Reading the Stage: Margaret Cavendish and Commonwealth Closet Drama," *Criticism* 37, no. 2 (1995); Elaine Walker, "Longing for Ambrosia: Margaret Cavendish and the torment of a restless mind in *Poems, and Fancies* (1653)," *Women's Writing* 4, no. 3 (1997). In 1999, Mihoko Suzuki writes that "scholarship on Cavendish appears to be abandoning the practice of taking as a point of departure her contemporaries' ridicule of her." See "The Essay Form as Critique: Reading Cavendish's *The World's Olio* through Montaigne and Bacon (and Adorno)," *Prose Studies* 22, no. 3 (1999): 1. Unfortunately, Suzuki's assessment has not turned out to be correct: see Anne M. Thell, "The Power of Transport, The Transport of Power: Margaret Cavendish's *Blazing World*," *Women's Studies* 37(2008); Eric Lewis, "The Legacy of Margaret Cavendish," *Perspectives on Science* 9, no. 3 (2001); Katherine R. Kellett, "Performance, Performativity, and Identity in Margaret Cavendish's *The Convent of Pleasure*," *SEL* 48, no. 2 (2008); Deborah Boyle, "Margaret Cavendish's Nonfeminist Natural Philosophy," *Configurations* 12 (2004).

³ Quentin Skinner, "Paradiastole: redescribing the vices and virtues," in *Renaissance Figures of Speech*, ed. Sylvia Adamson, Gavin Alexander, and Katrin Ettenhuber (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 149-65.

⁴ Sylvia Bowerbank's discussion of the "female" imagination is a good example of this process of redescription. Bowerbank argues that Cavendish's aesthetics reverse and re-value the classic bee/ spider analogy for literary creativity. Sylvia Bowerbank, "The Spider's Delight: Margaret Cavendish and the 'Female' Imagination," *English Literary Renaissance* 14, no. 3 (1984): 392-408. For further examples of this type of argument, see G. Gabrielle Starr, "Cavendish, Aesthetics, and the Anti-Platonic Line," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 39, no. 3 (2006): 295-308; Eve Keller, "Producing Petty Gods: Margaret Cavendish's Critique of Experimental Science," *English Literary History* 64, no. 2 (1997): 447-71.

⁵ 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).

⁶ G.C. Moore Smith, ed. *The Letters of Dorothy Osborne to William Temple* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1928), 41; Samuel Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, 10 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), 8:137.

⁷ Lara Dodds, *The Literary Invention of Margaret Cavendish* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2013), 223-32.

⁸ Katherine Philips, *Letters from Orinda to Poliarchus* (London: Bernard Lintott, 1705), 206. The occasion mentioned in this passage is Philips's composition of a poem on the same topic as Waller, which, she suspects, will incite comparisons between her poetry and his.

⁹ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 65. See also Lisa Mae Schlosser, "Mrs. Dalloway and the Duchess: Virginia Woolf Reads and Writes Margaret Cavendish," *Literature Compass* 5, no. 2 (2008).

¹⁰ Henry Ten Eyck Perry, *The first duchess of Newcastle and her husband as figures in literary history* (New York: Johnson Reprint, 1968), 237.

¹¹ Negative judgments are particularly common in the earliest treatments of particular works. In one of the few published articles on Cavendish's *Orations*, for instance, Christine Sutherland explains that the speeches' "defects are so gross that it is tempting to interpret them as deliberately concocted in order to hold up oratory as a matter for scorn." She concludes, however, that these features, "the serious gaps in the argument, the non sequiturs, the begging of the question, the lack of appropriate argumentation or support and even of illustration or example," are defects rather than rhetorical strategies and a result of Cavendish's lack of rhetorical education. Christine Mason Sutherland, "Aspiring to the Rhetorical Tradition: A Study of Margaret Cavendish," in *Listening to Their Voices: The Rhetorical Activities of Historical Women*, ed. Molly Major Wertheimer (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1997), 261-2.

¹² Rose Zimbaro, *A mirror to nature: transformations in drama and aesthetics, 1660-1732* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1986), 58.

¹³ For Cavendish's own response to detraction, see Susannah Quinsee, "Margaret Cavendish's Critical Heritage and the Creation of an Infamous Gendered Literary Identity," *In-Between* 9, no. 1&2 (2000).

¹⁴ Jean Gagen, "Honor and Fame in the Works of the Duchess of Newcastle," *Studies in Philology* 56, no. 3 (1959). See also Hero Chalmers, "Dismantling the Myth of 'Mad Madge': the cultural context of Margaret Cavendish's authorial self-presentation," *Women's Writing* 4, no. 3 (1997).

¹⁵ For a fascinating reflection on how the recovery project has shaped the questions posed of early modern women's writing, see Laura J. Rosenthal, "Recovering from Recovery," *The Eighteenth Century* 50, no. 1 (2009).

¹⁶ Walter Raleigh used this phrase to describe *Paradise Lost* in Walter Raleigh, *Milton* (London: Edward Arnold, 1900), 88.

¹⁷ Margaret Cavendish, *Sociable Letters*, ed. James Fitzmaurice (Ontario: Broadview, 2004), 166.

¹⁸ Nicholas Breton, *The good and the badde, or Descriptions of the worthies and unworthies of this age* (London: 1616), 30.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.

²⁰ James E. Savage, ed. *The "Conceited Newes" of Sir Thomas Overbury and His Friends* (Gainesville, Florida: Scholars Facsimiles & Reprints, 1968), 138.

²¹ Breton, *The good and the badde, or Descriptions of the worthies and unworthies of this age*, 32.

²² Natasha Korda, *Shakespeare's Domestic Economies: Gender and Property in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002); Wendy Wall, *Staging Domesticity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

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- ²³ Michelle M. Dowd, *Women's Work in Early Modern English Literature and Culture* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 17.
- ²⁴ Cited from Susan Cahn, *Industry of Devotion: The Transformation of Women's Work in England, 1500-1660* (New York: Columbia UP, 1987), 89.
- ²⁵ Gervase Markham, *The English Housewife*, ed. Michael R. Best (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1986), 5.
- ²⁶ Geoffrey Bullough, ed. *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, vol. 6 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), 532. There has been significant scholarly debate about the relationship between Wilkins's 1608 romance and the text of the Shakespeare-Wilkins collaboration *Pericles Prince of Tyre* (Q1 1609). In this essay I do not take a stand on this question. It is likely that the play, the prose fiction, or both, was a source for Cavendish's *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity*.
- ²⁷ John Taylor, *A Bawd. A vertuous Bawd, a modest Bawd: As Shee Deserves, reprove, or else applaud*. (London: 1635), sig. A2v. In a parallel to the bawd's power, this work is dedicated "To the neither Noble or Ignoble, Lord or Lady, kind or cruell, learned or ignorant, curteous or currish, Christian or Barbarian, Man or Woman, rich or poore: but to all and every one in generall and particular" (sig. A2r).
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, sig. A3v.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, sig. B6r.
- ³⁰ Margaret Cavendish, *Poems, and Fancies* (London: 1653), sig. A7r.
- ³¹ Lara Dodds, "Margaret Cavendish's Domestic Experiment," in *Genre and Women's Life Writing in Early Modern England*, ed. Michelle M. Dowd and Julie A. Eckerle (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 151-68.
- ³² Margaret Cavendish, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 105.
- ³³ Cavendish, *Observations*, 105.
- ³⁴ Mario DiGangi, *Sexual Types: Embodiment, Agency, and Dramatic Character from Shakespeare to Shirley* (Pennsylvania: Penn Press, 2011), 160. Both *Pericles* and Cavendish's *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity* draw upon the tradition of the Prostitute Priestess, in which the bawd's target defeats her through a superior deployment of rhetoric. See Lorraine Helms, "The Saint in the Brothel: Or, Eloquence Rewarded," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (1990).
- ³⁵ *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity* was first published in Cavendish's 1656 work *Natures Pictures*. These passages are cited from the 2nd edition of 1671. Margaret Cavendish, *Natures Picture Drawn By Fancies Pencill*, 2nd ed. (London: 1671), 398.
- ³⁶ Margaret Cavendish, *The Worlds Olio* (London: 1655), 4. A similar passage in *Sociable Letters* explains that women's limited education, which includes reading Romances, makes their "Body a Baud, and their Mind a Courtesan, for though the Body procures Lovers, yet it is the Mind that is the Adultrous" Cavendish, *Sociable Letters*: 73
- ³⁷ Cavendish, *Sociable Letters*: 240. *The Wooers* in Margaret Cavendish, *Playes* (London: 1662), 403.

- ³⁸ Money as bawd appears in Cavendish, *Sociable Letters*, 240 and in *The Wooers* in Cavendish, *Playes* (London: 1662), 403. Flatterty in *Bell in Campo*, in Cavendish, *Playes*, 619.
- ³⁹ Cavendish, *Sociable Letters*: 80. For further discussion of this letter and the significance of Aspasia, see Lara Dodds, "Reading and Writing in Sociable Letters; Or, How Margaret Cavendish Read her Plutarch," *ELR* 41, no. 1 (2011).
- ⁴⁰ James Grantham Turner, *Libertines and Radicals in Early Modern London* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), xvi.
- ⁴¹ Cavendish, *Sociable Letters*, 80.
- ⁴² Margaret Cavendish, *Philosophical Letters: or Modest Reflections Upon Some Opinions in Natural Philosophy* (London: 1664).
- ⁴³ "Margaret the First" is from the preface to the *Blazing World*. For an example of the latter, see the "Preface to the Reader" in Cavendish, *The Worlds Olio* (A4r-A5v).
- ⁴⁴ William Poole, "The vices of style," in *Renaissance Figures of Speech*, ed. Sylvia Adamson, Gavin Alexander, and Katrin Ettenhuber (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 237.
- ⁴⁵ George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), 335.. \
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 343.
- ⁴⁷ See *Ibid.*, Book 3, Chapter 23.
- ⁴⁸ Jenny C. Mann, *Outlaw Rhetoric: Figuring Vernacular Eloquence in Shakespeare's England* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2012), 188.
- ⁴⁹ I have consulted five books, published between 1930 and 2000; Cavendish is featured in three. Cavendish is also discussed in Stephen Pile, *The Incomplete Book of Failures* (New York, 1981), but I have not been able to consult it. See Bowerbank, "The Spider's Delight: Margaret Cavendish and the 'Female' Imagination," note 1.
- ⁵⁰ Nick Page, *In Search of the World's Worst Writers* (Harper Collins, 2000), xiv.
- ⁵¹ Nicholas T. Parsons, *The Joy of Bad Verse* (London: Collins, 1988), 11.
- ⁵² Page, *In Search of the World's Worst Writers*, 14.
- ⁵³ D.B. Wyndham Lewis and Charles Lee, eds., *The Stuffed Owl: An Anthology of Bad Verse* (New York: New York Review Books, 2003), ix.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, x.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, v.
- ⁵⁶ Cited from Sylvia Bowerbank and Sara Mendelson, eds., *Paper Bodies: A Margaret Cavendish Reader* (Ontario: Broadview, 2000), 92-93.
- ⁵⁷ Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1967), 283.
- ⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 291.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 286. Cavendish and Sontag also share an interest in gender fluidity. Sontag says that Camp is the "triumph of the epicene style (the convertibility of "man" and "woman," person" and "thing" (280). Cavendish writes: "I know no reason but that I may not as well make them Hees for my use, as others did Shees, or Shees as others did Hees." Cavendish, *Playes*, A4v.

⁶⁰ The Bad Verse anthology is a derivative, verging on plagiaristic, form, so those volumes that include Cavendish's poetry typically include the same small selection of poems. Other favorites include "Natures Dessert" and "A Posset for Natures Breakfast."

⁶¹ Cavendish, *Poems and Fancies*, 127-8.

⁶² Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesy*, 342.

⁶³ Page, *In Search of the World's Worst Writers*, 15; Parsons, *The Joy of Bad Verse*, 184.

⁶⁴ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1932), 247.

⁶⁵ For the violence of the early modern kitchen and of the practices of housewifery more generally, see Wall, *Staging Domesticity*, 3-7. On Cavendish's housewifery poems as a blazon, see Elizabeth Scott-Baumann, "'Bake'd in the Oven of Applause': The Blazon and the Body in Margaret Cavendish's *Fancies*," *Women's Writing* 15, no. 1 (2008).

⁶⁶ Richard Strier, "How Formalism Became a Dirty word, and Why We Can't Do Without It," in *Renaissance Literature and its Formal Engagements*, ed. Mark David Rasmussen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 213.

⁶⁷ Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 42-54.

⁶⁸ Strier, "How Formalism Became a Dirty word, and Why We Can't Do Without It," 211.

⁶⁹ John Donne, *The Complete Poetry and Selected Prose of John Donne*, ed. Charles M. Coffin (New York: Random House, 2001), 262-3. For a comparison of Donne's *First Anniversary* and Cavendish's "A World in an Eare-ringe," see Dodds, *The Literary Invention of Margaret Cavendish*: 57-92.

⁷⁰ I would like to thank Amy Tigner for pointing me toward the connection between the repetitive nature of housework and Cavendish's additive poetics.

⁷¹ Cavendish, *Poems and Fancies*, 17-18.

⁷² Robert Kargon, *Atomism in England from Hariot to Newton* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), 75-6.

⁷³ This defect will be corrected soon, as Brandie Siegfried is currently editing *Poems and Fancies* for The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe series.

⁷⁴ Margaret Cavendish, *Poems and Phancies*, 2nd ed. (London: 1664), 26.

⁷⁵ The second edition also addresses some irregularities of number. Here Motion makes "Atomes" his "Bawds," which suggests that each individual Atom is a Bawd. In the first edition, Motion makes "Atomes his Bawd," which suggests that atoms are, collectively, a single Bawd.