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Marching on the Catwalk and Marketing the Self: Margaret Cavendish's Autobiography

By Effie Botonaki

Margaret Cavendish's *True Relation of my Birth, Breeding and Life* (1656) is the first secular female autobiography published in England. It is a rather short piece of work, just twenty-four pages long, and it is appended to a collection of stories under the title *Natures Pictures drawn by Fancies Pencil to the Life*. Unlike most of the autobiographical works by women in that period, *True Relation* does not focus on the spiritual but the secular aspect of its author's life, describing her position as a woman both in the private and the public realm. And although Lady Newcastle was only thirty-three when she wrote her autobiography, she already had much to say about herself as her literary endeavors and her eccentric outfits (designed by herself) had attracted not only the attention but also the strong disapproval of her contemporaries. In this article I am going to argue that one of Cavendish's motives for writing her autobiography was the need to construct not only her own self-definition¹ but, most importantly, a *marketable* image that would contradict and undercut the already formed and circulating derogatory images which were imposed upon her. As we shall see, however, this urge for marketability inevitably turned Cavendish's act of emancipation, as Barbara Johnson has described autobiography, into a balancing act of contradictory self-representations.

Margaret Lucas was born in 1623, and she was the last of the eight children born to Sir Thomas Lucas, Earl of Colchester, and Elizabeth Leighton. In spite of her father's early death, Margaret appears to have had a very happy childhood and a liberal upbringing. Unlike a large number of young girls of her time who were purposefully deprived of a rigorous education, she was encouraged to pursue her interest in reading and writing without any restrictions. The results were impressive: Margaret started to compose manuscript works, both in poetry and prose, from the age of twelve.² This was the beginning of a writing career that became a life-long passion with the result that Cavendish is nowadays regarded as one of the most prolific women writers of the seventeenth century. Her first book, *Poems and Fancies*, was published in 1653, and by the time she wrote her last in 1668, she had written more than a dozen books, which covered almost all genres: poems, plays, short stories, letters, biography, philosophical treatises, and orations.³ Fortunately for Margaret, her writing efforts were encouraged by her husband, the Royalist General, William

Cavendish (later Duke of Newcastle). Unlike most of his male contemporaries, who would have tried to hinder a wife's ardent intellectual pursuits, Lord Newcastle stood by his wife's literary endeavors throughout her life.

Cavendish's writing activity was heavily criticized by her contemporaries, both male and female. Her claims to scientific knowledge and literary achievement were considered to be outrageous in a society which had no trust in the intellectual capacities of women and which did not welcome the articulations of the female tongue. Richard Brathwait's advice in his conduct book, *The English Gentlewoman* (1631), is representative of the dominant ideas of his time in relation to female expression: "Truth is, their [women's] tongues are held their defensive armour; but in no particular detract they more from their honour, than by giving too free scope to that glibbery member. . . . What restraint is required in respect of the tongue, may appeare by that ivory guard or garrison with which it is impaled. See, how it is double warded, that it may with more reservancy and better security be restrained!" (88).

Within this ideological context, Cavendish's bold venture into the strictly male territory of literary production was open to attacks on various fronts. Whenever her writings were approved of by the critics, she was suspected of having stolen them from a man;⁴ when they were disapproved of, she was generously granted their authorship so that she could be ridiculed;⁵ and, finally, in either of these cases, Cavendish had to face the charge that she was an unfeminine and impertinent woman.

Under these unfavorable circumstances, Cavendish had to take measures to defend her reputation both as a competent writer and as a virtuous woman. This explains why all of her works contain apologetic remarks for the linguistic or other flaws of her writings⁶ and acrobatic arguments in defense of her appearance in print. Very often, however, the apologetic tone is supplemented or replaced by a passionate expression of the author's desire for eternal fame and bitter remarks about sex-discrimination and its consequences for women.⁷ The following extract from Cavendish's "Female Orations" in *The Worlds Olio* (1655) is illustrative of her views: "Men are happy, and we Women are miserable; they possess all the Ease, Rest, Pleasure, Wealth, Power, and Fame; whereas Women are Restless with Labour . . . Melancholy for want of Pleasures, Helpless for want of Fame. Nevertheless, Men are so unconscionable and Cruel against us, that they endeavour to bar us of all sorts of Liberty, and will fain bury us in their houses or Beds, as in a Grave. The truth is we live like Batts, or Owls, labour like Beasts, and dye like Worms" (qtd. in Hilda Smith 82). As will be shown, *True Relation* is notably different from most of her other writings in that it refrains from making such provocative remarks, and this is not accidental.

Cavendish's unconventionality was not restricted to her literary pursuits and her ideas, but it was extended to and semiotically emblemized by her external appearance. When Samuel Pepys saw her during her visit to the Royal Society (she was the first woman to be admitted in its headquarters) he

thought that she was “a good, comely woman; but her dress so antick, and her deportment so ordinary, that I do not like her at all.”⁸ As Cavendish herself tells us in her autobiography, even from her childhood she had a particular taste for “attiring”: “I never took delight in closets or cabinets of toys, but in the variety of fine clothes, and such toys as only were to adorn my person” (96).⁹ As a result, even those of her contemporaries who were not familiar with the content of her books seemed to be well-acquainted with rumors about the extraordinary outfits Lady Newcastle designed for herself in order to look like no other and impress upon her viewers a lasting memory of her presence.

In spite of Cavendish's efforts to defend herself against “spightful tongues,” her censors appear to have been more numerous than her supporters. In a society which often interpreted “rebelliousness” as a “clear sign of mental disturbance,” as Michael MacDonald put it (qtd. in Sanday 133–34), Cavendish's literary ambitions made her appear as a woman out of her wits and earned her the nickname “Mad Madge.” The comment of Dorothy Osborne, Margaret's contemporary, on Cavendish's first book, *Poems and Fancies*, sadly echoes this view: On 14 April 1653 Dorothy wrote to her fiancé, William Temple: “And first let mee aske you if you have seen a book of Poems newly come out, made by my Lady New Castle. for God sake if you meet with it send it mee, they say tis ten times more Extravagant then her dresse. Sure the poore woman is a litle distracted, she could never bee soe ridiculous else as to venture at writeing book's and in verse too, If I should not sleep this fortnight I should not come to that” (37). Three weeks later Osborne wrote to Temple: “You need not send mee my Lady Newcastles book at all for I have seen it, and am satisfi'd there are many soberer People in Bedlam, i'le swear her friends are much to blame to let her goe abroad” (41).¹⁰

When, three years later, Cavendish appended her short autobiography to her fifth book, she appears to have been well-aware of the reports about and against her person and was desirous to defend her reputation. In order to do the latter successfully, she had to project upon herself an image that would meet the readers' expectations and standards about what a woman and a wife of her class ought to be like; in other words, she had to have “graces and virtues as Modesty, Chastity, Dilligence, Patience, Temperance, Faithfulness, Secrecy, Obedience, etc”(Ambrose 278). The above prescription, offered by a conduct book published in 1654, was by no means an isolated instance. A large number of such books had been projecting the same image upon women from the beginning of the century: William Whately's *Bride-Bush or A Wedding Sermon* (1617), William Gouge's *Of Domesticall Duties* (1622), Richard Brathwait's *The English Gentlewoman* (1630), Daniel Rogers' *Matrimoniall Honour* (1642), and Jeremy Taylor's *The Rules and Exercises of Holy Living* (1650) and *Holy Dying* (1651) are only a few of the guide books that strove to regulate female conduct according to the dictates of patriarchal ideology. Most of these books underwent numerous editions throughout the century and, in some cases, were

read even by eighteenth-century readers.¹¹ In spite of the influence these books appear to have had on the ideas and conduct of seventeenth-century men and women, it would be misleading to assume that the prescriptions they offered were dutifully followed. If we turn to women's autobiographical writings, we will find several indications that women at once followed and disobeyed, advocated and attacked these prescriptions according to their particular interests. Cavendish's autobiography presents us with one such case.

In writing *True Relation* and marketing herself, Cavendish had to juggle with the dictates of the dominant ideology concerning female selfhood and reconcile conflicting aspects of herself: emphasize those of her qualities that were in agreement with the norm and de-face those which cast her in an unfavorable light. Thus, the already circulating image of the ambitious, willful, and confident writer had to be successfully blended with that of the modest and submissive woman so that the autobiographical self put together would be sanctioned by the reading public. In this way, her autobiography subjected her to the very abuse she was trying to resist: the straitjacketing of her self by the imposition of a culturally prescribed, male-oriented identity. The text itself, however, hinders the de-facement of the autobiographer's "un-marketable" attributes and undermines all attempts for an unproblematic and "fitting" representation and the consequent remolding of her subjectivity according to the prescribed female models. As we shall see, the autobiographer's iconoclastic self is always there, peeping out and making a mess of the show-stopper Lady Newcastle had designed for her parade on the catwalk.¹² In contrast with most of her sartorial creations, it appears that her autobiographical gown was tailored to be not an avant-garde outfit that stressed Cavendish's extraordinariness, but a classic, plain and sober piece that bespoke her conformity to established models of femininity. Yet, this textual attire proved to have a queer look and an uncomfortable "fit" and eventually presented its designer—once more—as a "misfit" in her society.

The main "flaws" of Margaret's textual attire can be glimpsed in her concise commentary on her motives for writing and publishing her life, which moreover serves as an epilogue to her autobiography:

But I hope my readers will not think me vain for writing my life, since there have been many that have done the like, as Caesar, Ovid and many more, both men and women, and I know no reason I may not do it as well as they. But I verily believe some censoring readers will scornfully say, why hath this lady writ her own life? Since none cares to know whose daughter she was, or whose wife she is, or how she was bred, or what fortunes she had, or how she lived, or what humour or disposition she was of? I answer that it is true, that 'tis no purpose to the readers but it is to the authoress, because I

write it for my own sake, not theirs. Neither did I intend this piece for to delight, but to divulge; not to please the fancy, but to tell the truth. Lest after-ages should mistake, in not knowing I was daughter to one Master Lucas of St John's near Colchester in Essex, second wife to the Lord Marquis of Newcastle; for, my lord having had two wives, I might easily have been mistaken, especially if I should die and my lord marry again. (98–99)

The above extract illustrates that Cavendish's self-promotion through her autobiography leads her into a series of contradictions. One of the most striking of these is Margaret's ambivalent attitude towards the supposed impropriety of her project. First, she expresses her "hope" that she will not be thought "vain," and immediately afterwards—within the same sentence—she shoots herself to the apex of vanity by inviting a daring comparison to two distinguished male figures, Caesar and Ovid. Although it was a well-established convention for writers to make such references, in this case it is a *woman* who draws upon the example of famous male writers to validate her literary endeavors. If a famous Roman emperor and a celebrated poet have written their autobiographies, so can she. Her sex, her incomplete education, and her inconsequential private role do not matter; she appears confident that she can carry out her project "as well as they." This overt expression of her vanity, however, is an isolated instance in the particular text. As I will argue, her fervent desire for public acclaim and fame cannot find expression within her autobiography because, if it does, the reader will be displeased—and this is the last thing the autobiographer wants.

Cavendish's attitude towards her readers, as it is manifested in the concluding paragraph, constitutes another contradiction. On the one hand, by expressing her fear that they will once more accuse her of being a vain woman, she indirectly admits that she is concerned about their opinion. On the other, unwilling as she is to give up her project in order to avoid criticism, she declares that she is indifferent to what they might think as she writes her autobiography for her "own sake." And although this overt expression of defiance of the readers' opinion falls within the aristocratic conventions of the age, coming from a woman, it inevitably smears—once again—the modest image Cavendish tries to manufacture and sell.

In spite of her protestations that she was unmindful of her readers' reactions, Lady Newcastle was unquestionably writing for an audience: Hers was not an autobiographical text written for private perusal, designed to remain hidden in a drawer or to circulate among close members of the family; it was one that from the moment of its conception was specifically meant and fashioned for public consumption. This becomes particularly evident in the last sentence of *True Relation* in which Cavendish claims that she writes her autobiography to avoid being mistaken after her death. In order for this to happen, her text first has

to be read and then it has to be interpreted as she wants it to be. In this respect, the autobiographer's dependence upon her censorious reader for the success of her text's mission is much larger than she is willing to admit.

On the other hand, the constraints Cavendish was pressured to succumb to in constructing a marketable self-representation should not blind us to the subversiveness of her project. One of the most important aspects of Margaret's putting of her self on show and displaying it on the market is that it is performed by the object of the transaction itself. This was no mean feat at a time when women were almost exclusively objects and not subjects of exchange, commodities and not commodifiers. As Irigaray has convincingly argued, patriarchal society counts upon the commodification of women to assure the foundations of social order: "The society we know, our own culture, is based upon the exchange of women" (170). "The circulation of women among men," Irigaray adds, "is what establishes the operations of society, at least patriarchal society" (184). This observation is poignantly true of seventeenth-century society, as Cavendish's own comment in her *Sociable Letters* manifests: "Daughters are but Branches which by Marriage are broken off from . . . whence they Sprang, & Ingrafted into the Stock of an other Family, so that Daughters are to be accounted but as Moveable Goods or Furnitures that wear out" (qtd. in Hilda Smith 90). As this essay will argue, by writing her autobiography, Margaret tries to take charge of the commodification of herself and become—once more in modern terms—the promotion manager who will negotiate the terms of her circulation and consumption.

One of the most "un-marketable" aspects of her public image that Cavendish had to "make up" in the textual representation of her self was her "vanity"; that is, her confidence that she deserved to be celebrated for her literary achievements and to enjoy immortal fame. This craving for everlasting public acclaim, which appears to have been the motivating force of her writing activity, dominates all of Margaret's writings except her autobiography. Nowhere in *True Relation* do we find this desire expressed with the passion and audacity that is seen in her other works. In her *Sociable Letters* (1664) she writes: "I wish . . . I had a thousand, or rather ten thousand millions [of readers], nay, that their number were infinite, that the issue of my brain, fame, and name might live to eternity if it were possible" (qtd. in Grant 221). In *The Blazing World* (1666) we come across another instance of hyperbolic self-glorification: "I am not covetous, but as ambitious as ever any of my sex was, is or can be, which makes that though I cannot be Henry the Fifth or Charles the Second, yet I endeavour to be Margaret the First" (252–53). Cavendish's daring comparison to two famous men here has a double function: it stresses the difficulty of her project and the value of her accomplishment not only in relation to men's, but also women's achievements at the time. It seems that, when it came to her desire for singularity, Lady Newcastle antagonized her own sex too; this is blatantly and unashamedly stated in her "Epistle to my Readers" prefacing *Natures Pictures*: "I have not

read much History to inform me of the past Ages, indeed I dare not examin the former times, for fear I should meet with such of my Sex, that have outdone all the glory I can aime at, or hope to attain" (qtd. in Hobby, "Discourse" 19). If we consider that the only aspiration women were allowed and expected to have at the time was to be chaste and modest wives and mothers, we can begin to envisage how scandalous Cavendish's ambitions must have appeared in the eyes of her contemporaries.

As a text whose "mission" was to win the readers' approval of its author on account not of her intellectual capacities but of her feminine virtues, Cavendish's autobiography could not afford to give her censors grounds to accuse her of immodesty. Thus, an overt expression of her desire for fame appears only once, and very briefly too, in the midst of repeated claims to female chastity and modesty and is even presented as the result of another virtue: the desire for "emulation" (97). The relevant section is worth quoting as a wonderful example of the logical acrobatics that most women writers of the time ended up performing in order to excuse their preoccupation with a distinctly male and therefore improper activity:

For I think it no crime. . . . to do my endeavour, so far as honour and honesty doth allow of, to be the highest on fortune's wheel, and to hold the wheel from turning if I can. And if it be commendable to wish another's good, it were a sin not to wish my own; for as envy is a vice, so emulation is a virtue. But emulation is in the way to ambition, or indeed it is a noble ambition; but I fear my ambition inclines to vainglory. For I am very ambitious, yet it is neither for beauty, wit, titles, wealth or power, but as they are steps to raise me to fame's tower, which is to live by remembrance in after-ages. (97)

As Elaine Hobby has remarked, because Cavendish "should repeatedly assert her subservience and shyness" in her autobiography, the latter had to "combine" "the conflicting demands of 'fame' and 'honour'" (*Virtue* 83). This could be one explanation why the last paragraph of her *True Relation*, which is probably the most convenient part of the text to be saturated by the autobiographer's desire for immortality, is almost devoid of such sentiments. In contrast with most of the concluding paragraphs of her other autobiographical pieces (such as the epistles appended to her writings), here her desire for fame almost dies out, concealed and replaced by her supposed fear of mistaken identity. On the other hand, Cavendish's "unfeminine" literary aspirations cannot be entirely effaced. The appearance of her autobiography in print, as an imprint of her masculine desires, is in itself an indisputable, tangible proof of her "immodesty."

Lady Newcastle's desire for posthumous fame brings us to the complex issue of self-definition, which is integral to any autobiographical attempt. In the

case of female self-definition, however, things are even more complicated. The project of a woman trying to identify herself within a society which recognizes its subjects only under the name of the father/husband is highly problematic, if not self-defeating; the moment that the female subject tries to define herself in separation from the male within a patriarchal society that defines her always in relation to it, she is once more forced to fall back on “the proper name” which represents “the father’s monopoly of power.” “It is from this standardization,” Irigaray notes, “that women receive their value, as they pass from the state of nature to the status of social object.” And it is “this trans-formation of women’s bodies into use values and exchange values” that “inaugurates” a symbolic order women have no access to (189). Thus, when Cavendish tries to determine her identity, she has to resort to the male “others” to whom she is “appended”¹³ and define herself as “the daughter of Master Lucas and the wife of the Marquis of Newcastle.”

The function of the above male figures is not restricted to Cavendish’s definition of her name and titles; her autobiography includes lengthy sections on these men’s lives and personalities—something which has annoyed the feminist critics of her work. According to Sidonie Smith, for example, Cavendish “turns her woman’s autobiography into a biography of men” (91). This supposedly unorthodox structure of *True Relation*, however, does not render the autobiographer a marginal figure¹⁴ since both of the male life-stories are inextricably connected with that of Margaret’s and can be seen rather as supplements, long footnotes to her story. Moreover, as Mary Mason has pointed out, “this grounding of identity through relation to the chosen other, seems . . . to enable women to write openly about themselves” (210). From this point of view, the impropriety of Cavendish’s preoccupation with herself is moderated by her preoccupation with distinguished male others, to whom she humbly acknowledges her subordination. As this paper will argue, the function of her father’s and her husband’s stories is, ultimately, not to foreground those men, but to enhance the image of the woman who was related to them and, thus, augment its marketability.

That Cavendish’s autobiography starts with an account of her father’s life is hardly surprising, and not only because it is a woman’s text. It was a commonplace in men’s autobiographies, too, to start with similar references so as to establish the author’s pedigree and also prove his gentility and virtuous upbringing. The first sentence of *True Relation* reads: “My father was a Gentleman, which title is grounded and given by Merit, not by princes” (*Lives* 265). As Cavendish goes on to explain, her father refused to buy a title “that his Estate might have easily purchased” because he “did not esteem Titles, unless they were gained by Heroick Actions” (266). Lady Newcastle, following in her father’s footsteps, wanted her fame to be grounded not on her social status or wealth, but on her “worth and merit” (290). Both of them had difficulty in fulfilling their ambitions: The father, living at a time of peace, was not given the

opportunity to prove his worth as a valiant soldier. The daughter, living in a society which denied women any role in the public realm, was not given opportunities, either, to prove her worth as a writer. Yet, the daring offspring cultivated, or better, created by force the opportunities herself and achieved distinction in an activity which she repeatedly described as warfare, "marching with her pen on the ground of white paper" (94). In this respect, the underlying parallel between the stories of Thomas and Margaret Lucas eventually shows the latter to be *more* than her father's daughter.

The function of the husband's story within the autobiography is more complex. The representation of Lord Newcastle, who was Margaret's devoted companion from her youth to her death is lengthier than that of her father's and occupies a prominent position in her narrative. Cavendish starts her description of her husband by relating how they met and got married and how they united their efforts to overcome the misfortunes that befell them in the years they lived as exiled Royalists. Then she proceeds to describe Lord Newcastle's "humour" and mentality and paint a most flattering portrait of him: "His mind is above his fortune, as his generosity is above his purse, his courage above danger, his justice above bribes, his friendship above self-interest, his truth too firm for falsehood, his temperance beyond temptation. . . his wit is quick and his judgement is strong. . . His nature is noble, and his disposition sweet" (93). In providing a laudatory account of her husband's life and personality, Cavendish does much more than fill in her family tree according to the requirements of the particular genre and prove her uxorial devotion and subordination. As it will be shown, Lord Newcastle's plethoric textual presence, far from ousting that of his wife's to the margins, serves both as an intensifier of her merits and a camouflage for her "faults."

Lord Newcastle was a staunch Royalist and commander of the army during the Civil War. After being defeated in the battle of Marston Moor, he had no other choice, as he claimed later in his biography (1667) written by his wife, but to escape to the continent. Several Royalists accused him then of abandoning his army when he could have tried to reorganize it and retaliate.¹⁵ In her account of her husband (within her autobiography), Cavendish had the opportunity to refute these accusations by presenting his retreat to the continent as a "banishment"(93) and by describing him as "the most loyall Subject to his King and Country" (*Lives* 289)—a characteristic that she laid claim to herself.

It was during his exile that Lord Newcastle met Margaret as a lady in waiting to Queen Henrietta, pursued her passionately and won her affection. Initially, the situation did not seem to be ideal: Newcastle was at least thirty years her senior (his three daughters from his first marriage were almost the same age as his future bride), and the Queen herself was opposed to the match. In spite of the adversities, however, their marriage did take place (1645) and lasted for almost 30 years during which, according to Margaret's own testimony, the treatment and

privileges she enjoyed were unknown to the vast majority of married women at the time; if the Duchess was unique in her then extraordinary pursuits, the Duke was even more so for wholeheartedly supporting her, even at the expense of his own reputation.¹⁶ When Samuel Pepys, for example, read Margaret's biography of her husband, he directed his sarcasm rather to the Duke who indulged his wife's whims; on 18 March 1668 Pepys wrote: "stayed at home, reading the ridiculous History of my Lord Newcastle, wrote by his wife, which shews her to be a mad, conceited, ridiculous woman, and he an asse to suffer her to write what she writes to him, and of him" (7: 344).

Considering the ridicule the Cavendish couple was subjected to, it becomes evident that Lord Newcastle's description in his wife's autobiography takes place in order to serve two purposes: the celebration of their conjugal relationship and, more importantly, her own celebration as the ideal female. Significantly enough, the qualities Margaret claims one found and appreciated in the other are exactly the ones the conduct book writers of the time prescribed. According to Isaac Ambrose, for example, "the duties of the husband and the wife" are divided in two categories: "either common and mutual, or proper and peculiar to each severally." The "common and mutual" are "Matrimonial unity . . . and chastity. . . . Loving affection to one another; and Providential care of one for another" (277). As for the duties "peculiar to each," these are founded upon the assumption that the female sex is essentially inferior to the male: The "duties proper to the husband" are, first, "that he dearly love his wife" and, second, "that he wisely maintain and manage his authority over her" (278). The duties "proper to the wife" are accordingly "that she be in submission to her husband" and "that she be an helper to him all her days" (280).¹⁷

Cavendish's description of her relationship to her husband even from the time of their courtship is in complete agreement with the picture projected by Ambrose. Their affection was mutual and founded upon their moral qualities, and it was "undefiled" by sexual desire:

And though I did dread marriage and shunned men's companies as much as I could, yet I could not nor had not the power to refuse him, by reason my affections were fixed on him, and he was the only person I ever was in love with. Neither was I ashamed to own it, but gloried therein. For it was not amorous love, I never was infected therewith: it is a disease, or a passion, or both, I only know by relation, not by experience. Neither could title, wealth, power or person entice me to love. But my love was honest and honourable, being placed upon merit; which affection joyed at the fame of his worth, pleased with delight in his wit, proud of the respects he used to me, and triumphing in the affections he professed for me (which affections he hath confirmed to me by a deed of

time, sealed by constancy, and assigned by an unalterable decree of his promise). (91)

The above lines present Margaret as a shy and chaste woman, who would not be attracted to a man unless he were himself a person of high morals who would appreciate her virtue. And, as Cavendish tells us, she had always been particularly careful not only to be virtuous, but to be thought virtuous too: "I was so afraid to dishonour my friends and family by my indiscreet actions, that I rather chose to be accounted a fool, than to be thought rude or wanton" (90). As the conduct books warned, "Modest shamefastnesse" was "a Womans chiefest Ornament" (Brathwait 50)¹⁸ and one of the virtues that men would look for in a wife. According to Margaret, Lord Newcastle appears to have been no exception, and in this way she was eventually rewarded for safeguarding her reputation: "my lord the Marquis of Newcastle," she writes with pride, "did approve of those bashful fears which many condemned, and would choose such a wife as he might bring to his own humours"(91). Here Cavendish's overt assertion that she has been molded by her husband's desires runs parallel to her unconfessed subjection to the readers' desire for a textual representation of the ideal female.

Lady Newcastle's self-portraiture as a chaste and modest woman, which is so crucial for the marketability of her image, continues to be worked through the representation of her husband as she proceeds to describe her conduct in marriage, the next ordained stage of a woman's life. I will now illustrate how Cavendish's representation as a wife enables her to amplify her defense against the main attack leveled at her: that she was a vain and even deranged woman, as both her eccentric appearance and her literary ambitions were thought to signify.

Margaret's fantastic outfits had attracted attention and condemnation even while she was permanently residing abroad. She herself complained in her *True Relation* that this issue had been grossly exaggerated (*Lives* 295). At the same time, her repeated references in this text to her habits of attire run counter to her effort to moderate the impression that she took immense pleasure in them. In her description of her recreations when she was a young woman, for instance, Margaret implicitly admits to her "vanity": "I took great delight in attiring, fine dressing and fashions, as I did invent myself, not taking that pleasure in such fashions as was invented by others. Also I did dislike any should follow my fashions, for I always took delight in a singularity, even in accoutrements of habits" (96). In these lines Cavendish appears as a woman who indulges in self-adornment and exposure and who employs her creative energy to produce unique clothes that will distinguish her from all the rest. Being acutely aware of the negative implications of this image, she immediately adds: "But whatsoever I was addicted to, either in fashions of cloths, contemplation of thoughts, actions of life, they were lawful, honest, honourable and modest, of which I can avouch to the world with a great confidence, because it is a pure truth"(96).¹⁹ Further

down, Cavendish again makes several references to this issue as when she presents her public appearances as a social convention that her class position obliges her to follow: "Although for my part I had rather sit at home and write, or walk, as I said, in my chamber and contemplate; but I hold necessary sometimes to appear abroad" (95). Towards the end of her autobiography she once more tries to resolve her conflicting desires: to be a celebrated public figure and, at the same time, the ideal wife—plain and invisible to all but her husband and master. The result of this attempt is another unresolved contradiction: "and I am so vain, if it be a vanity, as to endeavour to be worshipped, rather than not to be regarded. . . . And though I desire to appear at the best advantage, whilst I live in the view of the public world, yet I could most willingly exclude myself, so as never to see the face of any creature but my lord, as long as I live: enclosing myself like an anchorite, wearing a frieze-gown tied with a cord about my waist" (98). Margaret's pronouncement of self-abnegation here is not particularly convincing, not only because it comes right after the admission of her vain desires, but also because it comes from a woman who apparently enjoyed seeing people crowding around her coach just to catch a glimpse of her.²⁰ Once more, the autobiographer's inconsistent claims, this awkward juggling of self-assertion and self-effacement, is the result of her desire to construct an image that would sell.

We find this interchange of self-exhibition and camouflage symbolically illustrated in Cavendish's insistence on appearing—half-revealed and half-concealed—in her carriage: "But because I would not bury myself quite from the sight of the world, I go sometimes abroad: seldom to visit, but only in my coach about the town . . . which we call here a 'tour,' where all the chief of the town go to see and to be seen" (95). Lady Newcastle's circumscribed self-display within her coach seems to satisfy both her own ambition and the conditions set for female public exposure: she is barely visible and completely inaccessible, yet spectacular in her fantastic dress, luxurious carriage, and impressive escort by servants whose costumes match hers. From this point of view, Sidonie Smith comments, Margaret's carriage serves as a metaphor for her autobiography: the latter, too, is "a vehicle that parades the body of Cavendish's life before the public, allowing her to escape the confinement of silence" but it also "threatens to take her on a transgressive ride beyond the conventional path of woman's selfhood"(99).

The coach metaphor can also be extended to represent the requirements of female public appearance at the time. Women had to prove their moral virtues by means of discreet and, most importantly, silent demonstration. On the other hand, as the intense theatricality of Cavendish's public appearance indicates, every parade of the self is, in the end, as reliable as a pantomime. Cavendish, "perceiving," as she tells us, that "the world is given or apt to honour the outside more than the inside, worshipping show more than substance" (98), gives her viewers the show they want—both in her real life and in her autobiography. Lady Newcastle's parade in her carriage is a spectacular, though silent, performance, a

theatrical "tour" around the town staged in her luxurious coach, herself being dressed in an impressive costume and surrounded by her servants and co-performers. This is also, in part at least, what the writing of her autobiography amounts to; this time, though, the spectacle is supported by a script which is, moreover, written by the protagonist herself. By assuming a voice, Cavendish becomes more than a passive and mute object to be devoured by its spectators. In resorting to writing, and particularly in the writing of her life-story, she tries to extend the limited control she has over the construction of her self-image to its interpretation. Her scrutinizing and censorious viewers are answered back; she will not let them be the only painters and critics of her portrait.

As I have argued earlier, Lord Newcastle's textual presence in his wife's autobiography is instrumental in her effort to present herself as a chaste and bashful female and in this way it has facilitated the deflation of her "narcissistic" image. I will now proceed to illustrate that his presence has another important function: by discussing and exalting her husband's intellectual achievements, Cavendish has the opportunity to introduce her own. And in order to do the latter as smoothly as possible, she once more projects and deploys the image of the ideal couple of the time. Her husband is described as the "head"²¹ and, as such, the instructor of his wife, and the latter is the humble disciple whose achievements cannot but pale beside those of her "tutor's":²² "he recreates himself with his pen, writing what his wit dictates to him. But I pass my time rather with scribbling than writing, with words than wit. Not that I speak much, because I am addicted to contemplation, unless I am with my lord; yet then I rather attentively listen to what he says, than impertinently speak" (93). The ambitious author who fervently defended her writings in whatever she wrote, belittles the worth of her literary accomplishments in the text that could have been her loudest call for public acclaim; but the demands of the proper female self-portraiture deny her this opportunity. Despite the absence of self-praise, however, Margaret cannot possibly refrain from writing *about* her writing, and from this point onwards, the focus is shifted from her husband's intellectual pursuits to her own. Cavendish starts by trying to explain the workings of her creative imagination and then the pleasure she takes in writing, and concludes with an attempt to excuse her unfeminine preoccupation with the latter by presenting it as an innocent pastime. In her effort to do so, she once more describes herself as a woman who conforms to and, at the same time, deviates from the norm: she has withdrawn from the world as a modest female, but to devote herself to contemplation and writing as only a male intellectual would. As for the writing of her "harmless fancies," this is the joy and meaning of her life:

that little wit I have, it delights me to scribble it out and disperse it about. For I being addicted from my childhood to contemplation rather than conversation, to solitariness rather than society, to melancholy rather than mirth, to write with the

pen than to work with the needle, passing my time with harmless fancies . . . in which I take such pleasure as I neglect my health. . . . My only trouble is, lest my brain should grow barren, or that the root of my fancies should become insipid, withering into a dull stupidity for want of maturing subjects to write on. (94)

In conclusion of my discussion of the Lord Newcastle's prominent position in Cavendish's autobiography, it could be claimed that the pairing of her image to that of her husband is put to her own service since, in describing him she employs, or rather deploys, his gaze to describe herself according to the requirements set by her society and culture. Her husband's eyes become a multi-purpose lens which can magnify or obscure according to the desired projection and which can guarantee the accuracy and reliability of male perception. In this respect, as in the case of the other "other" stories, we are probably dealing with one more advertising strategy which serves the marketing of Cavendish's self.²³

The issue of Cavendish's relational self-definition has occupied a central position in my discussion so far, not only because it is linked to and illustrates various aspects of her self-representation, but also because it is a major issue in feminist autobiographical criticism. When autobiography first began to be treated as a literary genre, critics like Georges Gusdorf believed that the celebration of a unique self defined in isolation was a characteristic inherent to the genre. One of the reasons that led to this conclusion, feminist critics pointed out later, was that all of the texts Gusdorf examined were written by men. Furthermore, they argued, this theorizing of autobiography perpetuated the exclusion of women's life-writings from the study of this genre: "The emphasis on individualism as the necessary precondition for autobiography," notes Susan Stanford Friedman, is "a reflection of privilege, one that excludes from the canons of autobiography those writers who have been denied by history the illusion of individualism" (39).

The initial response of the feminist critics to Gusdorf's theory concentrated on the explanation of the relational selves of women's autobiographies by a recourse to the cultural/material conditions of women's lives and psychoanalytic criticism.²⁴ The problem with this critical attempt was that it seemed to take for granted the rigid binary opposition that male critics had forced upon autobiographical representations in defining the male ones as essentially different from the female.²⁵ More recent critical works have stopped trying to apologize for women's construction of relational selves and have pointed out that men's texts as well—even "canonical" ones like Augustine's—construct relational self-representations.²⁶ So it appears that critics had been blind to this aspect of celebrated autobiographies by men as it did not fit with the highly individualistic theory they were inclined to form. Nowadays, it is persistently and convincingly argued that there is nothing "wrong" with an

autobiographical self that does not lay claims to uniqueness and authority and that does not refuse to place itself in its familial and cultural context.²⁷ On the contrary, such a self, far from being in need of “repair,” deconstructs the basic premises of Western metaphysics and of one of its aftermaths: phallogocentrism. According to this critical view, the “I” in Cavendish’s autobiography, as Domna Stanton points out, moves exactly in this direction: by “show[ing] that its constitution and individuation predicate[s] reference and relatedness to others,” it “represent[s] a denial of a notion essential to the phallogocentric order: the totalized self-contained subject present-to-itself” (15).²⁸

On the other hand, Cavendish’s representation is not constructed in relational terms only. As her text implicitly but firmly asserts, her definition as the daughter and wife of famous men does not suffice for her identification; the qualities she wants to attribute to herself in order to prove her uniqueness cannot be signified by the “proper” name. This is why she finds it necessary to write a detailed autobiographical account that supplements the documentation of her identity with other credentials: her particular experiences (“fortunes”), and her idiosyncrasy (“humour” and “disposition”). This multi-faceted definition of female identity, which supplants the narrow definition according to the father’s name and which is moreover constructed by the female subject herself, is a sabotage of the transformation of women’s bodies into use values and, as such, a sabotage of the symbolic order itself.

Returning to the issue of Lady Newcastle’s motives for writing her autobiography, it is assumed that one of the reasons behind any attempt at self-definition is the fear that one’s identity is under threat. Margaret’s autobiographical project also appears to have its roots in the fear that her identity and her life would be misread “in the after ages.” Her autobiography is therefore designed to be a metatext on her life, fixing *her* meaning upon it. This project is a particularly difficult one since, as a woman, Cavendish is denied both the ability to form and the right to express her own opinion on issues like her identity and her position. A valuable accessory in this “impertinent” attempt of hers is the genre itself: autobiography not only permits unlimited self-indulgence to a female subject, who is forbidden the luxury to place herself at the center of her attention, but also bestows upon its author an equally unprecedented authority over her interpretation. On the other hand, by almost *compelling* the composition of a coherent, stable, and respectable self, autobiography is also in the service of repressive ideological mechanisms and can function as a vehicle of cultural conditioning while disguising itself as a means of unobstructed expression, “veiling” the “de-facement” it leads to, as Paul de Man put it (81). In this respect, the formal generic assumptions fool both the readers who presume that what they are dealing with is an accurate self-representation and the author who deludes herself into thinking that she is going to be the mistress of her textual self. Autobiography, as Shari Benstock has remarked, eventually reveals “the impossibility of its own dream: what begins on the presumption of self-

knowledge ends in the creation of a fiction that covers over the premises of its construction” (11). In disagreement with Benstock, however, I have argued that autobiography in fact *exposes* these premises in presenting us with a self that is what it should not be: unstable and contradictory. And it is the writing process itself that is primarily responsible for this “failure,” as it gradually undermines the demands it sets out to fulfill.

The neat and solemn self-image Cavendish wants to project, the sober dress she tries to design, is eventually marred by her own unruly text, one that is “very loosely structured,” that “tends to rattle on” (Mason 223), and that is formulated not only by “unorthodox” syntax, grammar, and spelling,²⁹ but also by “unorthodox” desires; in other words, it is hardly the ideal text for the production of the well-structured, sober, and authoritative self-representation it covets. In order to carry out her project, Cavendish has to struggle not only against external pressures and obstacles, but against herself too—her own shortcomings and failures which have their roots in her lack of formal education.³⁰ In this respect, it is particularly telling that her description of the writing process draws upon images of warfare and racing, which allude to the strain writing put her under; putting her thoughts to paper seemed to Cavendish like “marching . . . 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 oft-times outrun the pen. Where I, to keep speed in the race, write so fast as I stay not so long as to write my letters plain: insomuch as some have taken my handwriting for some strange character” (94).

According to one critical opinion, the language in the preceding passage “also reveals the degree to which . . . [Margaret] felt ambiguous about the presumption inherent” in her analogy between writing and fighting: “Cavendish associates herself with the routed and defeated rather than with the heroic and victorious” (Sidonie Smith 97). On the other hand, it could be argued that this passage points not so much to the author’s supposed lack of self-confidence as to her awareness of the importance of external appearances: Cavendish seems to believe that a messy textual appearance can be as harmful for the text’s reception as a shabby outfit for one’s reputation. This is why the raggedness of her text has to be excused and even appreciated as a sign of an ingenious brain. Thus, in contrast with her discussion of this issue in her other writings, here Cavendish does not attribute her “rambling” to her lack of training but to her vigorous imagination: her flow of fancies is too profuse and forceful to be disciplined into an orderly verbal transcription. This, she claims, is the reason her handwriting is almost illegible and her structure disorderly.³¹

Cavendish’s text goes “astray” just like she has done herself: its failure to adhere to rules of structure and form re-enacts her failure to subscribe completely to established rules of conduct that opposed her desires. In the same manner, as a location where personal desires and cultural dictates are in constant

and unresolved conflict with each other, her autobiography is, as I have argued, replete with contradictory self-representations. In this way, the text itself exposes the failure of all appropriating processes by presenting us with a subject which is shifting and contradictory—a grotesque figure that escapes rigid definitions and classifications.

Cavendish's autobiographical project did not entirely absolve her from the evils it was fighting against—the conditioning and commodification of her self; in fact, it appears to have forced its author to undergo and suffer from them once more, ironically, in its enabling of her to play an active part in these appropriating processes. In striving to give her own account of her life, Cavendish was caught anew in the traps of cultural conditioning and was led to profess and even celebrate her compliance with rules that in her other texts and also in her real life she contested. Moreover, by trying to promote herself and acquire fame, she had to expose and sell herself on the market and thus occupy again a position she deplored, that of a “moveable” good.³² On the other hand, her position as an autobiographical subject enabled her to take part in the process of her self-definition and self-circulation as a subject/agent, not only as an object. In this way, by disrupting the conventional modes of definition, representation, and exchange of women, Margaret's autobiography disrupts the entire order of the dominant patriarchal values of her society.

Cavendish ventures on the catwalk with the intention to woo her viewers, dressed in an autobiographical garb that commands admiration and, most importantly, respect. Yet, instead of gracefully swinging and turning, “enclosed” in a classic and “feminine” outfit, she marches down in a bizarre androgynous dress which shocks its spectators as it discloses precisely those aspects of herself she has tried to cloak. It appears that Cavendish did not eventually find it in her heart or simply did not manage to tailor her looks to the tastes of her beholders and the demands of the market.

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Notes

1. As Friedman has argued, “alienation from the historically imposed image of the self is what motivates the writing, the creation of an alternate self in the autobiographical act” (40).

2. In an epistle Cavendish addressed to the Duke of Newcastle in the preface of his biography (written by her in 1668) she wrote: “it pleased God to command his Servant Nature to indue me with a Poetical and Philosophical Genius, even from my Birth; for I did write some Books in that kind, before I was twelve years of Age” (*Lives* xxi).

3. Some of these works are *Philosophical Fancies* (1653), *The Worlds Olio* (1655), *Orations of Divers Sorts* (1662), *Philosophical Letters* (1664), and *The Life of the Thrice Noble . . . William Cavendish* (1668).

4. The accusation that she was not the real author of the works published under her name—which was directed to many early modern women writers—greatly disturbed Cavendish. Thus, both she and her husband repeatedly tried to refute this accusation in the prefatory epistles of her books; Margaret attributed it to “the malice and aspersions of spiteful tongues” of “this censorious Age” (*Lives* xx), and the Duke to the social prejudice against women writers: “there’s the crime, a lady writes them [the books], and to intrench so much upon the male prerogative is not to be forgiven” (qtd. in Grant 145).

5. This derision about Cavendish’s work lasted for centuries. As late as 1981 in *The Incomplete Book of Failures*, Stephen Pile characterized Cavendish as “the world’s most ridiculous poet” (qtd. in Bowerbank 392).

6. As Hilda Smith has pointed out, “none of her books has fewer than five prefatory remarks explaining her defects in particular areas of scholarship. A few have more than a dozen such prefaces, surely a record even in a century much given to this form of apologia” (77).

7. See, for example, Margaret’s epistle “To the Two Most Famous Universities of England” in her *Philosophical and Physical Opinions* which is a blend of humble apologies and eloquent accusations. An extract from it is reprinted in Ferguson (85–86).

8. See the entry of 30 May 1667 in *The Diary of Samuel Pepys* (6: 324). Evelyn, who was present too during Cavendish’s visit, wrote a ballad making fun of her eccentricity (fragments of it are quoted by Grant 23–26). For a description of this visit see also Mintz.

9. The edition of the autobiography I am going to use throughout this article is the one edited by Elspeth Graham et al. This edition is the most recent one, but unfortunately, it does not contain the whole text. Whenever I am referring to parts of the autobiography which are not included in the above edition, these are taken from *The Lives of William Cavendish*.

10. Several years later (1667) Mrs. Evelyn expressed the same views after having visited Cavendish. In a letter she writes to a friend she expresses nothing but derision for Cavendish’s external appearance and writings, taking both of them as signs of madness: “I was surprised to find so much extravagancy and vanity in any person not confined within four walls. Her habit particular, fantastical. . . . Her mein surpasses the imagination of poets, or the descriptions of a romance heroine’s greatness: her gracious bows, seasonable nods, courteous stretching out of her hands, twinkling of her eyes, and various gestures of approbation, show what may be expected from her discourse, which is as airy, empty, whimsical and rambling as her books, aiming at science difficulties, high notions, terminating commonly in nonsense, oaths and obscenity” (qtd. in Reynolds 51–52).

11. Ambrose's book, for instance, had gone through eight editions by 1765, and Taylor's twenty-six by 1739.

12. Although there were no such things as fashion shows and catwalks in Cavendish's days, I found this metaphor most fitting to describe the pleasure she took in designing and parading her original outfits.

13. At this point it would be relevant to point out that the first two modern editions of *True Relation* by M. A. Lower in 1872 and by C. H. Firth in 1886 place Margaret's autobiography at the end of her husband's biography (written by herself), as a kind of appendix. The implications of this placement are subject to various, indeed conflicting, interpretations. Some critics have spoken of the reduction of *True Relation* to a "historical footnote" (Sidonie Smith 100). However, one could claim that it is a matter of interpretation whether the autobiography functions as a trivial footnote, or an afterword which actually reviews and gives meaning to the text that precedes it, or an entirely separate text which is not necessarily connected with the previous one.

14. According to Mason, "for all her singularity . . . Margaret Cavendish required a substitute figure or other—an alter ego really—with and through whom she might identify herself. This need particularly makes itself felt in the telling of her life story. Margaret Cavendish found in the Duke of Newcastle both her husband and her Lord, but remarkably enough she succeeds in making this of him without ever dimming the bright light of her own personality" (222). Rose adds: "As an alter ego William Cavendish cuts a feeble, shadowy figure in *A True Relation*, never coming alive as a personality and making only brief, unconvincing appearances as an idealized moral character" (250–51). The same applies to the function of the other male figures in her autobiography, that of her two brothers and of her brother-in-law, Charles Cavendish.

15. For more details see Grant (66–68).

16. For more information on Lord Newcastle's support of his wife's literary activities see Hilda Smith (89).

17. More than three decades later, George Savile's *Advice to a Daughter* (1687) reproduced the conviction that women were by nature inferior to men: "You must lay it down for a foundation in generall, that there is inequality in the Sexes, and that for the better economy of the World, the men, who were to bee the Law-givers, had the larger share of reason bestowed upon them; by which means your Sex is the better prepared for the compliance that is necessary for the better performance of those duties which seem to bee most properly assigned to it" (*Works* 370).

18. Jeremy Taylor's *Holy Living* (1650) expressed the same conviction: "a woman . . . is of more plyant and easie spirit, and weaker understanding [than man], and hath nothing to supply the unequal strengths of men, but the defensative of a passive nature and armour of modesty, which is the natural ornament of that sex" (77–78). Taylor's *Holy Living* and *Holy Dying* (1651) reached (between them) seventeen editions by 1700, and went through nine more by 1739.

19. Sumptuous attire in women was thought to be a signifier of loose morals. In this spirit William Vaughan wrote in *The Golden Grove* (1608): The wife “must not be too sumptuous and superfluous in her attire, as, decked with frizled hair, embroidery, precious stones, and gold put about, for they are the forerunners of adultery” (qtd. in Jones 58). See also Gere (85).

20. See the entries of 11 April, 26 April, 1 May, and 10 May 1667 in Samuel Pepys’s diary (6: 254, 274, 283, 295).

21. This metaphor is present in almost all seventeenth-century conduct books; see William Whately, *A Bride-Bush or A Wedding Sermon* (1617) (A.3); William Gouge, *Of Domesticall Duties* (1622) (267); Daniel Rogers, *Matrimoniall Honour* (1642) (5); Isaac Ambrose, *Prima, Media, et Ultima* (1654) (280); and John Sprint, *The Bride-Woman’s Counsellor* (1709) (12–13).

22. In her epistle to the Duke at the beginning of his biography she actually calls him her “onely Tutor” (*Lives* xxi).

23. For a discussion of the function of the “other” in women’s self-representations, see Billson and Sidonie Smith.

24. Friedman, for example, brings into her study the psychoanalytic theories of Nancy Chodorow and Sheila Rowbotham (38–45). See also Mason and Greed (xiv), Jane Marcus, and Spacks.

25. Heilbrun’s central argument is representative of this critical perspective: “It is my intention in this paper to argue that women’s self-writings were, until very recently, radically different from men’s, and if the contemplation of one’s own singularity is critical, scarcely deserve the name of autobiography, but that in the last decade women’s autobiography has unmistakably found its true form” (14). On this issue see also Laura Marcus. Her article is a critique of the views expressed in Heilbrun’s article.

26. See Miller.

27. See Benstock (19–20).

28. See also Ryan. Ryan attacks the individualistic theorizing of autobiography (as expressed by P. Lejeune) from a Marxist perspective.

29. The most recent edition of *True Relation* has modernized the spelling and “substantially altered” the punctuation in order to reduce Cavendish’s “enormous sentences and paragraphs to manageable lengths” (89, 88).

30. Cavendish complained in her *Sociable Letters* (1664) that her tutor was an “ancient decayed gentlewoman” who could not teach her much more than elementary reading and writing (376).

31. Cavendish’s epistle in the preface of her autobiography concludes with an extensive comment on this issue: “But to return to the ground of this Epistle. I desire all my readers and acquaintance to believe, though my words run stumbling out of my mouth, and my pen draws roughly on my paper, yet my thoughts move regular in my brain. . . . For I must tell my readers, that nature, which is the best and curiousest worker, hath paved my brain smoother than

custom hath oiled my tongue, or variety hath polished my senses, or art hath beaten the paper whereon I write" (*The Life* 272–73).

32. See my quotation from her *Sociable Letters* on page 164.

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