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Melancholy, Maternity, and Self-Fashioning: The Swiss Doctor and the English Duchess

This article examines Margaret Cavendish's (1623-1673) views on melancholy and maternity, as reflected in texts such as *The Blazing World* (1666), *The Convent of Pleasure* (1668), as well as in her paratexts and life-writing. It explores how these views may have been shaped by the interventions of Théodore de Mayerne (1573-1655), the Genevan Huguenot physician who became indispensable to the upper ranks of 17th century English society. It is suggested, by centring Mayerne's influence and situating it in the context of contemporary cultural and medical discourses of female melancholy, that this Swiss physician may have helped to shape the writings of one of the most outspoken English female authors on fertility, motherhood and gender politics in the early modern period.

Keywords: Margaret Cavendish; Théodore de Mayerne; Robert Burton; maternity; melancholy

This article focuses on Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle (1623-1673), English female author and philosopher, and her relationship with the Swiss physician, Théodore de Mayerne (1573), who advised her and her husband William on health and fertility.¹ Justin Begley and Benjamin Goldberg's recent transcription of Cavendish family manuscripts includes letters from Mayerne to the Cavendishes during the late 1640s and early 1650s, offering insight into his medical practice and his potential influence on Cavendish's writings.² By reading these letters in conjunction with Cavendish's writing on maternity elsewhere, the article proposes that Mayerne's diagnosis and gender-neutral approach to melancholy, along with his surprisingly forward-thinking view of maternity and female men-

¹ Margaret will be hereafter referred to by her surname, whilst William Cavendish will be named in full.

² All Mayerne letters cited are from Begley and Goldberg's transcription of the Pw V90 manuscript.

tal health, may have helped to shape one of the most prolific early modern female author's melancholic self-fashioning and her depictions of motherhood and writing.

Born in Geneva in 1573, Mayerne became a prominent physician to the early seventeenth-century Stuart courts (Trevor-Roper). A reputed expert in fertility, critics and biographers frequently credit him with popularising hydrotherapy, which he used to help Queen consorts Anne of Denmark and Henrietta Maria to conceive (Lyon-Whaley; Griffey). During the English Civil Wars and Interregnum, he continued to advise exiled Stuart Royalists from his base in London via written correspondence. He diagnosed both Cavendish and William Cavendish as melancholic hypochondriacs some time before 1648 (Begley and Goldberg, 122–127).

Despite his positive reputation, Cavendish often disregarded Mayerne's medical advice, which we know because Mayerne complained about it in his letters: "I believe that to Cure my Lady Marquesse your wife will be yet harder. Not so much for the nature of the Disease, which is Rebellious, as for the disposition of the Patient, who will not willingly submit to the Councell of her Physicians" (132). Critics have read Mayerne's advice as misogynistic, presenting Cavendish's resistance as proto-feminist defiance of the medical establishment (Knoppers; Smith 24; Bowerbank and Mendelson 13–14).³ Begley and Goldberg have offered a useful corrective, highlighting the respect for the medical profession she demonstrates elsewhere (46–53). They suggest that her actions may reflect typical patient non-compliance, given the unpleasant nature of many seventeenth-century treatments. I propose that Cavendish's rejection of the advice may also be due to her self-fashioning as a melancholic author.

In section 1, I outline the cultural discourse surrounding melancholy and its gendered associations for early moderns, and the ways in which Mayerne's advice might be seen to depart from this gendered tradition, and in part 2 I build on this to outline how Cavendish adapted Mayerne's advice and cultural ideas of melancholia into a feminised form of melancholic self-fashioning, drawing on extracts from *Poems and Fancies* (1653), *Natures Pictures* (1656), *The World's Olio* (1655) and her later and more famous work, *The Blazing World* (1666). In the final section, I then outline how compassionate fertility advice that Mayerne gave the Cavendishes may have led Cavendish to see a connection between her health, her creative pursuits, and her childlessness, with reference to *The Convent of Pleasure* (1668) and *Sociable Letters* (1664).

³ For a discussion of Cavendish's antagonism towards male practiced science more generally see Lisa Sarasohn.

1. The Discourse of Male and Female Melancholy

Melancholy, in medical terms, was an illness caused by an excess or imbalance of black bile produced by the spleen. Symptoms varied widely but generally included despondency, anxiety, solitariness, and introspection. Culturally, however, melancholy had a broader meaning. During the Renaissance, it was associated with exceptional masculine genius and intellectual prowess, drawing on classical ideas (Radden “Melancholy”; Schiesari 97–140). Aristotle, for instance, questioned: “Why is it that all those men who have become extraordinary in philosophy, politics, poetry, or the arts are obviously melancholic?” (227).⁴ Italian humanist Marsilio Ficino’s *De vita libri tres* or *Three Books on Life* (1489) emphasised this link between genius and melancholy, popularising Aristotle’s notion of the melancholic philosopher (Kiblansky et al. 254–274). As Juliana Schiesari notes, following Ficino’s influential work, melancholia became a symbol of male creativity, turning feelings of disempowerment into a celebrated trait (7–8). By the seventeenth century, “Melancholy was a la mode,” particularly among wealthy, idle, scholarly men (MacDonald 151–152). However, the ailment was viewed quite differently in women.

Female melancholy was considered more severe and was tied to uterine diseases, menstruation and fertility rather than genius. Though melancholy in men was still considered a physiological condition, physical symptoms varied widely between patients and the common denominator of the condition in men was the psychological propensities to despondency and anxiety, as discussed above. The physical symptoms were also distinct from women’s. This, as scholars such as Schiesari, Jennifer Radden (*The Nature of Melancholy* and “Melancholy”), Kaara L. Peterson, and Carol Neely have noted, reflects misogynistic rhetoric that emphasized female physicality over male intellect. As Peterson points out: “[w]hen women *are* said to have melancholy, they do not have the *same* melancholy as their male counterparts due to female melancholy’s ultimate causal link to uterine insufficiency and disease. Thus, these repres-

⁴ Though the Greek term used by Aristotle for genius men, ‘Andres’, could feasibly be used to refer to man-kind and not simply men, the list of exceptional melancholics he provides is entirely male: Heracles, Lysander, Ajax, Bellaphoron, Empedocles, Plato, Maracus, and Archelaus. He also goes on to indicate that women who express moments of melancholic madness do so as part of an occasional infection, a moment of delirium caused by physical symptoms, as opposed to a natural propensity for melancholic genius (Schiesari 105).

entations do not always accord with the emotive affects associated with melancholic males either” (160). This medical and cultural framework thus established a division between male and female melancholic manifestation, both etiologically and symptomatically, with the masculine form as the more culturally significant.

Retained menstrual blood and / or ‘female seed’ was considered the source of female melancholy, leading to higher diagnoses among non-menstruating and sexually inactive women, such as virgins, nuns, and postmenopausal women. Galen had initially suggested that menstrual blood was akin to black bile because of its supposed corrosive properties (Galen 211; Flemming). From here grew the assumption that frequent or severe menstruation, or the cessation of menses which indicated that the blood was stuck and releasing toxins, resulted in both melancholy and infertility, linking the two. As early as the twelfth century, Hildegard of Bingen wrote of female melancholics that “during the monthly menses they lose much blood, and they are infertile because they have a weak fragile womb” (84). For Hildegard, female melancholics are thus “more healthy, more powerful, and happier without a mate than with one, because they become sick from relations with a husband” (85).

In the third edition (1628) of Robert Burton’s (1577-1640) *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (first published 1621), he includes a short section on female melancholics entitled “Maids, Nuns and Widows” (403–407). This acknowledges female sufferers but treats their condition as “a peculiar Species of Melancholy [...] distinct from the rest,” linking it to their sexual status and, most commonly, to the absence of sexual activity and fertility, being more common in “ancient maids, and some barren women” (403).⁵ Whilst he does not exclude female sufferers from other types of melancholy discussed in the treatise, the focus of Burton’s investigation—and of most similar treatises—is overwhelmingly on male patients. When female melancholics are mentioned, a clear distinction is drawn between them and their male counterparts.

Burton’s gendered distinction is most evident in discussions of remedies. His advice is predominantly (and explicitly) directed at male suffer-

⁵ A similar section which relates melancholy to sexual status entitled “Of the Melancholy of Virgins and Widows” is included in Nicholas Culpeper’s medical treatise (L3r-L4r). Female practitioners of medicine also subscribed to this division. The first female author of a midwifery manual, Jane Sharp, writes “Those that have hot wombs have but few courses, and those are either yellow, or black, or burnt, and fiery, that come disorderly; and such persons will fall into Hypochondriacal Melancholly, and rage of the womb” (X5r).

ers, for whom he recommends a range of treatments including dietary changes (446), travel (487), laxatives (454), exercise (491–505), and moderate sex (456–477). He emphasises study, asserting that, for male sufferers, “amongst those exercises, or recreations of the mind within doors, there is none so general, so aptly to be applied to all sorts of men, so fit and proper to expel Idleness and Melancholy, as that of *Study*” (505), devoting ten pages to it.⁶ In stark contrast, Burton’s advice for female recreation is relegated to a single short paragraph at the very end of the subsection. Shifting his focus with the phrase “Now for women,” he dismisses study and instead suggests that women engage in “curious needleworks, Cut-works, spinning, bone lace, and many pretty devices of their own making [...] they have to busy themselves about household offices” (515). Burton’s remedies are thus explicitly gendered, with significantly less attention given to the methods he deems suitable for women.

In addition to the domestic chores, Burton recommends sexual cures for women who suffer from melancholy, drawing from Hippocratic theory (King), and here he gives more detail. While he suggests moderate sex as beneficial for male sufferers to dispel lethargy and improve mood, Burton is more emphatic about its necessity for women. For men it can “drive away sorrow [...] and if it be omitted [...] it makes the mind sad, the body dull and heavy,” whereas women are “often raving mad because of the retention of seed” (457). He even cites a case in which a maid, rendered mad by suppressed menstruation, was raped by fifteen men in a brothel. Despite her “great shame,” the assault supposedly restored her mind by triggering “a heavy menstrual flow” (457). Though Burton does not, of course, advocate rape, this example underscores the gendered nature of his remedies: for men, sex is a mood enhancer, while for women, it is presented as a physiological necessity, regardless of, and outweighing in its benefits, the associated trauma of sexual assault.

Burton’s views regarding sex and melancholy are not unique. Nicholas Culpeper’s *Directory for Midwives* also notes that sex “heats the womb and the parts adjacent, opens and loosens the passages, so that the terms may better flow to the womb” (K5r–K5v), and Jane Sharp, the first female author of a midwifery manual, states that sex is the quickest way to

⁶ He does qualify that “Study is only prescribed to those that are otherwise idle,” not those who are melancholy because of studiousness (510). Although this recognises that not all melancholics are naturally given to study, in contrast with the Renaissance myth of the melancholic scholar, Burton’s prescribing of it as a cure for men who are melancholic nevertheless cements a link between the disease and studiousness.

open the womb and get rid of the corrupt humours, though she advises against it in severe cases until purging is completed (S4v–S5r). Beyond just sex, however, Burton identifies marriage as “the best and surest remedy,” emphasising the social dimensions of the sexual cure, which ties a woman’s health to her acceptance of a role in a patriarchal family unit (405). Sharp goes even further. For her, it is not only marital sex which cures female ailments, but conception and maternity (S4v).

Despite this influential discourse of the differences of melancholy in men and women, and its impact on other medical practitioners, Mayerne’s approach is radically different. His discussions of the Cavendishes’ symptoms and his suggestions of treatments in his letters remain, for the most part, the same: purging (Cavendish 126–127; William Cavendish 136, 214), clysters [enemas] (Cavendish 133; William Cavendish 213), blood-letting (Cavendish 126–127, 134, 218; William Cavendish 125, 218), salt of steel (Cavendish 126, 218; William Cavendish 126, 215), moderate exercise (107, 220), spa or mineral waters (Cavendish 126, 127, 133; William Cavendish 126, 215), baths (Cavendish 127, 133; William Cavendish 125), stomach pills (Cavendish 127; William Cavendish 217), and China root (Cavendish 219; William Cavendish 126) are prescribed for both. Any differences in advice are accounted for by the different lifestyles or habits of his patients, such as William Cavendish’s habit of smoking tobacco and drinking beer (123–126), and Cavendish’s habits of drinking only water and excessive purging or blood-letting (219; 126–7, 134). His letters do not suggest that he considers Cavendish’s womb to be involved in the affliction, as per the gendered distinction, but instead focus on her gastrointestinal symptoms, and, tellingly, he points to Cavendish’s studiousness as a potential factor in her condition.

2. Melancholic Self-Fashioning

It is not until 1654, following the publication of Cavendish’s first book, *Poems and Fancies*, that Mayerne sends the advice which has caused much consternation amongst critics: “her Ladships occupation in writing of bookes: with a sedenta[r]y life is absolutely bad for health” (219–220). He does not recommend that she cease writing altogether, but he argues that her studious introspection must be balanced with exercise. In doing so, Mayerne clearly refutes a diagnosis which associates feminine melancholy with menstruation, and instead aligns Cavendish with a (typically masculine) scholarly, melancholic figure, validating her newly public

authorial status. Cavendish, of course, did not give up her writing of books, nor did she endeavour to take much exercise or follow his remedies. Her reflections on this topic showcase a wilful embrace of the subjective position of a melancholic writer, one perhaps emboldened by his advice, rather than non-compliance out of a dislike of exercise. However, Cavendish still can be seen to adapt the premise of the masculine melancholic for her own purposes, leading to a complex duality in her self-fashioning in which feminised creative writing and fancy, as opposed to scholarship, is represented both as a symptom of her melancholic condition, and a remedy for moments of melancholic despondency.

Having received Mayerne's advice against her sedentary authorial lifestyle, Cavendish publicly fashions herself in the position of a tortured genius who neglects her health in order to pursue inspiration. In her autobiographical piece appended to *Natures Pictures*, published two years after the above advice, she links her health to her writing, describing how she prefers "melancholy" to "mirth" (3D1r), and neglects her physical well-being to nurture her imagination:

I take such pleasure as I neglect my health [...] lest my brain should grow barren, or that the root of my fancies should become insipid, withering into a dull stupidity [...] onely walking a slow pace in my chamber, whilst my thoughts run apace in my brain [...] for should I dance or Run, or Walk apace, I should Dance my Thoughts out of Measure, Run my Fancies out of Breath, and Tread out the Feet of my Numbers (3D1r).

Embracing a melancholic scholarly identity was not novel in this period. As Douglas Trevor notes,

it is rare to uncover scholars in this period [...] who do not claim melancholy as their predominant complexion; [...] we cannot assume that good health, or the ever-elusive perfect balance of the humors, was really desired by the melancholic scholar [...] To gain a peaceful hold on one's passions thereby carried with it the loss of mental insight in a kind of reverse Faustian bargain—the body being saved at the expense of the inspired insight (6–7).

Thus, Trevor suggests, scholars of the period such as John Donne and John Milton fashioned themselves as melancholics and developed "a learned self-identity that [they] then used to advertise [themselves] as writer[s]" (17). While Trevor's work focuses only on men, critics have noted that female authors such as Mary Wroth, Hester Pulter, and Lucy Hutchinson also adopted male melancholic strategies to define themselves, or their characters, as melancholic authors (Hackett; Rayner;

Bumke; Alexander). Cavendish's own self-identification as a melancholic figure, evident in her autobiographical writing, has also been noted (Fitzmaurice; Whitaker 145; Bowerbank and Mendelson 13; Skouen and Kolle). Cavendish thus aligns with the traditional trope of neglecting health for genius, though she presents her writing as driven by 'fancy', rather than scholarship or philosophy, as in Milton's "Il Penseroso," which celebrates melancholy as a source of scholarly inspiration.⁷ Her emphasis on feminine creative fancy over scholarly genius sets her apart from her contemporaries.⁸

In her earlier work, *Poems and Fancies*, prior to Mayerne's advice against her sedentary lifestyle, she frames creative writing not as a symptom of melancholy, but as a method of managing it, and one which is appropriately feminine. Reflecting on a melancholic period she writes: "my Rest being broke with *discontented Thoughts* [...] I strove to turne the *Stream*, yet shunning the *muddy*, and *foule waies* of *Vice*, I went to the *Well of Helicon*, and by the *Wells side*, I have sat, and wrote this *Worke*" (A7r-v). In this act of self-fashioning Cavendish casts her poetry as a remedy for melancholy which she actively pursues—one which is "*harmlesse, modest, and honest*"—anticipating potential criticism (*Poems and Fancies* A7v). Her redefining of creative writing as a feminine activity in *Poems and Fancies* may be a deliberate contribution to the broader discourse regarding the gendered remedies for melancholy: positioning creative writing and poetry as a feminine form of creativity, arguing that it is akin to needlework or "spinning with the brain" (A2r), implies that it is just as appropriate a form of recreational remedy as those which Burton advocated for women, as opposed to the scholarly pursuits recommended for men. Deftly evading the gendered remedies offered by contemporaries, Cavendish claims a melancholic predisposition which turns her not necessarily to masculine study (though she certainly partakes in this in her philosophical works), nor to feminine housework, but instead to fancy or creative writing.

These representations of melancholy as both symptom and remedy are seemingly contradictory. Mayerne's letter which accepted and validated

⁷ "These pleasures Melancholy give, / And I with thee will choose to live" (Milton line 175–176).

⁸ Helen Hackett notes that Mary Wroth's character Pamphilia, in her isolation, writes poetry and reads romances which one might argue is a feminine form of melancholic scholarship. However, as Hackett points out, this is due to her association with the male Petrarchan love-melancholic figure, and that Wroth thus "'affords her the prestigious style of melancholy generally associated with male figures' (66).

her position as a more typical masculine melancholic may have emboldened her to publicly adopt the more clearly masculine position of a genius neglecting their health in *Natures Pictures*, but this did not result in her abandoning her earlier suggestion in *Poems and Fancies* that creative writing had a curative, feminine quality. The two positions coincide in Cavendish's work and suggest that, be it as remedy or symptom, creative writing is, for her, a positive facet of her melancholy, and one which she prefers to the remedies proffered to women by most physicians. This is not to suggest that Cavendish's view of melancholic authorship was stable or cohesive, but that this duality is something which preoccupied her and which she returned to throughout her authorial career.

Her famous and frequent insect metaphors for writing demonstrate this duality.⁹ Cavendish suggests that she, unlike other melancholic authors, does not borrow her inspiration from intertextuality and excessive study, but, tellingly, from her own bowels, a key site of her melancholic affliction. As Bowerbank has noted, in doing so Cavendish responds to and adopts Francis Bacon's notion of the natural philosopher, depicted negatively as a navel-gazing spider who refuses to observe the facts of nature and produces only 'cobwebs of learning' (Bacon 26), thus, ironically, borrowing from Bacon a metaphor which she adapts to suggest that she need not borrow from others. In the *Worlds Olio* she writes "a true Poet is like a Spider that spins all out of her own bowels. And though the web be Artificial, yet that art is natural" (B3v). Equally, in the paratexts to *Poems and Fancies* (A2v), her writing is referred to as a web. Elsewhere, she compares her brain's production of fancies to "silk wormes that spin out of their own bowels" (*Natures Pictures* 3D1v). Cavendish here arguably offers a concrete metaphor for purging melancholic hypochondria through creative writing. Using images of spiders and silkworms spinning from their bowels, Cavendish suggests that writing is both a form of mental purging of black bile from the hypochondriac region, and an inspired byproduct of the melancholic state; it is both a curative process, and a symptom of the illness.

Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy. To Which is Added The Description of a New Blazing World (1666) comprises of an initial philosophical treatise, and a utopian narrative, and serves as an allegory for melancholy as both symptom and remedy. Structurally, Cavendish describes the connection between *The Blazing World* or "this piece of fancy" and the philosophical treatise as "two worlds [connected] at the end of

⁹ For further discussion of her insect metaphors see Sylvia Bowerbank.

their poles” (b*1v). Similarly, within the narrative, *The Blazing World* is geographically connected to the Empress’s world via the North Pole (*Observations* B1v). This connection with the North Pole also invites a humoral reading. As Peter Davidson has pointed out, the idea of the North has long been associated with notions of melancholy (17), and Cavendish seems to subscribe to this idea, elsewhere describing “thoughts of Melancholy” as winds blowing from the North Pole (*The World’s Olio*, P4r). This implies that the imaginative realm of *The Blazing World* emerges from a place where melancholic thoughts prevail, and is inspired by melancholy. However, in the preface, Cavendish argues that the purpose of this fictional diversion was to “withdraw [her brain] from its more serious Contemplations,” again reflecting on her practice of mitigating the extremes of melancholy through purgative creative writing (*Observations*, b*1v).

The Duchess, the figuration of Cavendish within the text, also suffers from a “melancholick humour” proceeding from an “extreme ambition” to be “Empress of a World” (*Observations*, 2B1v–2C1v), and she treats this melancholy through creative activity. Spirits advise her to “create an Immaterial World” within her mind, allowing her to overcome her melancholy and fulfil her ambition through imaginative world creation (*Observations*, 2C1v). This mirrors Cavendish’s own aim in writing the utopian text as a means to alleviate the melancholic state stemming from an unfulfilled “extreme ambition” for literary fame. In creating her new world, she thus becomes, as she claims in the 1668 edition, “Margaret the First,” further noting that regardless of critical success she will “be content to live a Melancholy Life in [her] own World” (*The Description of a New World*, A2r–A2v). Her ambition to create is thus inspired by a melancholic humour of underappreciated genius, and yet it is one which is alleviated by the act of creation regardless of success or fame. *The Blazing World* presents Cavendish’s practice of creative writing as a way of channelling the symptoms of melancholic genius, it represents both her character’s and her own authorial decisions as inspired and necessitated by melancholy.

Cavendish thus perhaps chose not to follow Mayerne’s advice to exercise or reduce her writing, instead embracing her melancholic status and engaging—or at least portraying herself as engaging—in creative writing as a form of self-care, fashioning herself as a creative melancholic genius who manages her melancholy through purgative creative pursuits. Although Cavendish ignored Mayerne’s advice in this instance, his acceptance and validation of her authorial identity in relation to her melancholic

diagnosis will likely have contributed to a growing confidence in her melancholic self-fashioning, developing from a somewhat defensive position in *Poems and Fancies* in which she feminises her actions in order to avoid criticism for taking on a masculine melancholic role, into the bold declaration of a clear melancholic identity in *Natures Pictures*, but finding more nuanced, balanced expressions in her insect metaphors and her later work, *The Blazing World*.

3. Melancholy and Maternity

Where Mayerne's advice does comment on the relationship between fertility and melancholy it does so in surprising ways which influence Cavendish's representations and discussions of maternity and motherhood. As previously discussed, early modern thinkers established a clear connection between female melancholics, menstruation and maternity. Mayerne, however, despite diagnosing Cavendish with melancholic hypochondria, does not imply that this would make her infertile, and, upon request, gives William advice on baths and spas in Paris that "will not be unprofitable to hir" in this regard (127).

More crucially, however, Mayerne's further and more personal advice about melancholy and maternity is surprisingly compassionate, perhaps radically so.

Touching Conception, I know not, if in the estate she's in you ought Earnestly to desire it, It is hard to get Children wth good Corage, when One is Melancholy, and after they are got and come into the World, they bring a great deale of Payne wth them, And after that very often one looses them, as I have try'd to my great greefe and am sory to have had them; Be in good health & then you may till yor grownd, otherwise it will be but tyme lost if you enter that race frowningly (qtd. in Begley and Goldberg 127).

Mayerne's advice does not simply aim to satisfy William Cavendish's desire for children, but also takes into consideration the mental and physical health of the parents, particularly, Cavendish. In an effort to connect personally with the Cavendishes and stress the reality of the danger of losing a child, he shares his own experiences of loss: at the point of writing, seven of his nine children had died. Although he does seem to say that they should focus on their health *first* and *then* think about children, the emphasis is not on rushing to that conclusion. In contrast with the general presumption that all women in possession of a husband must be in

want of a child, what Mayerne proffers is the choice of childlessness. Where Hildegard stated that female melancholics should remain spinsters or join convents and pursue celibacy, Mayerne's advice instead highlights an unusual route in which an aristocratic married couple choose childlessness to focus on themselves, even if only temporarily. This is a choice which, for Mayerne, is connected to their medical diagnosis as melancholic hypochondriacs. It is all the more startlingly considerate of Cavendish's health when we compare it to advice William received from another physician, Richard Farrer, who provided a recipe for fertility which included ram's excrement, instructing William Cavendish not to tell Cavendish what was in it in case she might refuse it, denying her the capacity to knowingly consent to treatment (179–180).

It seems that the Cavendishes decided to make the choice that Mayerne had suggested, with records of them soliciting and collecting fertility advice ending shortly after his 1648 letter. It is also around this point that Cavendish began writing for publication, and by 1653 she had published her first book *Poems and Fancies*, advertising her childlessness in its opening pages: "I have no *children* to employ my *Care*, and *Attendance* on," thus, she states, she is "so fond of my *Book*, as to make it as if it were my *Child*" (A7r–A7v).

I contend that Mayerne's compassionate advice that she and William could choose not to have children because of melancholy led Cavendish to see a connection between her health, her creative pursuits, and her childlessness. The choice not to have children due to melancholy, suggested by Mayerne, may thus have given rise to her continued metaphorical insistence on the trade-off between motherhood and writing, her representation of her books as her children (Bowerbank and Mendelson 10–11; Dodds), and her representation of the perils of motherhood to women's health and sanity.

In *The Convent of Pleasure*, the sisters perform scenes depicting the challenges of marriage and motherhood. Of the nine scenes or vignettes, four address childbirth and loss, one discusses troubled children, and four highlight marital problems. The scenes on motherhood emphasize pain, child-loss, and pressure to conceive. In the second vignette, a woman is shown suffering from pregnancy (G2r), in the fourth, another is grieving her child's death (G2v). The sixth depicts a woman in labour, enduring significant pain while waiting for a midwife occupied with another case (H1v). The eighth revisits her, focusing on her handmaids who reveal that the midwife has been delayed by another woman in labour with a stillborn child, and the midwife arrives only to announce that the mother and child

in her previous delivery died (H2r). The handmaids decide not to inform the Lady of this, not because it may make her fear for her own life, but because “the very fright of not being able to bring forth a Child will kill her” (H2r). *The Convent of Pleasure* thus seems to reflect Mayerne’s concerns about childbearing and the impact that child-loss could have. Mayerne’s advice not only recognised the physical and psychological pain of both having or losing children indicated in these scenes, but also the existence of a “race” to breed, advising them to avoid entering it “frowningly” (127). *The Convent of Pleasure*’s depiction of women risking it all to produce children, with no pay-off, expands on Mayerne’s comments on women bringing forth children regardless of their own health.

In *Sociable Letters* (1664), Cavendish seems to advocate for Mayerne’s choice to be available more widely. Responding in a letter to a lady’s complaint of, tellingly, melancholy, for being unable to conceive a child, she argues that “a Woman hath no such Reason to desire Children for her Own Sake” because “she Hazards her Life by Bringing them into the World, and hath the greatest share of Trouble in Bringing them up” (Z4r–Z4v). She also states that women, perhaps especially melancholic women, lack motive because their children will not bear their names (Z4v), unlike, as she frequently comments, her books, which like “true Melancholy” according to Cavendish, “leave a fame behind [them]” (*World’s Olio*, R3r–R3v). She articulates in *Sociable Letters* that though “for the most part Maids and Wives desire Husbands and Children upon any Condition, rather than to live Maids or Barren [...] I am not of their minds” (Z4v).

Cavendish, the English Duchess, thus adopted some of the Swiss Doctor’s advice, and though she disregarded his curative recommendations in favour of her own, her non-compliance was judicious, not malicious. Mayerne’s suggestion that she and William might forego children for health reasons, whether childlessness for her was a deliberate choice or not, enabled Cavendish to embrace this childless melancholic authorial identity. Thomas Shadwell’s elegy echoes this in its depiction of her as:

not as most of her frail Sex are;
 Who ‘ave Fruitful *Wombs* but Barren *Brains*,
 She left the best Remains:
 Though we no Issue of her Body find
 Yet she hath left behind
 The Nobler Issue of her mighty *Mind* (2v1v).

Shadwell's elegy suggests that her self-fashioning was convincing. We might wish to applaud Cavendish's ability to carve out a different identity to the ones offered to women in the seventeenth century. Instead of mimicking masculine roles, she crafts what was at the time an alternative melancholic identity in which creative writing was a feminised curative process. She posits writing not as a consolation prize in lieu of having children but as a choice to leave a feminine legacy for her own sake. However, this may have come at a price. Despite Mayerne's empathetic and forward-thinking approach to fertility, Cavendish's insistence on her own exceptionalism and the seeming incompatibility of melancholy with maternity also casts a long and troubling shadow in the ongoing and often nasty debates about women who 'choose' careers over children, or vice versa.

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