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## Review of: Sociable Letters by Margaret Cavendish

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*Sociable Letters* by Margaret Cavendish

Review by: W. H. Beardsley

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Margaret Cavendish. *Sociable Letters*.

Ed. James Fitzmaurice. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2004. 336 pp. append. illus. chron. bibl. \$16.95. ISBN: 1-55111-558-1.

By 1664, Margaret Lucas Cavendish, Marchioness, later Duchess, of Newcastle, was an established poet and playwright. Recently returned to England from a long exile in Paris and Antwerp, she had achieved a level of literary fame unheard of for a woman, as well as a fair degree of notoriety for her outspokenness and her eccentricities in dress and demeanor. Perhaps the first woman in England to publish so much under her own name, she was equally at home in a variety of literary forms, from drama and poetry to treatises on natural philosophy and metaphysics. As she explains in the preface to these *Sociable Letters*, Cavendish felt the need at this time in her career to turn to a form that might better please her readers both for brevity and variety, and so returned to a set of letters begun in exile several years earlier. Here she offers her readers one side of an imagined correspondence between two women, who “make it not only their Chief Delight and Pastime, but their Tye in Friendship to Discourse by Letters.” These “sociable Letters” contain “Short Descriptions in Long Letters” rather than “Long Complements in Short Letters” and are thus not composed in the usual “Romantical way, with High Words, and Mystical Expressions,” filled with “Empty Words, and Vain Complements,” but are more like short, self-contained scenes. Indeed, the concerns of the dramatist are not far from the surface, and this collection of letters contain many finely detailed studies in character, aiming to “Express the Humours of Mankind, and the Actions of a Man’s Life” (42).

Cavendish ranges widely in these letters, moving from observations of imagined and actual incidents and characters (thinly disguised by the use of initials), to

literary criticism, to reflections on Restoration political and religious controversies. Many of the letters are best read as autobiographical, touching on life in Antwerp, the many personal and economic difficulties she faced, as well as the character and struggles of her husband, William, who served in this period as an informal advisor to Charles II. Many are best read as short essays, in the style of Montaigne, on such topics in moral psychology as friendship, self-love, and the forms of anger. Other letters explore such virtues as courage and generosity, and such vices as greed, jealousy, and envy. Cavendish is at her best when reflecting on herself, the cast of her own intellect, and her position as author. We are told, for example, that she was able to put an end to the dull and tedious discord between a group of visiting philosophers and theologians concerning the nature and immortality of the human soul. "Hearing me talk Simply, they laught at my Innocency, and in their Mirth become Good Friends and Sociable Companions" (129). One wonders to what extent this technique actually succeeded with Hobbes and Descartes, who were frequent dinner guests during the couple's exile. In any event, Cavendish later extended her experiment in the epistolary form to her work on natural philosophy, and composed a second set of letters between the same female correspondents. These *Philosophical Letters* complement the *Sociable Letters*, and engage directly the opinions of Descartes and other philosopher-scientists.

The character and status of women is a dominant theme throughout the *Sociable Letters*. There are discussions of various psychological and moral differences based on gender, as well as discussions concerning the education of women, marriage, pregnancy, and children. The letters also describe the diversity of forms of life and character of women during the Restoration, from "Lady Puritan" and "preaching Sister," to courtesan and bawd. Here, as elsewhere, it is often difficult to pin down Cavendish's considered view. "There may be some irony here" is a phrase which appears several times in the editor's clear and usually helpful notes.

Margaret Cavendish is certainly one of the most interesting and unusual minds of the seventeenth century, and the publication of this fine edition of one of her more accessible works will be of great value to scholars of the period. The short collection of actual English letters and essays which Fitzmaurice, a leading Cavendish scholar, has appended to this edition provide useful context, particularly for students.

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