# **Peacock, Francesca.** *Pure Wit: The Revolutionary Life of Margaret Cavendish*. **New York, Pegasus Books, 2024. 384 pp. ISBN 978-1-63936-603-3**

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The legacy of the seventeenth-century authoress Margaret Cavendish is increasingly well-known amongst literary and academic circles but, in terms of a mainstream presence or a place in the canon, she is still considered somewhat obscure. Recent publications, however, such as Francesca Peacock's *Pure Wit* (2024) might change that soon. Peacock's biographical work is certainly not the first to be ever written about the life of authoress and public figure Margaret Cavendish. In terms of style and content, *Pure Wit* follows in the footsteps of two major contributors to the topic, the first being Douglas Grant's *Margaret the First* (1957), which was much later followed by Katie Whitaker's *Mad Madge* (2002). Now, over twenty years later, Peacock intends to tackle the topic once again, most likely due to the current academic boom surrounding Cavendish. The book consists of fifteen chapters in total (including the introduction) that provide a chronological account of the life and death of the Duchess of Newcastle. The volume, apart from demonstrating the most significant events and achievements that occurred in her life, successfully presents them within the context of seventeenth-century England, making the book a worthwhile read for a wide audience.

In her introductory chapter ("The empress and authoress of a new world") Peacock poses the question, why only "few people outside academia and dusty archives heard of [Margaret Cavendish]?" (xvi), a question that is in the center of much of the contemporary research surrounding Cavendish and her oeuvre. The chapter then goes on to give a brief overview of Cavendish's achievements within both the public and literary spheres, highlighting the somewhat paradoxical nature of her reputation that persists even today. Chapter 1 ("The monstrous regiment of women") focuses on Cavendish's (then Lucas) family background and explores the status of female education and the attitudes around the issue in seventeenth-century Europe by invoking the names of the female scholars of the time, such as Bathsua Makin or Anna Schurman. The chapter intends to situate Cavendish within the discourse of women's agency and education, and draws attention to how she subverted certain cultural norms. Chapter 2 ("This unnatural war came like a whirlwind") focuses on the English Civil War and its definite role in shaping Cavendish's life and how that is reflected in her literary works as well. This part highlights Cavendish's Royalist perspective on the situation and provides ample context for the historical events that transpired. Chapter 3 ("Generalissimas and she-soldiers") examines the role of women in military and political contexts of the seventeenth century, opening

with a description of Cavendish's life as the Queen's maid of honor living in exile. The chapter then delves into her writings that feature women depicted as military leaders and active participants in war, emphasizing Cavendish's unique approach to the matter at hand. Chapter 4 ("On sorrow's billows this ship was tossed") further explores Cavendish's life in exile, focusing on her personal struggles and how politics inherently became interwoven with those, especially after her marriage to the exiled Royalist, William Cavendish. The chapter further highlights the frequent use of storm motifs that are ubiquitous in her works.

Chapter 5 ("It is hard to get children with good courage") is centered around Margaret's marriage to William and the issue that plagued many royal families at the time: legacy. It explores the intersection of societal and personal expectations towards women at the time regarding the production of heirs. Chapter 6 ("A sumptuous banquet for the brain") examines Cavendish's (for the time unorthodox) engagement with natural philosophy and science, and dissects the intellectual circles in which the Cavendishes moved, including the male pioneers Margaret wished to challenge with her own ideas. Chapter 7 ("The first English poet of your sex") turns the focus towards Cavendish's literary ambitions and achievements, notably her efforts in painting herself as an innovator in her own right. Important issues regarding "authorship" and "female authorship" in the seventeenth century are also discussed here.

Chapters 8 ("We women are miserable"), 9 ("I have been asleep sixteen years"), and 10 ("Women's kisses are unnatural") examine Cavendish's stance on marriage and women's inequality, exploring what can be best described as "proto-feminist" ideas. The chapters reflect on the Cavendishes' re-entry into English high society following the Restoration and its impact on Margaret's life and writings. Furthermore, these three chapters explore the themes of romantic and platonic relationships, most notably same-sex affections as portrayed in her works. The chapters provide interesting and well-researched arguments about the contemporary representations of female friendship in literature, bringing attention to the poetry of Katherine Philips and Aphra Behn. Peacock argues that Cavendish is somewhat of a pioneer amongst her contemporaries even in this aspect, as her plays explore the topics of marriage and female sexuality beyond the limitations of late-Renaissance ideals.

Chapters 11 ("The thrice noble, illustrious, and excellent Princess of Philosophy") and 12 ("The Duchess of Newcastle is all the subject now discoursed on") circle back to Cavendish's contributions to natural philosophy, her relationship with the Royal Society, paying special attention to Cavendish's public persona and her contemporary reception, one that fluctuates between images of a misunderstood genius and a madwoman belonging to an asylum. Chapter 13 ("What will survive of us is books") reflects on Cavendish's obsession with ideas of fame and legacy. It highlights her efforts at attaining immortality and a level of transcendence through her extensive literary output. Finally, chapter 14 ("Doubt of an after being") concludes the biography by beautifully exposing Cavendish's personal musings on legacy and how she perceived the tangled relationship between fame and the afterlife. Though Cavendish is certainly a unique figure within English literary history, in her closing passages Peacock warns against putting Margaret Cavendish in a box. Instead, she suggests we should take in and appreciate all the complexities and contradictions her character offers.

Reading *Pure Wit* certainly enables readers to do exactly that. In terms of new information regarding Margaret Cavendish's life and death, the volume will not offer much more than the previous biographies. In fact, Peacock is both explicitly critical yet heavily reliant on both Grant's and Whitaker's works. However, references to Whitaker's book appear far more frequently, and for those who are more familiar with *Mad Madge* and its sources, names like Battigelli, Chalmers, and Fitzmaurice will ring familiar in *Pure Wit* as well. Nonetheless, it is still a valuable read even for those already somewhat acquainted with the subject matter. The book contains individual research in the form of the many examined letters and manuscripts including Cavendish's own autobiography, and Peacock is ready to voice criticism when she finds Cavendish's claims disingenuous or whenever they fail to cohere with the historical context. That is perhaps the strongest characteristic of the volume which also sets it aside from previous publications. Peacock provides well-detailed and clearly explained historical backgrounds for each chapter that truly help with contextualizing and understanding exactly what Margaret Cavendish did to make herself singular in her time. Moreover, the volume challenges many of the previous, often sensational, preconceptions surrounding Cavendish's character, aiming to paint a fair and considerate picture, leaving behind the monikers of madness. While it is an enjoyable read for those familiar with the topic, the book seems to be intended for a wholly uninitiated audience. It provides a fresh, modern take that turns a complicated early modern English authoress into a much more approachable figure. Indeed, *Pure Wit* by Francesca Peacock may very well help Margaret Cavendish reach the fame in posterity she so desired.