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Blake, Liza, ed. Margaret Cavendish's Poems and Fancies: A Digital Critical Edition

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Blake, Liza, ed.
***Margaret Cavendish's* Poems and Fancies*: A Digital Critical Edition*.**
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library2.utm.utoronto.ca/poemsandfancies/.

Liza Blake's new edition of Margaret Cavendish's *Poems and Fancies*, completed in collaboration with thirteen undergraduate research assistants, is a major work of scholarship that promises to be useful to both scholars and teachers of early modern literature. Blake's digital edition is the first critical edition of Cavendish's poetry. In other words, it is the first to be based on a collation of all three editions (1653, 1664, 1668) and the first to include full textual notes documenting all substantial variants. Cavendish's poetry has not always been widely available, and as a result, has been less read and less studied than some of her other works. This edition changes that and will open up new opportunities for the study and teaching of Cavendish's works.

Blake's edition is an easy-to-navigate website that includes editions of all of the prefatory material and poems in *Poems and Fancies*. The site also includes two introductions: a critical introduction ("Reading Poems (and Fancies): An Introduction to Margaret Cavendish's *Poems and Fancies*") and an extensive textual and editorial introduction that explains and justifies the editors' choices in the editing and presentation of the poems. A brief introductory landing page provides a description of the project and its contributors and a useful overview of how to navigate the site. All of the poems can be accessed from a Table of Contents on the left side of the screen. The Table of Contents is subdivided into several parts, displaying at a glance the complex organization of *Poems and Fancies*, which includes substantial prefatory material and five separate parts connected by interstitial sections labelled "Clasp." As Blake argues elsewhere on the website, poem arrangement is an important feature of *Poems and Fancies* that has not been widely recognized, and her edition makes this feature of Cavendish's poetry easy for readers to apprehend.

Blake writes that one of the aims of the edition is to make Cavendish's poetry "freely available online for all to use," and accessibility is certainly one of the edition's great achievements. But it is not the only one. The two substantial introductions included on the website make important contributions to scholarship on Cavendish's poetry specifically and on the challenges of editing early modern women's poetry more generally. The critical introduction makes

a strong case that we need more close readings of Cavendish's poetry. To this end, the introduction eschews biographical information and encourages instead a range of different formal approaches. This choice offers a useful and necessary alternative to many editions of early modern women's writing. As Alice Eardley has shown in her analysis of the representation of men's and women's poetry in teaching anthologies, women's poetry is often framed in narrow ways that highlight gender and/or biography.[1] Blake's edition instead urges readers to ask what kind of formalism might result from an intensive engagement with Cavendish's poetry:

> what would formalism look like—what would literary studies look like—if, instead of reading poets like Donne, Cleanth Brooks and his peers had been reading poets like Margaret Cavendish? To what other forms would we be attentive? How would it change our reading strategies? What would we be able to notice and find in her poems?

Blake uses the critical introduction, therefore, to identify several formal features of Cavendish's poetry that might each serve as a starting point for further criticism, including the lack of the first-person pronoun and the volta, as well as the importance of arrangement or ordering for understanding the poems individually and collectively. One of the important arguments that Blake makes is that the poems in *Poems and Fancies* cannot be read in isolation but must be read in relation to one another. Blake suggests that *Poems and Fancies* represents a deliberate experiment in arrangement, and the edition provides readers with tools to test this argument. As Blake demonstrates in a useful section of the critical introduction called "Anthologizing Cavendish's *Poems*," Cavendish's poetry has been anthologized in incomplete and sometimes misleading ways. By contrast, this edition provides the tools readers need to read *Poems and Fancies* as a whole and to read individual poems in the context of specific aesthetic practices. The critical introduction concludes with a useful section on further reading and suggestions for specific groupings of poems that may interest different types of readers. Blake's introductory essay offers a strong foundation for future scholarship on *Poems and Fancies*, and all Cavendish scholars will want to consult it when they undertake criticism on her poetry.

1. Alice Eardley, "Recreating the Canon: Women Writers and Anthologies of Early Modern Verse," *Women's Writing* 14.2 (2007): 270–89.

The "Textual and Editorial Introduction" is equally important, as it provides the most thorough discussion of the textual history of *Poems and Fancies* to date. Though Cavendish was very much involved in the production of her texts as books, the textual history of her works has not been thoroughly explored, and there are few scholarly editions of any of her works.[2] There are many different reasons for this neglect, including the lack of support in the profession for scholarship on women writers, as well as misconceptions about just what kind of writer Cavendish is. Given the relative lack of scholarly editions, many scholars, including myself, have worked from the facsimiles of Cavendish's books included in *Early English Books Online*, though, as Blake demonstrates in her introduction, the individual copies reproduced by *EEBO* may be idiosyncratic in any number of ways. Blake's edition, then, provides the foundational work for future scholarship on Cavendish's poetry by collating the three editions and representing the substantial variants for each poem. As scholars have long recognized, *Poems and Fancies* underwent a substantial revision between the first and second editions; however, before Blake's critical edition, there was no way to reliably assess the significance or effect of these revisions. Blake's edition makes this possible and also makes an argument about the kind of editing required by Cavendish's poetry and, by extension, by early modern women's writing more generally. For this edition, Blake and her collaborators pursued what is known as "best text" or, sometimes, conflated or eclectic editing. This form of editing allows editors to combine readings from different editions or versions of a text in order to create a single "best text." As Blake acknowledges, this type of editing is currently out of favour in early modern studies. Nevertheless, Blake and her collaborators chose this method, and I believe they offer compelling reasons for it. Without the material constraints of print, the online edition allows for the presentation of all variants, so readers can, if they wish, recreate the 1653, 1664, and 1668 versions of the poems. When you turn to a poem such as "Motion Makes Atoms a Bawd for Figure," for instance, you will first encounter a modernized version of a witty poem that allegorizes material change through a fable about the sexual relations of personified Motion, Atoms, and Figure. Blake's preference for a clean, modernized reading text allows readers to perceive both the artistry

2. Brandie Siegfried's recent print edition of *Poems and Fancies* is one important exception. See Margaret Cavendish, Poems and Fancies *with* The Animal Parliament, ed. Brandie R. Siegfried (Toronto: Iter Press, 2018).

of Cavendish's poetry and its, at times, innovative and provocative weirdness. What would it mean for all change to derive from the kind of sexual processes depicted in "Motion Makes Atoms a Bawd for Figure"? Yet the meticulous textual notes included with this poem and all of the poems in the edition also allow readers to see the openness and instability—i.e., change—inherent in the texts themselves. The notes depict all substantial variants between the different editions, which allows readers to compare and contrast different versions of the poems, and sometimes these differences are quite meaningful, as in "Motion Makes Atoms" where the personified figures are referred to with different gendered pronouns in the 1653 and 1664 editions. Blake's choice of best-text editing accompanied by complete textual notes creates Cavendish's poems as, on the one hand, works of art, and, on the other, historically contingent material texts. Blake's choice, therefore, treats Cavendish's poetry in the same way that previous generations of editors treated the great English poets such as Donne, Shakespeare, or Milton. The best-text edition by Blake and her collaborators is important because it gives "Cavendish, as a woman writer, a chance to have the same *kind* of edition, namely a conflated edition, that her male contemporaries received in the centuries where her book sat largely ignored." How can we "un-edit" if we never edited? Blake's deliberately anachronistic choice reflects Cavendish's own sense that her writing might only find its audience in the future. This edition helps fulfill Cavendish's desire and prediction. We should, as Blake urges, "*Consider reading Margaret Cavendish's Poetry.*"

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The Reception & Circulation of Early Modern Women's Writing, 1550–1700.
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National University of Ireland, Galway, 2014–20. Accessed 23 September 2019. recirc.nuigalway.ie.

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