

“Spinning with the brain”: Spinsterhood in Margaret Cavendish’s *Poems and Fancies*

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“Spinning with the brain”: Spinsterhood in Margaret Cavendish’s *Poems and Fancies*

Margaret Cavendish’s (1623-1673) references to spinning in her 1653 *Poems and Fancies*, typically taken as rhetorical performances of modesty and femininity, actually invoke the position of unmarried women in the early modern period, as the term “spinster” emerged as a new definition for single women in the early seventeenth century. Cavendish’s body of work frequently interrogates the position of women in society and investigates modes of feminine agency that exist both inside and outside of the patriarchal family unit. Across her prose, philosophical works, poetry, and plays, Cavendish theorizes about (among other things) alternative modes of female power,¹ female-dominated spaces,² and the imperative for a woman to marry.³ The Duchess of Newcastle’s complex (and often contradictory) discourse on gender roles is not limited to her main texts; her prefatory materials, in which she defends her own status as a female author in the male-dominated literary sphere, are often cited by scholars as examples of Cavendish’s conception of the place of women in society. Cavendish’s first publication, the 1653 *Poems and Fancies*, is no exception. In her self-consciously voluminous prefatory materials, the author compares the work of writing to more traditionally acceptable activities for women: “True it is,” she claims, “spinning with the fingers is more proper to our sex than studying or writing poetry, which is the spinning with the brain.”⁴ This reference to spinning and Cavendish’s later assertion that she only writes because she has no household to run (for she lived in political exile with her Royalist husband) are seen by some scholars as self-authorization on the part of an author aware of her transgressive boldness in publishing her work despite her gender. Cavendish’s desire to publish her writing was considered socially inappropriate, as few members of the early modern upper class officially printed their work (instead circulating documents in manuscript form), and even fewer women entered the literary sphere. Reading

Cavendish's prefatory reference to spinning as a comparison of her non-normative writing with a typically feminine task configures Cavendish's spinning reference as conservative, as it plays into normative gender performance. While this reading provides a necessary foundation for understanding Cavendish's complicated and artful manipulation of her critical reception, attendance to the socio-historical context of spinning in the seventeenth century demonstrates the complexity and potential transgression of the writer's self-positioning.

The aim of this project is to examine Cavendish's references to spinning within the context of a seventeenth-century redefinition of the term "spinster" to mean "unmarried woman." For this paper, I will focus on the prefatory materials and a few select poems in Cavendish's *Poems and Fancies* (hereafter *P&F*), as this publication marks the writer's entry into the world of published letters.⁵ By placing Cavendish's spinning references in conversation with a contemporaneously emerging definition of "spinster"—one that renders the occupational title a legal term for an unmarried woman—I will offer an alternative perspective on her self-positioning, one that suggests that her written work operates as a site of engagement with a spinster's unique ability to retain a self-contained legacy within the patriarchal system. I will then argue that Cavendish's poetic investment in a self-contained legacy inherently disrupts chrononormative constructions of reproductive time in a way that mimics the liminal temporality of spinsterhood; this temporal disruption is visible not only in the narrative treatment of time in individual poems, but additionally in the formal structure of the text in its entirety. By drawing attention to the untimely spinster characters that populate Cavendish's *P&F*, as well as to her ultimate treatment of these transgressive figures, I hope to highlight and contextualize the author's complex and often contradictory representation of women within her literary work. Cavendish's *P&F* is an intersection of interest in self-sufficiency and anti-chrononormative

reading practices rendered legible through its invocation of the double meaning of spinsterhood, so it will serve as a useful space in which to test the utility of a reading of early modern writing (and Cavendish in particular) that foregrounds a new definition of the term “spinster.”

The first reference to spinning in *P&F* occurs in the dedicatory epistle “To Sir Charles Cavendish, My Noble Brother-in-Law.” This prefatory piece is the first example of Margaret Cavendish’s writing in the volume, as the dedicatory poem that precedes it is penned by her husband, William Cavendish, the Duke of Newcastle. Margaret Cavendish makes reference to the task of spinning in the second sentence of her address:

True it is, spinning with the fingers is more proper to our sex than studying or writing poetry, which is the spinning with the brain. But having no skill in the art of the first (and if I had, I had no hopes of gaining so much as to make me a garment to keep me from cold), I made my delight in the latter (since all brains work naturally and incessantly, in some kind or other), which made me endeavor to spin a garment of memory to lap up my name, that it might grow to after-ages.⁶

Cavendish’s comparison of the traditionally feminine labor of spinning to the work of a writer and scholar is taken by many critics as a false modesty tactic: she professes her inability to perform one task in order to excuse her performance of another, less normative task. As Jessie Hock explains, Cavendish’s prefatory writing frequently presents her work “as a domestic textual production born of a woman’s boredom, idleness, and fancy” in order to quell “hostile reactions to a woman writer writing herself into the masculine public sphere.”⁷ This rhetorical strategy occurs again in Cavendish’s address “To the Reader” in which she claims that, “I have no children to employ my care and attendance on, and my lord’s estate being taken away in those times when I writ this book, had nothing for housewifery or thrifty industry to employ myself in, having no stock to work on.”⁸ Cavendish excuses her presence in the male-dominated literary sphere by arguing that she has none of the traditional feminine occupations on which to spend her time and by reframing her writing in terms of these tasks in order to feminize the work of a

poet.⁹ Cavendish's argument that *P&F* is like her child, and her hope that the world will "Pity its youth and tender growth, and rather tax the parent's indiscretion than the child's innocence," is another move that reframes the work of writing in terms of the traditionally feminine activity of child-rearing.¹⁰ Lara Dodds argues that Cavendish's comparison of her writing to acceptably feminine activities is a form of writerly acrobatics: "Cavendish paradoxically transforms her lack of housewifery into a public performance of the housewife's duties through the construction of an analogy between different forms of 'work.'"¹¹ Cavendish's literary manipulation is therefore twofold: she excuses herself from the expectation that she fill her time with feminine tasks by explaining that she has no such tasks to perform, and then she reframes her non-conformity by claiming that the traditionally masculine activity of writing and publishing is an intellectual version of common housewife duties.

This reading of Cavendish's reference to spinning in her prefatory materials operates off of a specific definition of the term "spinster," one with which Cavendish was certainly well-acquainted. As early as 1362, people who spun wool into yarn by trade were called "spinsters,"¹² an etymological nod to the process by which a person "draw[s] out and twist[s] the fibres of some suitable material, such as wool or flax, so as to form a continuous thread."¹³ Cavendish's reference to the occupational labor of spinning is therefore legible as a metaphor for the creative process of writing: she is "spinning" the fibers of her poetry from her brain.¹⁴ However, by the time of *P&F*'s publication, "spinster" no longer simply referred to a person whose occupation was spinning. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term "spinster" was used on legal documents to denote a woman's unmarried status as early as 1617.¹⁵ As Bridget Hill notes, "The Minsheu Director, a legal dictionary of 1617, includes the definition: 'A Spinster, a terme, or an addition in our Common Law, only added in Obligations, Evidences and Writings, unto maids

unmarried.”¹⁶ Most scholars agree that this legal definition came about in the early seventeenth century because the rising numbers of unmarried women in English society merited a common legal name for the growing group. Maryanne Kowaleski records this demographic change: “In the British peerage, about 5 to 9 percent of noblewomen were lifelong singlewomen in the sixteenth century, but this figure rose to 13-15 percent in the seventeenth century and became as high as 28 percent in the eighteenth century.”¹⁷ Likely due to this growing population, it became legally necessary to categorize unmarried women in the seventeenth century, and “spinster” was the term employed to do so.

Carol Z. Wiener records an even earlier usage of the term “spinster” as a synonym for an unmarried woman: she cites several early modern indictments against women in which they were referred to as “spinsters” despite the fact that their trade was not spinning wool; significantly, the “spinsters” mentioned in these indictments were also married. In these cases, wives had committed crimes for which their husbands were not culpable. Wiener explains that prior to the late sixteenth century, husbands were held responsible for the criminal actions of their wives, as it was assumed that a wife could not act against her husband’s will. Wiener therefore concludes that the designation of married women as spinsters in these cases was a way for the justices to hold wives responsible for their own crimes while maintaining a legal language of patriarchal domination. As she suggests, “By calling married women ‘spinsters’ when it suited them, perhaps the J.P.s [justices of the peace] had found a way to live happily in two separate worlds: a practical world in which married women were uniformly subservient to their husbands and in which the law, as written in law books, actually worked.”¹⁸ The fact that Wiener reads “spinster” as “unmarried woman” in these cases suggests that the new legal definition for the term, cited by the OED as emerging in 1617, was actually in use as early as 1589.¹⁹

While scholars of spinsterhood have not fully agreed on the reason why the specific term “spinster” became synonymous with “unmarried woman” at this point in the English vernacular, most people who study spinsterhood assert that the new definition arose because spinning was an occupational field dominated by women who were not yet or never to be married. The majority of occupational spinsters were women, as is evidenced by the parenthetical in the OED’s definition of the term: “A woman (*or, rarely, a man*) [...] who practices spinning as a regular occupation.”²⁰ By spinning wool into yarn, women were able to produce a small income for themselves. Often, unmarried daughters were spinsters in order to contribute to their family’s household income, but there are a number of recorded cases of spinsters who lived independently from a family unit or in “spinster clusters,” groups of single women who lived and worked together.²¹ Therefore, the occupation of spinsterhood became synonymous with women who were unmarried, and the term began to be used as a legal appendage that designated a woman’s single status.²² Since Cavendish’s reference to “spinning with the brain” in her 1653 *P&F* comes well after the first recorded use of the term “spinster” to mean “unmarried woman,” it is far more than a self-authorizing invocation of the occupational activity of spinning wool.

While Cavendish’s spinning metaphor could certainly be a part of her attempt to feminize the act of writing, the contemporary expansion of the definition of “spinster” means that her literary allusion to spinning also has the contradictory effect of invoking non-normative femininity. A reading of Cavendish’s spinning references within the context of early modern single women may seem out of place in scholarship about a woman who was herself happily married; however, Cavendish’s position as a woman of letters, as well as her non-normative performance of femininity, mark her literary work as a site of particular interest to spinster scholarship. Cavendish never had children, and she took an active interest in her financial

situation, characteristics she shares with spinsters and which locate her as a target of social scorn. A scholarly connection between Cavendish and spinsterhood is well recorded: several sources on early modern spinsterhood cite Cavendish as a woman interested in a life beyond or outside of marriage. As Bridget Hill notes, Cavendish once claimed that she “did dread marriage [...] and shun’d Men’s companies as much as [she] could,” although the writer later married.²³ Cavendish’s lack of children, early declaration of opposition to marriage, and literary investment in female independence and agency all connect her to the expanded definition of spinsterhood, so her invocation of spinning in *P&F*’s prefatory materials serves two contradictory functions: it is both a conservative feminization of the act of writing and a radical connection to the place of the unmarried and independent woman in early modern society.

Cavendish’s insistence on printing her written work further connects her to the expanded definition of spinsterhood through the eyes of her most vehement critics, as her prefatory phrase “spinning with the brain” reifies an already present connection between the “learned lady” and the spinster in the early modern imagination. Early modern spinsters and educated women were often connected by social criticism and devaluation, for, as Bridget Hill notes, “all the opprobrium that spinsters attracted was by a curious quirk of reasoning transferred to the learned lady. She was assumed to be unmarried and, whether married or not, lacking in all domestic virtues, ignoring home, husband and children.”²⁴ While Hill regards this conflation as a “curious quirk of reasoning,” there are strong connections between the social construction and reception of spinsters and learned ladies in early modern society. Both figures were regarded by their critics as insufficiently feminine, as individuals whose interests existed outside of the domestic sphere and were therefore contrary to traditionally acceptable roles for women. As Sir Ralph Verney (1613-1696) wrote of his daughter who was interested in academic pursuits, “Pegg is

very backward [...] I doubt not but she will be scholar enough for a Woeman.”²⁵ Pegg’s scholarly interest marks her as “backward,” as a woman whose interest and energy points in the opposite direction of her supposedly natural domestic duties. This “backward” focus on extra-domestic pursuits is what connects spinsters and learned ladies in the early modern imagination; spinsters were women who did not focus their energy on reproduction and child-rearing, and learned ladies—women who focused on scholarly pursuits such as writing—were accused of having priorities out of line with domestic femininity. In early modern society, both figures served as examples of non-normative women with self-centered and inappropriately directed interests. While Cavendish repeatedly refutes her position as a scholar in the prefatory materials of *P&F* by making such claims as “I never read nor heard of any English book to instruct me, and truly I understand no other language,” these remarks should be read with a healthy dose of skepticism.²⁶ These statements are not authentic denials of Cavendish’s interest in knowledge and writing, but rather are posturing attempts at modesty. Hyperattentive to her future critical reception, Cavendish uses her prefatory materials as a means of endearing herself to her audience through performative gestures of self-deprecation, such as when she describes *P&F* as a “coarse piece” of clothing that could hardly keep her from the cold.²⁷ Cavendish’s insinuation that she does not count as a learned lady is a similar effort to ingratiate herself with her audience and quell negative reception through a performance of feminine meekness. Although it is true that Cavendish did not receive a robust education as a young girl, her insistence on making a place for herself in public scholarship poses a similar threat to the traditional gendered order of society as a learned lady. Despite her own frequent denials of knowledge and the history of her less-than-stellar education, Cavendish remains socially connected to learned ladies through her

insistence on occupying space in the masculine world of publishing; like learned ladies, Cavendish's disruption of domestic expectation ties her to the threat of the unmarried spinster.

The connection between spinsters and educated women is further legible within the historically persistent discourse of devaluation and disdain surrounding both figures. Predictably, early modern views on spinsterhood were profoundly negative because the social position represented a life for women outside of the patriarchal family unit. Spinsters, or as they were derogatorily called, "old maids," were the victims of criticism that peaked in fervor in the late seventeenth century and early eighteenth century but was steadily building during Cavendish's writing career. In her study of the negative formulation of the old maid, Susan Lanser cites John Dunton's compendium *The Challenge... Or, The Female War* (1697) in which spinsters are referred to as "Lumps of Diseases" with "terrible Fangs" who resemble "She-Cannibals."²⁸ While Lanser explains that in comparison to eighteenth-century attitudes, social criticism of spinsterhood during the seventeenth century was less intense, she acknowledges that it certainly existed during Cavendish's time; according to Lanser, such criticism often centered "on the curious proverb that singlewomen 'lead apes in hell,' which appeared in such plays as Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Much Ado About Nothing*, *The London Prodigal*, and Shirley's *The School of Compliment*, and persisted into the eighteenth century."²⁹ The vitriol levelled at spinsters in the mid-to-late seventeenth century frequently focused on a single woman's inability to adequately perform femininity. As Bridget Hill notes, "Spinsterhood tended for many to denote ugliness and the lack of all feminine charms."³⁰ Because they were defined outside of the reproductive imperative of womanhood, women without children (or, in the case of this project, spinsters) were aggressively depicted as ungendered. Similarly, women interested in scholarly pursuits—of which Margaret Cavendish was one—were criticized for pursuing goals

outside of the traditional domestic purview. According to Felicity Nussbaum, during Cavendish's life, "The learned lady [...] becomes a pervasive metaphor for the unnatural woman who refuses to perform the natural functions of her sex and who actively usurps the functions of that male sex."³¹ By attending to their own studies and scholarly work, women who read, wrote, and engaged in academic disciplines were regarded as unfeminine and unnatural, for a good, domestic woman would never find herself interested in anything beyond childcare and the fulfillment of household needs. Learned ladies and spinsters, as women whose lives and interests push beyond domestic thresholds, are therefore connected through a history of criticism that accuses them of lacking domestic virtues.

Cavendish's interest in publishing and her eccentric lifestyle have attracted a discourse of detraction eerily similar to the social treatment of spinsters and learned ladies. Scholarly work on Cavendish contains no shortage of references to the harsh criticism frequently aimed at the eccentric writer's performance of rhetorical style and gender identity. Cavendish's seemingly indecorous entry into the print culture of the seventeenth century—in which few women writers publicly participated—along with her allegedly haphazard approach to poetic, linguistic, and grammatical rules have positioned her as the victim of much critical abuse. Line Cottegnies and Nancy Weitz explain that up until the past fifty years, Cavendish was not regarded as worthy of critical study: "whenever [her] writings were mentioned, the same few poetic passages with their 'eccentric' images were trotted out as proof of her madness and thus gave license to disregard her work as frivolous, fanciful, unstructured, uneducated."³² Centuries of mockery aimed at Cavendish have been so well-documented in recent scholarship that Lara Dodds notes, "Indeed it is conventional to begin an essay on Cavendish's writing with these or similar [negative] comments as a prelude to arguments that redefine the so-called defects of Cavendish's writing in

more positive terms.”³³ Examples of negative Cavendish criticism often include Dorothy Osborne’s claim that “there are many soberer People in Bedlam,”³⁴ and Virginia Woolf’s comment that Cavendish’s writing is like “some giant cucumber [that] has spread itself over all the roses and carnations in the garden and choked them to death.”³⁵ These comments, along with the oft-cited nickname for Cavendish, “Mad Madge,” emphasize the extent to which people have ridiculed the author for not conforming to literary and social expectations.

The frequency with which the quotations from Osborne and Woolf appear in Cavendish scholarship is particularly notable; they are pithy and extremely quotable, but they also speak to a persistent anxiety surrounding Cavendish’s non-normative gender performance. Osborne’s assertion that Cavendish’s sanity is in question extends beyond criticism of her haphazard approach to poetry and reads as an attack on her eccentric personality and lifestyle. Perhaps more pointedly, Woolf’s image of the giant cucumber choking the life out of a garden invokes a phallic, unbeautiful vegetable murdering a field of pretty and feminine flowers. Much like Hill’s description of criticism aimed at spinsters, Woolf’s words divest Cavendish of her social value by describing her as ugly and unfeminine. This metaphor for Cavendish envisions her not only as lacking in feminine charm, but as dangerous and disruptive to the production and proliferation of (English) roses. Cavendish’s growth threatens England’s normative flora in the same way that spinsters were seen to cause the stagnation of national population growth.³⁶ Woolf’s quotation, though written centuries after Cavendish’s lifetime (and, contradictorily, in Woolf’s most famously feminist work), betrays a persistent social discomfort with Cavendish’s non-normative performance of femininity, one that ties her to the socially devalued categories of learned ladies and spinsters.

Cavendish's refusal to bend to societal expectations, as well as the criticism aimed at her for her rhetorical and gender transgressions, marks her and her work as particularly useful sites in which to explore the non-normative role of spinsterhood as it was understood in the seventeenth century. Cavendish, as a woman with extra-domestic priorities, is connected to the socially devalued position of spinsterhood. Her poetic reference to this position, when viewed in the context of an abundant historical record of critical connections between educated women and spinsters, marks Cavendish's *P&F* as an intersection and exploration of non-normative feminine roles. Her prefatory mention of spinning is both a conservative attempt to feminize her non-normativity and an encoded reference to a group of women even less normative than herself. When Cavendish claims the act of spinning, she performs a paradoxical engagement with gender roles and norms that complicates a linear or singular conception of her meaning. While this project has so far explicated the historical ties between Cavendish's "spinning with the brain" and the historically degraded role of the unmarried woman, it will now explore how such a connection promotes new readings of Cavendish's work.

The polyvalence of Cavendish's spinning references, understood within the context of the social redefinition of the term "spinster," emphasizes the writer's persistent rhetorical investment in self-sufficiency. Cavendish's prefatory desire to "spin a garment of memory to lap up [her] name, that it might grow to after-ages," demonstrates her interest in a self-contained legacy, one that is capable of carrying on her name without a reproductive imperative.³⁷ She hopes to create for herself a written legacy through which her "name might grow to after-ages," a desire that ties itself to a non-reproductive acquisition of futurity and fame. Instead of relying on the production of children to carry her name into the future, Cavendish invests rhetorical energy in alternate modes of self-promotion that exist outside of the heteronormative family unit. Throughout her

voluminous body of work, Cavendish clearly expresses her desire to make a self-contained name for herself. In the preface to her 1666 publication *The Description of a New World, Called The Blazing World*, Cavendish repeatedly asserts the originality of her work: as she argues, “It is a Description of a *New World*, not such as *Lucian’s*, or the *French man’s World in the Moon*; but a World of my own Creating.”³⁸ Cavendish explains to her readers that her work is hers alone, not a regurgitation of what she has read by male writers. She frequently insists that her writing is pure invention, and as was mentioned earlier in this essay, she claimed that she “never read nor heard of any English book to instruct [her].”³⁹ While this statement is typically taken as an exercise in modesty (for if she hasn’t had a formal education, all her ideas might be wrong!), when read alongside Cavendish’s reference to spinning, we can understand this rhetorical strategy as a claim to a self-contained legacy. As Jessie Hock contends, “The author is vehement that her fame will be won by herself alone, not through any debt to another text or thinker. Instead of books, she has her own thoughts, natural and self-generated.”⁴⁰ Cavendish wants her readers to understand that her thoughts are the product of her own independently spinning brain. Her interest in such a self-contained and self-spun “garment” is highlighted by close attention to the double meaning of “spinster” and by extension, to the spinning imagery in Cavendish’s *P&F*.

Cavendish’s interest in creating a legacy that begins and ends with her own mind extends beyond the prefatory materials of *P&F* and into the poetic body of the text. In the poem “Of a Spider’s Web,” she explores a mode of creation that is wholly contained within the mind of the author and that is explicitly manifested through the action of spinning. In her poetic examination of a spider spinning a web, Cavendish writes:

Her bowels are the shop where flax is found,
Her body is the wheel that goeth ‘round.
Her distaff, where she sticks the thread, ‘s a wall;
Her feet, the fingers are, she pulls withal.⁴¹

Cavendish's description of the spider's creative process employs the metaphor of spinning yarn, as she imagines the spider's body as a "wheel" and the wall as a "distaff." Crucially, her spinning reference focuses on self-contained creation; the spider's work stems solely from her own body, each thread spun from the flax found inside her. The conflation of images regarding garment production, spiders, and self-contained creation is not limited to Cavendish's work. According to Mircea Eliade, "to weave is not merely to predestine (anthropologically) but also to create, to make something of one's own substance as the spider does in spinning its web."⁴² By tying the creative work of a spider to the human creation of cloth, Cavendish entangles herself and her particular brand of creativity with an already present discourse of self-sufficiency. As Sylvia Bowerbank argues, Cavendish's emphasis on spinning and spider imagery falls into Jonathon Swift's dichotomy of the bee and the spider. In Swift's *Battle of the Books*, he claims that some writers are like neoclassical bees, as their work is the product of an expansive attention to outside thought, and the resulting product (the metaphorical honey) is useful to society. In contrast to the neoclassical bee is the spiderly writer, whose characteristics include "his stress on originality; his fondness for a domestic rather than a 'universal' perspective; [and] his aimless creativity which, although it creates a space for himself, gives nothing of use (honey and wax) to others."⁴³ Bowerbank claims that Cavendish's attitude towards writing is unapologetically spiderly, as she repeatedly proclaims the originality of her work and "favors imagery of silkworm, spider, and spinning for depicting literary creativity, particularly hers."⁴⁴ Cavendish's reference to spinning is marked by an insistence on seeing her writing process as the creation of a self-contained legacy, one that shares characteristics with occupational spinsters and biologically spinning spiders. The occupational spinster and spider therefore come together in

this poem to demonstrate an interest in the ability of a woman to make something of her own without outside input.

Read alongside the contemporary expansion of the definition of “spinster,” Cavendish’s spinning metaphor also operates as an encoded reference to the socio-economic category of unmarried women, a social group that operates outside of reproductive legacy-creation. A spinster, a woman untethered to (or submissive to) the needs and accomplishments of a husband and children, is a textual indication of a claim for self-sufficiency, as her social value (or as critics would argue, lack of value) is tied only to herself and her own actions. As unmarried women, spinsters did not typically bear children, so the heteronormative production of offspring as legacies that were capable of carrying on one’s name and fortune was not available to them. Instead, a spinster’s legacy was her own to control and dispense with, as she could pass on her fortune (however small) to whomever she chose.⁴⁵ In patriarchal systems of feminine creation, childbearing is a woman’s means of creation and accessing a sense of futurity; however, in early modern society, this form of creation led to a product that was not under the control and ownership of the mother. Children, like property, were under the legal control of the male head of the household; while women were deemed useful in the bearing and rearing of children, the husband/father was the ultimate authority in the family unit. Spinsters, on the other hand, did not participate in this system of creation and subsequent loss of control. If a spinster created something that could be counted as a legacy (such as a sum of money or a written work), it was hers over which to claim ownership and control. Cavendish’s use of spinning imagery when describing her writing suggests that she viewed her written products in much the same way. Her metaphor is therefore legible not (simply) as the self-conscious excuse of a woman in a male-

dominated field, but as a claim to a self-contained and non-reproductive mode of feminine creation.

The convergence in *P&F* of spinning imagery and the desire for a self-contained legacy coincides with the economic and social reality of unmarried women during Cavendish's time. Seventeenth-century spinsters, while not the only women with financial and social agency, were uniquely in control of their own property; the social and economic status of the unmarried woman therefore embodies Cavendish's persistent interest in a self-contained and self-controlled legacy. As women who existed outside of marital bonds, spinsters had a financial agency that was denied to most married women. As Judith M. Bennet and Amy M. Froide note, "singlewomen and widows were often poorer than wives, but they were able to use their meager resources—cash, goods, credit, property—with fewer restrictions. Unlike most wives, they could sell goods, contract debts, loan money, transfer land, and otherwise manage their affairs as they best saw fit."⁴⁶ While a married woman in the seventeenth century would have some control over her household accounts,⁴⁷ the familial finances would be under her husband's name and control. Under a system of coverture, a wife's legal identity was subsumed by her husband's, and any financial action on the part of a wife was ultimately a reflection on her husband. When, for instance, Margaret Cavendish travelled to England to sue for a portion of her exiled husband's estate, she acted as an extension of William Cavendish. As Julie Crawford explains, "While the relationships between women and property, and women and authority, were destabilized in interregnum and early Restoration England—women had defended property, sought to preserve it, petitioned Parliament for their share—their ultimate rights to it were still limited by portions and jointures, and the transmission of property remained in the service of patriarchal lineage."⁴⁸ Even Cavendish's written work could operate as an extension of her husband's influence; as

Hero Chalmers claims, “Cavendish’s legal designation as a femme couverte, the property of her husband, ‘provided her with a license positively to embrace the printed publication of her texts. In view of her husband’s ignoble silencing and exclusion from public affairs, she, as the legal function of his identity, might serve as his surrogate’ and use ‘the notion that she was a spokesperson for her exiled husband as a means of finding a voice in print.’”⁴⁹ Cavendish is acutely aware of society’s tendency to attribute the work of a wife to her husband, and, as is typical of her style, she paradoxically vacillates between cultivating and opposing such an outlook on her own written work. At times, Cavendish claims that her husband taught her everything she knew, such as in her biography of him in which she states that “your Lordship was my onely Tutor [...] for I being young when your Lordship married me, could not have much knowledg of the world.”⁵⁰ However, Cavendish simultaneously insists upon the originality of her work; in the same passage in which she claims her husband as her “onely Tutor,” Cavendish disputes rumors that “somebody else had writ and publish’d” her books by recalling William’s statement that “what was written and printed in [her] name, was [her] own.”⁵¹ While Cavendish defers to her husband’s authority and knowledge at times, she still insists upon portraying her writing process in the context of self-contained creation. Her self-proclaimed desire to be called “*Margaret the First*,” found in the preface to *The Blazing World*, signals her interest in fame and recognition separate from a male family member, as the royal title lacks a patrilineal surname.⁵² Cavendish is interested in both appearing femininely deferential to her husband and radically original, a doubled and contrasting performance encoded in her use of the polyvalent reference to spinning and spinsterhood. In the occupational and non-normative gender role of spinsterhood, we find an early modern contrast to the submissive position of early modern wives. Cavendish’s spinning references therefore mark her interest in a self-contained and

original mode of feminine production that contrasts the misogynistic assumption that her written work could be attributed to her husband or any other man.

Cavendish's interest in a self-sufficient mode of creation is evident not only in her repeated references to spinning, but in the characters who perform the work of spinsters (social and occupational) in her poetry. The first non-prefatory appearance of spinning or spinsters in *P&F* occurs in the first poem of the collection: "Nature Calls a Counsel, Which Is Motion, Figure, Matter, and Life, to Advise about Making the World." In this poem, a female personification of Nature calls together a group of beings to determine how to build the world. Early in the poem, Nature says, "Wherefore, if you will pleasure have therein, / You'll breed the Fates in housewifery to spin."⁵³ This reference to the Fates is an explicit textual manifestation of occupational spinsterhood; in Greek mythology, the three Fates (collectively called the Moirae) were named Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos, and they were often depicted as three women who would spin, allot, and cut the thread of human fate. While Cavendish's creation story differs from Greek mythology, her invocation of the Fates relies upon her audience having a shared cultural knowledge of the role of these figures in classical mythology. Cavendish's reference to the trio of Fates, along with her statement about their spinning skills, conjures for her reader the productive power of occupational spinning; only these figures are able to create the thread of life, and they require no outside resources in order to do so.

In "Nature Calls a Counsel," the productive power of the Fates to create, allot, and cut the thread of life is mediated through their forced subservience to another deity. According to Nature, the "Fates [...] upon great Life attend."⁵⁴ The trio attends to Life, and therefore must do as they are bid; this mitigates their productive agency, but like social spinsters, their actions and products are clearly their own. This self-control is signaled in the apparent betrayal of Life by the

supposedly submissive Fates. Although the creative power of the Fates is meant to be mediated by Life, Cavendish's poem suggests that the trio has the ability to reject the directions of their leader. As Nature laments:

And Fates, though they upon great Life attend,
Yet fear they Death, and dare him not offend.
Though two be true and spin as Life them bids,
The third is false, and doth cut short the threads.⁵⁵

While Nature claims that the Fates betray Life because they fear Death, her suggestion that "The third [Fate] is false" implies that this act of disloyalty is an active choice on the part of the mythical spinsters. Cavendish's spinsterly Fates have the agency to choose which master they serve, or in other words, to spin their own fate. This agency is typical of mythological accounts of the Fates. Although they seem to work at the mercy of the gods, there is some evidence to suggest that the other Greek deities were humbled by the power of the Fates. Pierre Grimal explains that, "The Moirae were as inflexible as destiny; they embodied a law which even the gods could not break without endangering the equilibrium of existence."⁵⁶ Indeed, "in the Iliad (16.433-61), Zeus knows that his beloved son Sarpedon is destined to die [...] and—much as he grieves—he [can do] nothing to save him."⁵⁷ In classical mythology, even Zeus, the most powerful of the gods, must bend to the will of the Fates. The ability of Cavendish's trio of Fates to betray Life and choose to help Death suggests that a similar form of agency is available for the spinsters within *P&F*'s system of creation. Even though the Fates ostensibly have their creativity mediated by an authority figure, their work is their own, and they are capable of committing acts of disobedience while still maintaining credit for their work. This self-contained and controlling power is an example of how Cavendish's poetic work operates at the intersection of an authorial interest in self-sufficiency and a contemporaneously emerging redefinition of spinsterhood.

The presence of spinsters in *P&F* who are capable of self-contained legacy-creation necessitates a disruption of heteropatriarchal conceptions of time by harnessing the unmarried woman's ability to bypass the imperative to recreate a male-led and future-oriented family unit. The disloyal actions of the Fates in "Nature Calls a Counsel" emphasize the interest and ability of spinsters to disrupt normative time schemes. According to Nature, the third Fate "doth cut short the threads" of life; while death eventually comes to be understood as a natural conclusion to life, Nature's accusation suggests that pre-creative normative time includes threads of life that continue on forever, never to be clipped short. So, the Fates betray not only their mistress, but the very concept of normative time, or "chrononormativity." Elizabeth Freeman's term "chrononormativity" refers to the regulated conception of time that a society forces on its members;⁵⁸ Freeman's work specifically deals with the ways in which queer individuals disrupt normative time schemes by refusing mandated life-markers of linear temporal progression such as marriage and childbearing. Spinsterhood embodies such a disruption, as single women do not conform to the standard periods of female life in which a girl's maturation into womanhood is mediated through the commodity transfer of control over her from father to husband. The timelessness of spinsterhood is best exemplified in an alternate name for a single woman: old maid. The term "old maid," often used as an insult, states a spinster's ability to straddle time. She is both grotesquely ancient and virginally innocent, and her refusal to conform to chrononormative expectations of femininity marks her as powerfully and dangerously un-timed. By tampering with the length of the strands of life, the Fates of Cavendish's poem embody the anti-chrononormative imperative of single women; such a reading emerges through attendance to the double meaning of the word "spinster" in Cavendish's work.

The fact that the Fates betray a character called “Life” further suggests a disruption of chrononormativity that aligns with the social opinion of early modern spinsters. The Fates do not just shorten the length of a lifetime with their scissors—they invest their creative powers in the very opposite of Life: Death. Such a realignment of loyalty could suggest for Cavendish’s early modern audience the perceived social power of spinsterhood to stall and even stop national population growth. Susan Lanser persuasively argues that the demographic spike in spinsters in the late seventeenth century and patriarchal anxiety over female financial and social agency cannot fully account for the excessively negative construction of the “old maid” in the English imagination. She therefore offers English anxiety over population stagnancy and size as a potential reason for the aggressive anti-spinster sentiments in the national imagination towards the end of the seventeenth century. English concerns over population growth were justified, as England’s population was about half that of Spain’s, less than half that of Italy’s, and less than a quarter that of France’s.⁵⁹ In Lanser’s estimation, national anxiety over insufficient population size and growth led to the “dramatic discrediting of the female body that did not reproduce.”⁶⁰ Spinsters were seen as women who refused to fulfill their natural biological role in the (re)production of an English population and who were consequently aligned against national life. As women who failed to contribute to the perpetuation of the nation’s population, spinsters were seen as harbingers of national death. The growing sentiment was that without enforced reproduction, English’s agricultural system and armies in particular would lack the human capital necessary for growth and survival, and that the country would subsequently fall behind the rest of Europe; under-population left England open and vulnerable to catastrophe, so spinsterhood was connected in the English social imagination with death and decay. Cavendish’s poetic Fates re-enact this betrayal of Life by cutting short the threads of human fate for Death;

due to growing concerns over population stagnancy during Cavendish's writing career, her poetic portrayal of a group of female occupational spinsters aligned against a personification of life invokes social concerns over the anti-chrononormativity of unmarried and childless women. The Fates' betrayal of Life in favor of Death is therefore legible as an investment in anti-chrononormative re-conceptions of time, an investment associated with early modern spinsters.

While Cavendish's poem suggests an interest in the non-conforming power of spinsterhood (as she allows her Fates to betray Life), it later performs a reversal of this radical narrative by re-scripting the nature of time itself. By the end of "Nature Calls a Counsel," the anti-chrononormative rebellion of the Fates in cutting short the thread of life is reintegrated into normative conceptions of time. As Nature concludes,

You, Life, command the Fates a thread to spin,
From which small thread the body shall begin.
And while the thread doth last, not cut in twain,
The body shall in motion still remain.
But when the thread is broke, he down shall fall,
And for a time, no motion have at all.
But yet, the mind shall live and never die;
We'll raise the body too, for company.
Thus like ourselves we may make things to live
Eternally, but no past times can give.⁶¹

In this section of the poem, the cutting of the thread of life becomes part of the natural progression of time; Nature constructs a way for humans to both die and live forever, and in so doing, undermines the rebellious investment of the Fates in Death. By the end of the poem, the spinsterly work of betraying Life is mitigated and integrated back into a chrononormative conception of time. While it interrogates and invests rhetorical power in self-contained and disruptive spinsters, Cavendish's poem ultimately divests its spinsters' anti-chrononormative rebellion of its effect.

This move is contradictory, but not surprising; Cavendish routinely populates her writing with non-normative women, only to fold her radical characters back into normative narratives or kill them. In *The Convent of Pleasure*, for example, Lady Happy vows never to marry, but ends up falling for and marrying a prince by the end of the play. Cavendish more morbidly mitigates the power of spinster Lady Sanspareille from *Youth's Glory, Death's Banquet* by killing the character off. With these contradictory rhetorical moves, Cavendish demonstrates the ability of her writing to both highlight radical women and mitigate their power. The self-contained legacy-creation of the spinsters that populate *P&F* is therefore emphasized in some poems (such as “Of a Spider’s Web”) while in other poems similar characters are divested of their time-warping powers (such as in “Nature Calls a Counsel”). This ambivalence is typical of Cavendish’s treatment of women in her writing. As Sylvia Bowerbank contends, “Since Cavendish makes no judgmental distinctions among her female orators, it would be a mistake to guess her viewpoint; perhaps she shared all their attitudes to some extent. Contradiction is typical of her style.”⁶² Cavendish’s haphazard treatment of her radical female characters, while making it nearly impossible to definitively identify her opinion on female agency, matches the polyvalence of the term “spinster.” At once a slur, occupational title, legal definition, and term of female independence, the word “spinster” is too expansive to be pinned down to a singular meaning. The slipperiness of Cavendish’s prose and poetry, with its self-contradictions and frequent edits and reprintings, parallels the multiplicity of meaning emphasized by her references to spinning and spinster-characters.

A familiarity with the dual meaning of spinsterhood is also crucial to understanding the formal qualities of Cavendish’s work, for the time-warping power of spinsters in *P&F* extends to the poetic and structural style of the author herself. The effect of Cavendish’s “poetics of

variety” on a reader’s experience of *P&F* is disorienting to normative conceptions of readerly time. While a typical book invites its readers to begin on the first page and continue chronologically through the text until the end, Cavendish urges her reader to disentangle from such strict readerly practices. For, as she states in “To Natural Philosophers,” readers can “skip this part of my book [about atoms] and view the other, for fear it may seem tedious.”⁶³ Indeed, she continues, “Though the subject be light and the chapters short, perchance the other may please better; if not the second, the third; if not the third, the fourth; if not the fourth, the fifth.”⁶⁴ Cavendish invites her readers to move through her work at whatever pace best suits them instead of conforming to a standard readerly time that necessitates a full understanding of each component part before one can move on to the next section. Her invitation is a direct refutation of the chrononormativity of reading that is best highlighted by a scholarly investment in the untimely spinsters that populate her poetry.

The anti-chrononormative nature of *P&F*’s structure is not limited to Cavendish’s invitation to the reader to “skip” swiftly through the “tedious” bits. The layout of the book itself overwhelms the reader with its dense profusion of poetry. However, there is a method to the mad(Madge)ness; as Hero Chalmers argues, “The variousness of *Poems and Fancies* should not be read simply as a sign of chaotic muddle [...] but as an essential basis of order,” one that does not conform to chrononormative readerly practices.⁶⁵ *P&F* is a complex web of interconnected themes, and for this reason, Liza Blake feels that the inclusion of Cavendish’s poetry “in more anthologies in recent decades [in which] they are frequently excerpted and strung together into a hodge-podge mixture of poems that seem incoherent as a collection” is a misrepresentation of her “poetics of variety.”⁶⁶ As Blake continues:

each Part—each major section of the book—operates according to its own internal logic, and so stringing poems from different parts together while ignoring their context in the

volume as a whole does harm to our understanding of how any individual poem is functioning. Cavendish, for the most part, did not write individual poems to be read in isolation; her book has a clear structure, and understanding any individual poem requires at least a basic understanding of that structure.⁶⁷

A reading of Cavendish's work that isolates her poems and ignores her structure of variety misunderstands her intentions; Cavendish's *P&F* is a direct refutation of chrononormative readerly practices, as her work requires a reader to return to and string together various poems. Just as a spinster's periods of childhood and adulthood are left forever open and permeable, Cavendish's poems refuse a chrononormative reader who would assume to ever be finished with a particular poem.⁶⁸

A non-chrononormative reading practice allows poems from distant sections of Cavendish's text, and even from separate editions of her work, to bear on the development of meaning and metaphors in each other. For example, attention to the shifting pronouns in "Nature's Cook," a poem located in Part III of *P&F*, recontextualizes the gendered implications of the allegiance of the Fates in Part I's "Nature Calls a Counsel." As this project has already mentioned, when the Fates enact their spinsterly betrayal of Life, they choose to obey the direction of a character called "Death." While in this poem Death is represented with male pronouns, in the 1653 version of a textually distant "Nature's Cook," Death is figured as female. Cavendish's later editions of *P&F* often include such revisions to gendered pronouns. While in later editions the "Death" character in "Nature's Cook" is male, in the 1653 version, the character is repeatedly referred to as "shee."⁶⁹ In addition to serving as an intriguing example of Cavendish's fluid representation of gender, this suggests that in the first iteration of *P&F*, the Death to which the Fates bend is not routinely figured as male, for later in the same volume the character is referenced by female pronouns. Additionally, even when Cavendish substitutes male pronouns for the female pronouns in "Nature's Cook," the role that Death inhabits in this poem

is feminized through the performance of domestic and traditionally female tasks such as cooking. Therefore, the being to which the spinning Fates show their allegiance may be construed as female, androgynous, and/or gender-fluid. By engaging with and extending Cavendish's prefatory invitation to move through her poetry in a non-chrononormative way that is reminiscent of spinsterhood's non-normative temporality, we can develop nuanced readings of Cavendish's complicated discourse on gender identity and performance.

The goal of this project has been to serve as an intervention into critical understandings of Cavendish's conception of gender performance, non-reproductive legacy, and anti-chrononormative time. By elucidating the connection between Cavendish's use of spinning imagery in *P&F* and the introduction of the word "spinster" as a synonym for "unmarried woman" into English vernacular, this project has demonstrated that attention to the productive, self-contained, and untimed position of spinsterhood in the social imagination is a useful way in which to consider Cavendish's work. While her claim that writing is "spinning with the brain" certainly references the occupational definition of spinsterhood, Cavendish operates within a moment in English vernacular history in which the term is polyvalent for author and reader alike. Just as Liza Blake implores us to read Cavendish's poems as interlocking structures of textual reference, we must attend to the "poetics of variety" contained within the single word "spinster."

ENDNOTES

¹ The world depicted in her 1666 publication *The Blazing World* is ruled by a powerful Empress.

² Her closet drama *The Convent of Pleasure* is set in a female utopia, a woman-only convent set up by the aristocratic Lady Happy.

³ In both *The Convent of Pleasure* and *Youth's Glory, Death's Banquet* Cavendish's heroines dismiss marriage as a societal imperative and explore non-marital possibilities, although Lady Happy ends up marrying a prince who infiltrates her convent, and Lady Sanspareille dies suddenly.

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- ⁴ Margaret Cavendish, “To Sir Charles Cavendish, My Noble Brother-in-Law,” in *Poems and Fancies with The Animal Parliament*, ed. Brandie R. Siegfried (Toronto: Iter Press, 2018), 59–60.
- ⁵ Although *P&F* was originally published in 1653, Cavendish heavily revised and republished the volume in 1664 and 1668. The source text that I will cite throughout this project is a modern spelling edition based on the 1668 edition of *P&F*, although I will make note of alternative readings encouraged by an attendance to other editions.
- ⁶ Cavendish, “To Sir Charles Cavendish, My Noble Brother-in-Law,” 59-60.
- ⁷ Jessie Hock, “Fanciful Poetics and Skeptical Epistemology in Margaret Cavendish’s *Poems and Fancies*,” in *Studies in Philology* 115, no. 4 (Fall 2018): 788.
- ⁸ Margaret Cavendish, “To the Reader,” in *Poems and Fancies with The Animal Parliament*, ed. Brandie R. Siegfried (Toronto: Iter Press, 2018), 69.
- ⁹ While this paper will focus on the unmarried and childless woman as a figure of feminine agency in Cavendish’s work, spinsterhood is by no means the only social role for a woman with which the author engages throughout her published work. Indeed, Cavendish explores many different modes of feminine agency from motherhood to the married Empress in her *Blazing World*. Spinsterhood is therefore just one aspect of Cavendish’s complex and polyvalent engagement with feminine power.
- ¹⁰ Cavendish, “To the Reader,” 70.
- ¹¹ Lara Dodds, “Bawds and Housewives: Margaret Cavendish and the Work of ‘Bad Writing,’” in *Early Modern Studies Journal* 6 (2014): 40.
- ¹² “spinster, n.,” OED Online. June 2020. Oxford University Press. <https://www-oed-com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/view/Entry/186771?redirectedFrom=spinster> (accessed June 13, 2020).
- ¹³ “spin, v.,” OED Online. June 2020. Oxford University Press. <https://www-oed-com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/view/Entry/186661?rskey=tmJtIX&result=1&isAdvanced=false> (accessed June 13, 2020).
- ¹⁴ This materialist image of thought as physical fibers drawn from the brain is in line with the atomist materialism expounded throughout *P&F*. For more on the atomist materialism of Cavendish’s work, see Jessie Hock’s article “Fanciful Poetics,” mentioned above.
- ¹⁵ “spinster, n.,” OED Online.
- ¹⁶ Bridget Hill, *Women Alone: Spinsters in England, 1660-1850*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 4.
- ¹⁷ Maryanne Kowaleski, “Singlewomen in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: The Demographic Perspective,” in *Singlewomen in the European Past, 1250-1800*, ed. Judith M. Bennet and Amy M. Froide, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 61.
- ¹⁸ Carol Z. Wiener, “Is a Spinster an Unmarried Woman?,” in *The American Journal of Legal History* 20, no. 1 (January 1976): 31.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.
- ²⁰ “spinster, n.,” OED Online, emphasis added.
- ²¹ Judith M. Bennet and Amy M. Froide, “A Singular Past,” in *Singlewomen in the European Past, 1250-1800*, edited by Judith M. Bennet and Amy M. Froide, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 10.
- ²² An alternative explanation for the convergence of “spinster” and “unmarried woman” is given by Susan S. Lanser, who cites E. Cobham Brewster’s *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* (London, 1894), which claims that “Wife is from the verb to weave [...] Woman is called the distaff [...]

while a girl was spinning her wedding clothes she was simply a spinster; but when this task was done, and she was married, she became a wife, or one who had already woven her allotted task.” For further information, see Susan S. Lanser, “Singular Politics: The Rise of the British Nation and the Production of the Old Maid,” in *Singlewomen in the European Past, 1250-1800*, ed. Judith M. Bennet and Amy M. Froide, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 318. While this explanation for the emergence of the new meaning of “spinster” is intriguing, this footnote in Lanser’s essay is the only reference to it that I have found in my research, which suggests that its reputability may be in question.

²³ Hill, *Women Alone*, 5-6.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 81.

²⁵ Verney qtd. in Hill, *Women Alone*, 93.

²⁶ Margaret Cavendish, “To Natural Philosophers,” in *Poems and Fancies with The Animal Parliament*, ed. Brandie R. Siegfried (Toronto: Iter Press, 2018), 66.

²⁷ Cavendish, “To Sir Charles Cavendish, My Noble Brother-in-Law,” 60.

²⁸ Lanser, “Singular Politics,” 299.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 298.

³⁰ Hill, *Women Alone*, 81.

³¹ Nussbaum qtd. in Hill, *Women Alone*, 83.

³² Line Cottagnies and Nancy Weitz, “Introduction,” in *Authorial Conquests: Essays on Genre in the Writings of Margaret Cavendish*, edited by Line Cottagnies and Nancy Weitz, (London: Associated University Presses, 2003), 7.

³³ Dodds, “Bawds and Housewives,” 29.

³⁴ Qtd. in Dodds, “Bawds and Housewives,” 30.

³⁵ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, (London: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1929), 65.

³⁶ I will speak more on the association of spinsters with population stagnation later in this project.

³⁷ Cavendish, “To Sir Charles Cavendish, My Noble Brother-in-Law,” 59-60.

³⁸ Margaret Cavendish, *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World*, ed. Sara H. Mendelson, (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press), 2016.

³⁹ Cavendish, “To Natural Philosophers,” 66.

⁴⁰ Hock, “Fanciful Poetics and Skeptical Epistemology in Margaret Cavendish’s Poems and Fancies,” 798.

⁴¹ Margaret Cavendish, “Of a Spider’s Web” in *Poems and Fancies with The Animal Parliament*, ed. Brandie R. Siegfried (Toronto: Iter Press, 2018), 261–62.

⁴² Mircea Eliade qtd. in Weigle, *Spiders & Spinsters*, 12.

⁴³ Sylvia Bowerbank, “The Spider’s Delight: Margaret Cavendish and the ‘Female’ Imagination,” in *English Literary Renaissance* 14, no. 3 (1984): 397.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 397.

⁴⁵ While the word “spinster” stems from an occupational title, Cavendish’s polyvalent use of the term does not only tie her to working-class women. Although the term “spinster” originally referenced women who had to work for a living, once the term became a legal definition for an unmarried woman, it was used to describe single women across social and economic classes. Unmarried daughters of upper-class and aristocratic families were also referred to as spinsters in legal documents and social discourse; these women often inherited money from family members, and as they were untethered to a husband, they were able to use their money as they saw fit. A recently published archive of early modern spinster Joyce Jeffreys’ financial records serves as an

example of the potential economic self-sufficiency of unmarried women during Cavendish's lifetime. In *The Business and Household Accounts of Joyce Jeffreys, Spinster of Hereford 1638-1648*, the spinster meticulously records her financial dealings. While Jeffreys inherited some money from her mother and brother, Judith M. Spicksley claims that, "Much of the property Joyce held may have been acquired as a result of her money-lending activities [...] The main source of Joyce's income was undoubtedly the interest she had gained from extending her considerable capital on mortgage or loan." (See Judith M. Spicksley, "Introduction" in *The Business and Household Accounts of Joyce Jeffreys, Spinster of Hereford 1638-1648*, ed. Judith M. Spicksley, (Oxford University Press, 2012), 23.). Jeffreys' business acumen, while notable, was not unusual for unmarried women in the seventeenth century. Indeed, "While richer single women were clearly best-placed to offer credit, they were not the only ones to be doing so. Material from across five English counties indicates that single women with relatively minor amounts of capital [...] were in the business of lending for profit" (Spicksley, "Introduction," 25). Money lending was a means of financial production open to single women; the unmarried status of these lenders allowed them to have sole control over their resources, unlike women whose financial agency was mediated by a husband. So, while spinsters were certainly not the only women capable of exercising economic agency during Cavendish's time, spinsterhood represented a particular brand of female self-sufficiency, one with which the writer was certainly familiar.

⁴⁶ Bennet and Froide, "A Singular Past," 14.

⁴⁷ Cavendish details the financial acumen and agency of her mother in particular in *A True Relation of My Birth, Breeding, and Life*.

⁴⁸ Julie Crawford, "Convents and Pleasures: Margaret Cavendish and the Drama of Property," in *Renaissance Drama* 32 (2003): 202.

⁴⁹ Chalmers qtd. in Crawford, "Convents and Pleasures," 209.

⁵⁰ Cavendish, Margaret. *The Life of the Thrice Noble, High and Puissant Prince William Cavendish*, 1667, p.4.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 4.

⁵² Cavendish, *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World*, 60.

⁵³ Margaret Cavendish, "Nature Calls a Council, Which Is Motion, Figure, Matter, and Life, to Advise about Making the World," in *Poems and Fancies with The Animal Parliament, Poems and Fancies with The Animal Parliament*, ed. Brandie R. Siegfried (Toronto: Iter Press, 2018), p.75-80, ll.1 1-12.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, ll.61.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, ll.61-4.

⁵⁶ Pierre Grimal, *The Dictionary of Classical Mythology*, translated by A. R. Maxwell-Hyslop, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 1986), 294.

⁵⁷ Jenny March, *Dictionary of Classical Mythology*, (London: Cassell, 1998), 163.

⁵⁸ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 3.

⁵⁹ According to Lanser, "At 4.9 million, England's population in 1680 constituted only 6.8 percent of western Europe's total, while France had the region's largest percentage (30 percent) with 21.9 million; Spain, 8.5 million; and Italy and the German states, 12 million each." For an in-depth analysis of these numbers and their effect on English population anxiety, as well as an explanation of the reasons behind the "pronatalist domesticism" of England, see Lanser, "Singular Politics," 310-11.

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- ⁶⁰ Lanser, “Singular Politics,” 309.
- ⁶¹ Cavendish, “Nature Calls a Counsel,” ll.127-136
- ⁶² Bowerbank, “The Spider’s Delight,” 407.
- ⁶³ Cavendish, “To Natural Philosophers,” 67.
- ⁶⁴ Ibid, 67-8.
- ⁶⁵ Hero Chalmers, “‘Flattering Division’: Margaret Cavendish’s Poetics of Variety” in *Authorial Conquests: Essays on Genre in the Writings of Margaret Cavendish*, ed. Line Cottegnies and Nancy Weitz, (London: Associated University Presses, 2003), 134.
- ⁶⁶ Liza Blake, “I. The Interlinked Structure of Poems and Fancies” in *Margaret Cavendish’s Poems and Fancies: A Digital Critical Edition*, ed. Liza Blake. Website Published May 2019. <<http://Library2.Utm.Utoronto.ca/Poemsandfancies/>>, n.d.
- ⁶⁷ Ibid.
- ⁶⁸ While my analysis here focuses on the *consumption* that Cavendish’s work invites, further research might consider the anti-chrononormative modes through which Cavendish *produces* her work. To a certain extent, Cavendish’s writing process also bears an interest in ill-defined borders between past and present, between what work is finished and what is left open to revision. As I have noted, Cavendish heavily revised and republished *P&F* two times during her life: once in 1664, and again in 1668. Cavendish’s interest in the permeability of her published work signals a conception of time that resonates with spinsterhood in its refusal to stay within the strict borders of past, present, and future.
- ⁶⁹ Margaret Cavendish, “Nature’s Cook,” in *Poems and Fancies with The Animal Parliament*, *Poems and Fancies with The Animal Parliament*, ed. Brandie R. Siegfried (Toronto: Iter Press, 2018), 234–35.