

**“In Specie”: Educational Advocacy, the Material Book, and Female  
Intellectual Communities in Seventeenth-Century British Women’s Writing**

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## ABSTRACT

In the early seventeenth century, a number of female writers began to exercise a strong degree of agency in the materials they published and the discourse in which they participated. Discussions of expanded female education abounded in their writing, and by the end of the century, female writers had become bold enough to write tracts proposing entirely new educational institutions for women. These proposed all-female schools would have provided teachers and students alike with both an intellectual space free from patriarchal strictures and the opportunity to expand their minds unimpeded. Through analysis of works by Rachel Speght, Elizabeth Isham, Margaret Cavendish, Bathsua Makin, and Mary Astell, this thesis traces the broad preoccupation of female writers with female intellectual communities across the seventeenth century. This project adds to current and past scholarly discussions of female reading in the early modern period, notes rhetorical continuities between the works of these various writers, and hopes to contribute to our understanding of early feminist thought.

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## INTRODUCTION

### **From Literate to Learned: Understanding Women's Educational Advocacy in the Seventeenth Century**

In the early modern period, female reading was typically imagined as a passive activity. Women were meant “not to critique books but imbibe them,” leaving any form of critical thinking and discussion to those whom society considered to be the more intellectually capable men (Snook, “Reading Women” 41). A woman’s reading material was often linked heavily to her religion or domestic duties. The type of education she might receive was dictated by her father, whose decisions might be influenced by male-authored conduct books detailing the kind of reading appropriate for a young lady. Despite a small number of prominent women who received a traditional humanist education in the 1500s, including Elizabeth I and Katherine Parr, this male-prescribed form of women’s education remained in place until the turn of the seventeenth century, when a shift began to occur in female educational models. Suddenly, the established norms of female learning were countered by female writers who began to assert themselves in public discourse and proposed educational models that resisted the strict curriculum espoused by men. They began to argue for an expanded female education that would transform a woman from being merely literate to being what they called “learned.” These writers thought that being learned would provide women with both the knowledge to think critically for themselves and a forum through which to express this thinking, rather than blindly accepting the patriarchal narratives that maintained dominant power structures. Furthermore, these female writers were able to avoid mass censure by masking this advocacy with religious discourse, as religion was “an approved, productive discursive site for early modern women” (Phillippy 8). The work these female writers did on education and, by extension, the freedom of female thought, did

much to pave the way for celebrated later feminists like Mary Wollestonecraft. As Sarah Gwyneth Ross says in the introduction to her 2009 monograph *The Birth of Feminism: Woman as Intellect in Renaissance Italy and England*, disregarding these seventeenth-century writers “deprives feminism of its history” (3). Thus, while the wide archive of early modern women’s writing boasts many examples of proto-feminist texts, special attention should be paid to those that discuss female education and reading as a way of contributing to the recovery of early feminist history.

Following that line of reasoning, this thesis will examine a commonality that can be found among several female-authored texts from across the seventeenth century: the proposal of all-female intellectual communities and spaces, both real and imagined, as ideal sites for women to engage in learning and reading. In this examination, I also consider representations of reading and the material book. The specific texts I will be investigating include: Rachel Speght’s “The Dreame,” which was printed in her *Mortalities Memorandum with a Dream Prefix’d* (1621), Elizabeth Isham’s *Booke of Remembrance* (1638-1639), Bathsua Makin’s *An Essay to Revive the Ancient Education of Gentlewomen* (1673), Mary Astell’s *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694), and various short works from the illustrious Margaret Cavendish, including her autobiography, a selection of her *Sociable Letters* (1664), and her play *The Female Academy* (1662). These texts differ in significant ways: they are of different genres, were intended for diverse audiences, were written by women of varying social classes and political beliefs, and hail from a wide time period – between 1621 and 1694. Indeed, this project does not privilege any writer or type of text above the others it examines. Instead, it disregards the hierarchies that often accompany discussions of canon in favour of what will instead be a balanced analysis of female

communities in these works, which is the link that ties these diverse discussions of female education together.

The consideration of female reading in early modern literature is not a new endeavour. In fact, Edith Snook has written an entire monograph on the subject, titled *Women, Reading, and the Cultural Politics of Early Modern England* (2005). Snook's book examines representations of reading in a wide variety of female-authored works from across the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, discussing how these representations can contribute to both the history of reading and literary history. She begins with the sixteenth-century writings of Anne Askew and Katherine Parr, and concludes with Lady Mary Wroth in the mid-seventeenth century. Snook views the literary depiction of female reading in the early modern period as providing "a way of speaking" and "a technique for authoritative self-invention" to these early female writers (*Cultural Politics* 3). Additionally, reading is "a route into cultural politics, for writing about reading affords a multivalent topic that is at once appropriate to women and expansive," offering women the authority to discuss their situation without being too overt (Snook, *Cultural Politics* 4). By the term 'cultural politics,' Snook means the ways in which expressive medias, such as writing and books, can have influence over dominant issues in patriarchal culture. In her eyes, representing reading in their writing means that "women writers can address the pious matters accepted as feminine concerns, even as they fashion an alternative discourse about the female mind and forge a place for female voices and readers in the political, literary, and intellectual culture from which they are most often excluded" (Snook, *Cultural Politics* 4). While this book is an essential foundational work to any further study of women's reading in early modern literature, its status as such practically guarantees that it will provoke questions for further research.

Several scholars have also examined the socio-historical background of early modern female reading, from Susanne W. Hull's seminal work *Chaste, Silent and Obedient: English Books for Women 1475-1640* (1982) to Heidi Brayman Hackel's more recent *Reading Material in Early Modern England* (2005). Both of these works provide a broader historical account of reading at the time, with Hull considering the type of books available to women and Brayman Hackel focusing her analysis through case studies of figures such as Anne Clifford and Frances Egerton, Countess of Bridgewater. In her monograph *The Woman Reader* (2009), Belinda Jack places the early modern woman in a wider study of female reading from the medieval period to now. Most recently, Leah Knight, Micheline White, and Elizabeth Sauer have edited *Women's Bookscapes in Early Modern England: Reading, Ownership, Circulation* (2018), a collection of essays that aims to present its readers with previously overlooked forms of evidence, revised readings of established debates, and the possibilities of using digital tools to examine female readers in literature of the period. The recent essay collection *History of Early Modern Women's Writing* (2018), edited by Patricia Phillippy, takes a broader stance to include all aspects of the field with the intention of presenting a "history that respects and acknowledges the multiplicity of women's writing" (6). At the same time, it provides the methodological impetus to "support a unified narrative" that raises the possibility of doing scholarly work that links together texts whose potential for comparative analysis has been previously overlooked (Phillippy 6). In many ways, it is this notion of overlooked connection that runs through the core of this thesis.

Before continuing, I think it particularly important to address what I mean by "feminism" in the context of this study. "Feminism," as we experience it today, could very easily be considered an anachronistic category that is difficult to apply to the early modern period. Indeed, the earliest use of the word in the sense that we use it today, of the "advocacy of equality of the

sexes and the establishment of the political, social, and economic rights of the female sex,” was, according to the *OED*, not until 1895 (*OED*, “feminism, n.”, 3). This study examines women who exhibit what some scholars would term “proto-feminism” in their advocacy for expanded female education, their exhibition of female agency, their resistance against restrictive gender roles, and, in some cases, their outright critique of the position of women – whether political, economic, or social – in society. While their writing and advocacy do not adhere to the notion of modern “feminism,” these authors do consider and advocate for ideas that comprise a significant portion of the core of traditional feminist thought. With this in mind, this study employs the term “feminism” to indicate the ways in which these female writers contribute to the history of the discourse that led to feminist thinking.

While a number of critical studies of women writers of the seventeenth century have argued for women’s agency in how they articulate a desire for freedom against restrictive gender roles, few studies have explicitly examined how women writers charted a plan for social change. Two exceptions are Hilda L. Smith and Sarah Gwyneth Ross. The earliest, Smith’s *Reason’s Disciples: Seventeenth-Century English Feminists* (1982), examines the broad proliferation of women writers with a “desire to change women’s lives” – an aim that she says separates them from “other sixteenth- and seventeenth-century critics of women’s role in society” (5). She touches on education in her discussions of Bathsua Makin and Mary Astell, but it does not form the core focus of her study. Interestingly, Smith’s work on ‘seventeenth-century’ feminists disregards the entire first half of the century and, for its final chapter, extends into the early decades of the eighteenth century. The more recent study, *The Birth of Feminism: Woman as Intellect in Renaissance Italy and England* (2009) by Sarah Gwyneth Ross, examines historical evidence from both countries concurrently to trace the development and expansion of female

education as it actually happened. Ross examines some literary works as historical documents to help support a narrative of the gradual improvement of the female condition, but does not really delve into the implications of the explicitly literary qualities of these works – a line of inquiry that is central to the consideration of the texts in this thesis. As with Snook's *Cultural Politics*, both of these studies are works to be built upon, and the research questions that their findings raise create a wonderful space to consider why and how female writers envision their own reading and education in the seventeenth century.

Building upon the questions considered in these foundational studies, this thesis examines a common thread of female intellectual communities in works of various genres from throughout the seventeenth century by five writers: Rachel Speght, Elizabeth Isham, Margaret Cavendish, Bathsua Makin, and Mary Astell. In order to weave a smooth narrative of connections between these disparate writers, this project is framed using two concepts employed by scholars of early modern women's writing in recent years: the bookscape and the literacy narrative, which I define below. By conducting the project in such a manner, I demonstrate that several seventeenth-century female writers had a preoccupation with concepts of space, learnedness, and female solidarity. In one way or another, all five of these writers create and imagine female intellectual communities and spaces in their works and privilege these spaces as the ideal locale for female reading and learning to take place. Unencumbered by the intrusions of male critics, the women in these communities, which are largely imaginary, are free to expand their minds and develop their knowledge base and critical thinking skills. I also discuss how the development of the expression of female educational advocacy in the seventeenth century can be placed on a timeline that eventually leads to influential feminist thinkers like Mary Wollstonecraft.

Some scholars have noted this preoccupation with the intellectual community in disparate cases. In *Reason's Disciples*, Hilda L. Smith notes the importance of real-life intellectual communities in her discussion of Margaret Cavendish: "lacking any intellectual community to which she could belong, the duchess was sharply aware of the limitations of the scholarly groups from which she was excluded" (94). When Smith considers the works of Mary Astell, this recognition of the intellectual community is much more overt. She notes how Astell belonged to such a group of women in her own life, and sought to recreate that feeling in the proposed school of her *Serious Proposal*. Smith asserts that the school "seemingly would have institutionalized this informal network of mutually supported, sisterly intellectual development" that Astell found so important in her own life (121). These examples demonstrate that while scholars have touched on the importance of these female communities disparately, no one has yet completed a study of how we can use this preoccupation as a way of linking these authors and their texts together.

There are also several rhetorical continuities among the works of Speght, Isham, Cavendish, Makin, and Astell that promote a study of female intellectual communities in these writings. They often critique those who publicly oppose an expanded female education by citing an index of learned women from throughout history. They are boldly unafraid to criticize the unfair treatment women faced in early modern patriarchal society, and they depict learning and education in these writings as worthwhile pursuits that will help women to be closer to God. In the process of defending the intellectual capabilities of women, these writers often establish their own learning through the masterful way that they discuss subjects such as classical learning, philosophy, theology, literature, languages such as French, Greek, and Latin, and science, which was termed 'natural philosophy' at the time. There are even more similarities between the works of Makin and Astell, who conduct similar projects twenty years apart. When these rhetorical

strategies are considered alongside the historical contexts that produced these writings and the evocation of various forms of female intellectual communities, it is clear that these women are adept at following the dominant cultural narrative related to the capabilities of women just enough to subvert the larger prejudices at work in early modern patriarchal society.

In their introduction to *Women's Bookscapes*, Knight and White state that in terms of creating a connection between women's writing and women's reading, scholars have traditionally undertaken "examinations of female-authored literary works, diaries, and commonplace books in light of male-authored directives regarding female literacy and education" (2). Following this, scholars then "analysed how individual women responded to such patriarchal attitudes and deployed their reading in their own literary productions" (Knight and White 2). My project will invert this approach by placing *female*-authored directives on women's education, as well as literary works and diaries, at the heart of its debate and examining several writers through the same lens. Furthermore, the majority of the scholarship mentioned by Knight and White has a relatively wide focus in terms of the type of literary works they examine. This project differs by focusing on educational advocacy, the dichotomy between learnedness and literacy established by these writers, and representations of reading and the material book. All three of these things are at play in the writers' discussion of education. Speght, Isham, Cavendish, Makin, and Astell all place the book at the centre of their idealized female communities as a vessel that mediates the learning process. For example, Makin's *Essay to Revive the Ancient Education of Gentlewomen* asserts that "a Girl shall much easier fasten in her memory the names of [things]" if she sees "the things themselves in *specie*; or the Pictures and Representations, where the things themselves cannot be had" (90). Books are the places in which pictures and representations of the things themselves appear; Makin is referring here to the

importance of physical access to the material book. This thesis explores the implications of this material presence alongside its investigation of the female intellectual community.

Furthermore, this project engages methodologically with two theoretical concepts that have been employed recently by scholars of early modern women's writing: the bookscape and the literacy narrative. The former is the critical impetus for *Women's Bookscapes in Early Modern Britain: Reading, Ownership, Circulation* (2018). The editors of this volume draw from James Raven's theory that suggests that the bookscape forms "a deliberate parallel with...the tensions between three essentials of landscape: the imagined, the remembered, and the actual. The 'bookscape' [Raven proposes] is not just real terrain, but the envisaging of spatial form, value, and temporality" (qtd. in Knight and White 6). Thus, the female communities and spaces imagined and discussed by these seventeenth-century female writers can be considered, through this lens, as bookscapes: there is a specific space dedicated to learning and reading that holds value to the texts' subjects because it allows them to expand their mind without fear of persecution. Margaret Ezell has noted that employing the bookscape "leads to a consideration of early modern women as collaborative agents rather than isolated ones in a literary landscape" (276) – even if their collaboration can only be seen in retrospect. This thesis also aims to create a wider bookscape comprised of the writings of these women whose texts work in tandem to create a cohesive narrative that communicates a desire for female intellectual communities. According to Knight and White, the value of regarding books as "part of a panorama of spatial and social factors has only lately gained scholarly traction" (6-7). The bookscape is also appropriate given the breadth and nature of the texts that this project examines. "Landscape," the idea from which the concept of the bookscape derives, suggests "a prospect that may be wide but can nonetheless

be absorbed at once from a single vantage point” (Knight and White 9). In this case, the vantage point is the common theme of female communities in these texts.

The second theoretical concept that is employed is one that can help link these works of diverse genre and form together: the literacy narrative. Julie Eckerle works with this concept to interesting effects in her 2010 article “Coming to Knowledge: Elizabeth Isham’s Autobiography and the Self-Construction of an Intellectual Woman.” Eckerle defines the term as “a tale of the construction of a literate self” (103). By utilizing the idea of a literacy narrative as Eckerle does in her article, I will be able to “highlight numerous moments of education embedded in the narrative” of the texts I have selected (Eckerle 107). Furthermore, examining these texts as literacy narratives allows me to create both a generic and thematic link between these works as this term is one that can encompass forms such as autobiography, poetry, treatises, drama, and fictionalized letters. To borrow Eckerle’s phrase, all of these narratives have a goal of bringing their main subjects “to knowledge,” a process that is linked inextricably to education.

In order to understand how the ways these female writers experience and envision education are different from what preceded them, it is necessary to establish the sixteenth-century precedents for female education. As mentioned earlier, sixteenth-century women were often educated at the behest of their fathers, and the curriculum they followed was often directed by male-authored conduct books. While there were many such books available, the most popular and widely used was Juan Luis Vives’s *Education of a Christian Woman* (1523). Vives wrote this book for the future education of Princess Mary of England, daughter of Henry VIII and Katherine of Aragon. It is divided into three sections – one for unmarried women, one for married women, and one for widows – and details what Vives believes to be the appropriate education and reading for women who belong to each of these respective categories. In some

ways, Vives can be viewed as quite progressive for his time. After all, his text advocates for the education of all women, regardless of their status or social class, and he makes the statement that, contrary to popular belief, women do have the intellectual capabilities to study and not be corrupted by the material they imbibe.

However, Vives' progressiveness was limited. Hilda L. Smith notes that *Education of a Christian Woman* "reflects well [a] general weakness" that can be seen across directives for female education of the time – the fact that they were written by men (41). Indeed, there are two primary strands of thought that run through his work: "the primacy of chastity for women and the importance of a women's domestic vocation in defining her education" (Smith, *Reason's Disciples* 42). An examination of Vives' work demonstrates that only a small proportion of the actual text is dedicated to what should be viewed as essential considerations for such a treatise: appropriate reading materials for female education. Smith counted, and notes in *Reason's Disciples* that "of some 300 pages, 9 [are] devoted to formal educational concerns such as 'What books to be read and what not'" (42). Given that the title of the work indicates a preoccupation with pedagogy, it is curious that such a small portion of *Education of a Christian Woman* is dedicated to the mechanics of the teaching process.

There are two particular aspects of Vives' work and others like it that Speght, Isham, Cavendish, Makin, and Astell reject. Firstly, the idea that female learning must be tied directly to one's domestic occupation. Although they resist this idea in various ways and to various extents, these five writers defend the right of women to an education that expands beyond the implications of traditional gender roles. Secondly, Vives and his contemporaries stress the manner in which an educated woman will be beneficial to both potential husbands and to society at large. The subtext here is that Vives' educational models for women are acceptable because of

the way that they benefit men and help to uphold the patriarchy, while allaying any indignation that women might feel about the education that they receive. While my female writers, particularly Makin and Astell, often promote their sometimes-radical ideas by noting (somewhat sarcastically) how their educational models will benefit society, each of the texts is free of advocacy of female education *for the benefit of men*. Instead, these women detail how providing others of their sex with a more in-depth and expansive education will allow them to cultivate the critical thinking skills and moral judgements that will help them to be upstanding members of civilized society.

Chapter One addresses two ostensibly unrelated early-century works: Rachel Speght's *Mortalities Memorandum with a Dream Prefix'd* (1621) and Elizabeth Isham's *My Booke of Remembrance*, which was composed between 1638 and 1639. The dream vision that prefaces Speght's much longer Christian meditation on death details her educational history through the poetic speaker's encounters with female allegorical figures such as Wisdom, Experience, Knowledge, and Industrie. Here, the female community is an imagined one, created through the speaker's encounter with these figures, envisaged by Speght to be women, who gently guide the speaker through her educational journey. The imaginative space that Speght creates is one where knowledge is a cure to the "maladie" of "blinde" ignorance (Speght 50, line 60). Isham's *Booke*, on the other hand, describes her unusual life as a highly intellectual unmarried woman in the first half of the seventeenth century, providing in-depth discussions of her educational habits. While Isham studied primarily on her own, she also expressed "a desire to learn from her elders, especially her mother and grandmother" (Eckerle 108). The detail that she provides of her early education combined with the bequeathing of her *Booke* to her nieces and references in the *Booke* to volumes she received from or exchanged with family members all reveal the creation of a

multi-generational familial female intellectual community wherein the material book occupies a central role. Although Speght and Isham wrote at separate times, for different reasons, and to different audiences (the public and the self respectively), they espouse similar views on the intellectual capabilities of women and share similar educational journeys. Furthermore, in addition to the communities created within the pages of their texts, they both also create interesting intellectual communities with their readers.

The second chapter addresses the mid-century writings of Margaret Cavendish, one of the most widely-studied female writers of the early modern period. I briefly discuss Cavendish's *A True Relation of my Birth, Breeding, and Life* (1656) as a way of detailing relevant events from her life. I then examine *The Female Academy*, a 1662 play that depicts the establishment of an educational establishment for young women by a group of matrons and the resulting havoc that this creates within their local community, particularly among the young men who are irate at the marriageable ladies being sequestered away from them. In my discussion of this text, I demonstrate how Cavendish uses the female intellectual community as a mechanism through which to express her views and opinions on various subjects. I then turn to *Sociable Letters* (1664), a collection of fictionalized letters between two unnamed women through whom Cavendish continues to demonstrate her learning. However, this text also places an emphasis on the importance of the material book to these two women, whose friendship forms a microcosm of an intellectual community defined by female solidarity. When examined together, these texts demonstrate how Cavendish's contested place within the history of feminist thought may not be so contentious after all.

The third and final chapter presents an analysis of the intellectual communities of the more radical late-century educational treatises of Bathsua Makin and Mary Astell. Makin's text,

*An Essay to Revive the Ancient Education of Gentlewomen* (1673), responds directly to male fearmongering regarding the potential consequences of women being truly learned. She disavows their arguments by citing a long index of intellectual talented women from history and by providing counterarguments to any potential objection that men could raise. Makin stresses the importance of educating young women to be genuinely learned and suggests her own school outside of London as a suitable place for young ladies to ‘amend’ their ignorance. Twenty years later, in *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694), Mary Astell builds on Makin’s ideas with a scathing critique of how women are disadvantaged by male systems of power and the proposal of an all-female academy designed to enhance a woman’s piety through mutual self-improvement among female friendships and the development of solid critical thinking skills. Astell emphasises the power of a good spiritual education to reject the vanity that she views as accompanying a reliance on commodity culture. Although Astell’s proposal did not come to fruition, she still imagines a sort of utopian educational space where an all-female community can gather away from the designs of men. Like Speght and Isham, Makin and Astell also create intellectual communities between author and reader by addressing their works to women, effectively barring men from the conversation at times.

The evidence of the writers examined in this thesis demonstrate that in the early years of the seventeenth century, female intellectual communities were envisioned in relatively “safe” ways. Rachel Speght does so in a dream vision that prefaces a much larger poem, and this community is both imaginative and allegorical. Elizabeth Isham, on the other hand, describes her community through her relationships with her mother and grandmother in a private bookscape – her diary and other materials that she probably never intended for publication. In the mid-century sits Margaret Cavendish, a woman who begins to be increasingly vocal with respect to ideas

about expanded female education and satirical critiques of the inherent sexism in seventeenth-century England. In fact, she is well known to have relished the criticism that was directed at her. Lastly, the final decades of the century see a targeted shift in the discourse from Speght and Isham, with Bathsua Makin and Mary Astell being much more explicit in their critique of the patriarchal power structures that restricted women's access to a rounded education.

In their introduction to *Women's Bookscapes*, Knight and White make the following statement about the difficulties inherent in working on projects involving any aspect of early modern female reading: “[s]o much must stand in synecdochally for what is likely the far greater preponderance of books and readers lost to the depredations of time and the peculiarities of a patriarchal past” (Knight and White 8). When considered together, what at a first glance appears to be a few unrelated instances of women envisioning all-female intellectual communities emerges as “evidence of intricately connected...patterns and habits of reading” that link women with “family, community, and the world of ideas” (Ezell 277). Thus, the project of this thesis is ultimately recovery and recuperation. It is my hope that in conducting this research and undertaking a careful analysis of these texts, I will be able to contribute to our understanding of early feminist thought.

## CHAPTER ONE

### **Female Bonds in the Writing of Rachel Speght and Elizabeth Isham**

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, female education was still dictated largely by dominant patriarchal structures. In order for female writers to one day rise vocally against male control of female learning, as Bathsua Makin and Mary Astell were to do towards the end of the century, it was necessary that some courageous women take some vital first steps. Two such women are Rachel Speght and Elizabeth Isham, who are both less well-known than the other authors examined in this study. Their respective writings demonstrate, in their own way, a certain transgressive attitude towards patriarchal norms. Despite the vast differences between the two authors and their works, there are some intriguing continuities between Speght's "Dreame" and Isham's *Booke of Remembrance*. Although they both, but particularly Speght, wrote in times that were fraught with debates about gender and woman's role within the home both texts subvert gender expectations in subtle ways while also remaining within the conventions of acceptable female expression. Both include two female intellectual communities in their texts – one within the text itself, and one between the author and the intended reader. They emphasize the importance and strength of a powerful sisterhood and female solidarity, and also indicate that female learning has been dictated by God, thus sanctioning their writing through religion. An examination of these two female writers demonstrates that, although they were restricted in some ways by a limited historical record of female writers to emulate, they made significant contributions to the history of feminist thought with their innovative and sometimes daring writings.

### **The Search for Knowledge in Rachel Speght's "Dreame"**

An important figure in the history of female authorship, Rachel Speght is a name that not many contemporary English literature students would recognize. Although the study of her writing has certainly increased in the last thirty years, particularly since the 1996 publication of *The Polemics and Poems of Rachel Speght*, edited by Barbara Kiefer Lewalski, academic interest in Speght still seems to be relegated to those who, like myself, are studying those on the margins of early modern women's writing. Indeed, a significant portion of the existent Speght scholarship focuses on her polemical writings, which make up less than half of her small but rich body of work. This chapter focuses on Speght's "Dreame," which acts as a prefatory poem to the much longer poetic meditation on death *Mortalities Memorandum* (1621). Although many scholars have noted the "Dreame" for its narrative treatment of the educational journey of a middle-class woman in the seventeenth century, the significance of the female allegorical figures to the poetic speaker has been largely overlooked.

In order to truly appreciate the power of her work, it is first necessary to discuss Speght's life and education. She was born in 1597 and was raised "in the heart of London's clerical and mercantile community" (Speight 449). Although little is known about her mother, she had three siblings: two sisters, Sara and Rebecca, and a brother named Samuel (Speight 451). Speght's father, James, was a well-connected scholar and Calvinist minister who, as a graduate of Christ's College, Cambridge, was in a position to provide his children with a good education (Speight 449). Indeed, her writings make it clear that her level of learning was quite rare for a seventeenth-century woman of any class. By conducting a thorough investigation of Speght's writings, Barbara Lewalski was able to glean that Speght demonstrates a "knowledge of Latin and some training in logic and rhetoric," as well as "some history, geography, and nature lore,

parts of at least some classical texts (Plutarch, Cicero, Virgil), some vernacular literature, and many sermons, biblical commentaries, and manuals of devotion” (xii-xiii). Given that it is unlikely that this education was the product of enrollment in a girls’ school, scholars suggest that Speght was probably tutored by her very knowledgeable father (Speight 451).

Speght put her education to good use in 1617, when she published her first work *A Mouzell for Melastomus*. This text, which Speght wrote in response to the intensely misogynistic *Arraignment of Lewd, Idle, Froward and Unconstant Women* (1615) by Joseph Swetnam, places her in the canon as the “first Englishwoman to identify herself, by name, as a polemicist and critic of contemporary gender ideology” (Lewalski xi). Helen Speight’s assertion that the *Mouzell* is “the strongest evidence of Rachel’s pride in her academic accomplishment” is not misplaced, given how she demonstrates both her skill in logic and rhetoric and how well-read she is (452). Swetnam’s text was controversial and created a debate about a woman’s place and role in society that lasted well over five years. Although there were two other polemic responses to Swetnam’s pamphlet, the writers (Esther Sowernam and Constantia Munda) wrote under pseudonyms, making it difficult to ascertain whether these texts were genuinely written by women, or merely male-authored contributions to a debate that was “a middle-class controversy fueled (or created) by canny booksellers who recognized a market when they saw one” (Schnell 59). As Lisa Schnell rightly notes, the literary economy at this time was “male-defined” (60), and it is quite possible that some male writers may have chosen to respond to the *Arraignment* in an effort to exploit an “early example of printed popular entertainment” (62). Thus, Speght’s decision to name herself and to take pride in her role as a writer defending her sex would have made her “an obvious locus of anxiety” in the male-driven bookselling economy in early seventeenth-century England (Schnell 60). Indeed, Wendy Wall has noted that, in the early

modern period, male writers and printers created “models for authorship that were highly gendered and sexualized” (80). In describing their texts in feminine terms, authors and publishers encouraged readers to “imagine [a] book purchase as the act of entertaining and owning a ‘female’ object,” thus gendering “both the emergent author and reader as male” (Wall 80). All this was done partly in an effort to discourage women from publishing. Thus, given the anxiety that surrounded female writers at this time, particularly those who wrote about secular topics, Speght would have been called to defend her place as an author.

A large part of the public response to the *Mouzell*, which Speght addresses in the dedicatory epistle to *Mortalities Memorandum*, was a disbelief that she wrote it at all. Indeed, she denounces those “criticall Readers” whose attentions she had “bin toucht with the censures of” for “depriv[ing] [her] of [her] due” and “imposing [her] abortive upon the father of [the writer], but not of it [the *Mouzell*]” (Speght 45). Speght is admonishing hostile readers for not appreciating that she is the “father” of the *Mouzell*, which she curiously calls “an abortive” – an aborted fetus or stillborn child. The use of this noun is rather surprising, especially when one considers that works of literature are often spoken of in terms of creation, not elimination. In her notes on the text, Lewalski suggests that Speght uses this term as “a modest admission of [the *Mouzell*’s] imperfections” (Speght 45 note). However, the modesty suggested by Lewalski seems out of place in the context of Speght’s dedication, where she is quite outspoken and defiant towards her critics. Furthermore, the term seems to be rather strong to be considered “modest.”

Interestingly, there is another potential connotation of this terminology that, while considered obsolete today, was in use in the seventeenth century. The *OED* notes that “abortive” was used figuratively from the late sixteenth to the late eighteenth century to denote “the fruitless or unsuccessful outcome of an endeavour” or “an unfulfilled object or aim” (*OED*, “abortive, n.

and adj.”, 3). If Speght intended to connote this use of “abortive,” then we can assume that she was humorously ventriloquizing what her critics would have thought of the *Mouzell* in her use of this term. After all, there is a certain defensive humour to the way that Speght notes that while she is her father’s daughter, he is not the “father” of her pamphlet. By using such a term, she is reclaiming the “due” that she notes her critics deprived her of, and wittily weaponizing their criticisms in her defense of the *Mouzell*. Indeed, the fact that many readers of Speght’s first work believed that this intelligent, articulate, and logical defense of the female sex could not actually have been written by a woman demonstrates precisely why the early seventeenth-century debates about gender grew so heated. As a result of these criticisms, Speght returned to the literary market in 1621 with the publication of *Mortalities Memorandum with a Dreame Prefixed*, determined to discount the unfounded criticisms of those “criticall Readers” and to prove the intellectual and rhetorical capabilities that she received as a result of her generous education.

*Mortalities Memorandum with a Dreame Prefixed* comprises a dedicatory epistle, a prefatory poem addressed “To the Reader,” the 300-line “Dreame,” and the 756-line titular meditation on death. Christina Luckyj has noted that the title poem “has been largely ignored in favor of the prefatory, apparently more secular *Dreame*,” and argues that in order to read the “Dreame” as secular, it has “been necessary to...isolate it from the title work” (227-8). She worries that studying the “Dreame” as a secular poem through a gendered lens undermines the work that the larger *Mortalities Memorandum* is trying to do. Indeed, her article “Rachel Speght and the ‘Criticall Reader,’” she reads the two poems through a largely religio-political lens, arguing that “after the *Dreame* poem establishes a largely Calvinist framework for the pursuit of knowledge, the *Memorandum* delivers an important religious and political message to English men and women at a crisis point in their history” (Luckyj 229). Luckyj argues that a Calvinist

position is discernible in Speght's depiction of human reason as deficient without God's grace, and suggests that the "Dreame" "encourages humanist learning only to appropriate it for the Calvinist cause" (237). While she does raise some persuasive points, Luckyj also voices some ideas that are questionable given how explicitly Speght raises the question of gender. One such notion is that the work "transforms Speght's particular self...into a representative human sinner who seeks and finds assurance of her election" (Luckyj 233). This interpretation of the "Dreame" discounts the explicitly autobiographical nature of the work, and considering the many references to events in Speght's life that can be found in the text, is difficult to support.

Luckyj is not the only scholar to criticize the way that the "Dreame" has been studied in the past; James Purkis agrees with Luckyj's claim that gender has dominated criticism of Speght, noting that "uncovering...Speght's writerly engagements beyond her expression of a specifically female experience raises the question of how gender – and indeed, her experiences as a woman – should inform reception of her work" (110). While these criticisms of the scholarly preoccupation with gender concerning Speght's writings are valid, it is important to recognize that Luckyj's and Purkis's comments also run the risk of privileging one type of investigative lens over another (religious/political over feminist/gender studies). This critical perspective could propagate a hierarchy of literary criticism that discounts other lines of inquiry in reference to Speght's work. As a result, the scholarship on Speght's writings could remain skewed towards a particular critical preoccupation, maintaining the insular study of her work that Luckyj and Purkis criticize – but in the direction of historical context rather than gender.

Luckyj's and Purkis's attempts to broaden the focus of Speght scholarship could, albeit unintentionally, have the effect of refocusing the emphasis of this scholarship from one framework to another, rather than truly expanding the analytical scope of the scholarship to

include any legitimate investigative approach. It is my belief that it is particularly important for scholars to approach understudied writers such as Speght and Isham from a multitude of disciplines, and not to discount analytical models like gender, no matter how conventional the approach may seem. Gender remains a pressing and relevant model of enquiry, particularly in studies like this, where gender is one of the concerns that links disparate literary works together. In addition, gender is a topic that is of particular concern to Speght; her first work was part of the great gender debate of the early seventeenth century, and in the “Dreame,” she foregrounds female characters in her fantasy space. Thus, this chapter examines Speght’s “Dreame” as a moderately secular poem apart from the work that it prefaces. To me, the “Dreame” is a semi-autobiographical poem about Speght’s educational journey in which she envisions an imaginative female intellectual community that guides her in her quest for knowledge, in sharp contrast with the male-guided education that she seems to have received in real life. I read this poem, like all of the other works examined in the chapters that follow, as a literacy narrative that, although there is no direct mention of the materiality of books, implicitly comments on the book as a vessel for learning – a vessel that is obviously essential to the female intellectual community that this work creates.

*Mortalities Memorandum with a Dreame Prefixed* begins with a particularly interesting dedication to Speght’s godmother, Marie Moundford, whose husband Thomas was a well-known London doctor and six-time president of the College of Physicians (Lewalski xiv). In addition to addressing the critics of her first work, *A Mouzell for Melastomus*, Speght uses the dedication as an opportunity to comment on the value of promulgating her ideas to the general public. The contents of this book, she says, were originally “devoted to private Contemplation,” but she was motivated to divulge her thoughts to “publique view” for “common benefit” (Speght 45). She

follows this proclamation with a series of admonitions: “Corne kept close in a garner feeds not the hungry; A candle put under a bushell doth not illuminate an house; None but unprofitable servants knit up Gods talent in a Napkin” (Speght 45). Although these statements seem straightforward – that knowledge sealed away benefits no one and that the gatekeeping of it is wrong – the fact that these remarks resist early modern gender expectations is clear. It also demonstrates that, despite her modesty, she also places a certain amount of value on her writing based on her thinking that it could benefit the public. In these comments, Speght “openly directs our attention to her public stance” and, with her refutation of male criticisms of her previous work, to “the key issues of a woman entering public discourse” (Beilin 267). Thus, the dedication to *Mortalities Memorandum* works to validate Speght’s assertion of her “private Contemplations” for public view by contrasting her method of writing for “common benefit” with the more exclusive literary market directed by men.

At the same time, the dedication also places Speght into a sort of maternal role – one where she acts as a carer for others – that ensures she is still operating within the bounds of accepted early modern gender roles. In *Mortalities Memorandum*, Speght strives to take on a caring, guiding role to help her readers prepare better for death. This is something that she states openly in the dedication to Moundford. If any “oblivious persons” are “incited to premeditation of, and preparation against their last houre” as a result of reading her text, Speght would have accomplished her goal in publishing it: “I levell at no other marke, nor ayme at other end, but to have all sorts to marke and provide for their [her readers’] latter end” (Speght 45). Furthermore, she presents *Mortalities Memorandum* through maternal language, referring to it as the “off-spring of [her] indeavour” which she has a “strong motive” to present for her “rights sake” (Speght 45). She proudly acknowledges this work as her “off-spring,” and cares that it receives

the consideration that it deserves. Thus, as will be seen with both Speght and Isham, calculated subversion within patriarchal limits was an effective way for early feminist writers to express themselves without drawing mass censure and censorship.

The dedication is also one of the key writings that demonstrates how, although dealing with a vastly different educational and literary economy than Cavendish, Makin and Astell (Isham was not writing for publication), Speght still managed to successfully navigate resistance to patriarchal norms in the early seventeenth century. She discusses being the subject of the “censures” of various “criticall Readers” – who she admits were mostly male - and how she was “by a strong motive induced” for “[her] rights sake” to produce *Mortalities Memorandum* as proof of her literary and intellectual talents (Speght 45). She is unashamedly dismissive of her male critics: “Their varietie of verdicts have verified the adagie *quot homines, tot sententiae*,” which Lewalski translates as “many men, many opinions” (Speght 45). Speght also notes that these reactions to the *Mouzell* “doth affirme Censure to be inevitable to a publique act” (Speght 45). These statements discuss criticisms that are far more than public controversy over the ideas expressed in her writing – they are admonitions rooted heavily in misogyny and patriarchal control over women’s voices. At this time, the valued feminine qualities of chastity, modesty, silence, and obedience were “insistent[ly]” coupled with female learning, a consolidation that was “at least partly an attempt to control educated women’s involvement in the public sphere” (Beilin 250).

The coupling of submissive virtue with female learning was part of the early seventeenth-century legacy of sixteenth-century patriarchal conventions, where “with a few royal exceptions, women preserved the public silence appropriate to their absence from positions in the state, the academy, and the church” (Beilin 250). In the seventeenth century, the purpose of education was

to “train men and women to be appropriately different from one another, not to present them with a body of knowledge the understanding of which would make them socially or intellectually equal” (Smith, *Reason’s Disciples* 41). By bravely entering into the very public Swetnam gender debate and naming herself as the author of the *Mouzell* rather than writing under a pseudonym like Esther Sovernam and Constantia Munda, the other two writers who responded to Swetnam, Speght made an undisguised statement of her views on the denigrated place of female writers in the early seventeenth century. Her proud defence of these statements and her assumption of the role of writer in the dedication to *Mortalities Memorandum* are arguably even more daring, because they inform her readers that the *Mouzell* was the product of her own toil – not her father’s, like some doubtful critics assumed – and that the criticism of men far more powerful than her was not a hindrance, but an incentive for further publication. Here, she sets herself up as a strong authority over her readers, creating a relationship between them that she maintains throughout the course of *Mortalities Memorandum* and the “Dreame.”

Aside from the literary community that she creates in the “Dreame,” which will be discussed later, Speght creates an additional and, in some ways more interesting, intellectual community with her readers in the prefatory materials to *Mortalities Memorandum*. Although I cannot speculate about Speght’s true readership for this text, there are certain indications that suggest her intended readership was female. Speght’s first work, *A Mouzell for Melastomus*, was addressed “To all virtuous Ladies Honourable or Worshipful,” indicating that her intended readership for this work was female (3). Although there is not a similar address in *Mortalities Memorandum*, the work is dedicated to Speght’s godmother, Marie Moundford, with whom she shared a close bond. Furthermore, the presence of the proto-feminist “Dreame” that prefaces the main work also suggests an intended female readership. Thus, the relationship between author

and reader that I discuss here is based on *intended readership* rather than on those who actually picked up and read the text in the seventeenth century, as there is really no concrete way (beyond handwritten marginalia that engages with the printed text) to determine such a fact.

Exactly such a source does survive for Speght's other work, her *Mouzell*, but it is a reader who is almost certain to be a man, and one who was incensed by Speght's text.<sup>1</sup> In total, there are eighty-seven marginal notations in "a contemporary hand" that survive in a copy of the text located in the Beinecke Library at Yale University, and Lewalski notes that "such extensive commentary is most unusual in the period" (Speght 91). The outrage of this male reader took the form of comments such as "weoman be a wall, the wall is full of cracks, and needs much mortar to mend it" (Speght 96) and, at one point, he refers to Speght as "a singular ill-conditioned woeman" (Speght 103). Even knowing that the survival of these comments is rare, the palpable vitriol and contempt detectible in the tone of writing is quite astonishing, and these notations are a good indication of the type of retaliation that female writers were required to endure at this time.

After establishing a certain authority over them in the dedication, Speght instructs her readers on the kind of audience she is hoping they will be in an epistolary poem titled "To the Reader." The first stanza reads:

Readers too common, and plentiful be;  
 For Readers they are that can read a, b, c.  
 And utter their verdict on what they doe view,  
 Though none of the Muses they yet ever knew.  
 But helpe of such readers at no time I crave,

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<sup>1</sup> This marginalia appears in a copy (Ih Sp 33 617m) of Speght's *Mouzell* held at the Beinecke Library at Yale (Speght 91).

Their silence, than censure, I rather would have:

For ignorant Dunces doe soonest deprave. (Speght 47, lines 1-7)

In these lines, Speght notes that a person can be a reader by virtue of being functionally literate. That they can read “a, b, c” makes them such, but these readers are “too common”; they are people of ignorance who feel comfortable stating their opinions on subjects they know very little about (Speght 47, lines 1-2). The first stanza is a clear reproach of the type of “criticall” reader that Speght discusses in her dedicatory epistle who were, by her own admission, primarily male. In referencing the Muses, Speght is likely referring to mythical female sources of inspiration for poets and writers. She is thus creating a separation between herself as a writer, who is acquainted with the Muses, and thoughtless readers who merely critique what they “view” and do not have the talent or ability to create anything themselves. Thus, labelling the “criticall” readers as “ignorant Dunces” creates a hierarchy of learning that legitimizes Speght’s views and discounts the charges put against her by the men who did not like the *Mouzell*. In creating such a hierarchy, Speght is essentially implying that the classical education critical male readers might be assumed to have does not get them close to the Muses or create an ideal reader; one also has to be open-minded and willing to consider perspectives other than one’s own without dismissing them out of hand. Indeed, as the intended audience of her writing was likely female, it is easy to read Speght as warning her audience against becoming one of these “criticall” readers. Speght goes on to contrast the aforementioned “criticall” and “ignorant” type of reader with a discussion of a “courteous Reader” who she invites to take her literary efforts “in good part” (Speght 47, lines 8-9). She instructs these readers to correct “with judgement the faults [they] do’st finde, / With favour approving what pleaseth thy minde” (Speght 47, lines 10-11). She does not seem to mind

the commentary of “courteous” readers because they have the “judgement” to critique her work – and it is this model of a “courteous” reader that Speght compels her audience to emulate.

Speght enhances her relationship with “courteous” readers by speaking directly to them through second-person pronouns. Where she discusses the “ignorant” reader entirely from a distance, Speght addresses her audience as “thou,” creating an exclusive community between author and reader that adds further legitimacy to her authority as a writer and grants her the authority to advise her audience about the appropriate way to use their education to engage with literary texts. Kate Lilley places emphasis on the power of this writer-reader relationship in her article “‘Imaginarie in Manner’: Rachel Speght’s *Dreame* and the Female Scholar-Poet,” a relationship that she dubs a “hypostatized community” (103). To Lilley, the “rhetorical mechanism” that creates this community (the epistolary poem) “depends on the blurring of distinctions between writer and reader, writing and reading. Writing is figured as the occasion for a displaced and mediated meeting of minds” (Lilley 103). Once established, this “meeting of minds” continues throughout the course of the reader’s experience of *Mortalities Memorandum*, starting with the “Dreame.”

Speght’s direct address to the reader serves one more important purpose: it constructs a divide between the person who is reading and the ignorant who critique without proper judgment. The shift in the perspective of Speght’s address profits from an “us versus them” discourse that pits the reader against the “ignorant Dunces” whom they would be eager to distance themselves from out of a fear of being labelled as such. The contrast between the “ignorant” and “courteous” readers is solidified when Speght signs her poem “To those which (Art affect, And learnings fruit) respect,” a sign-off that alienates the “criticall Readers” who disliked the *Mouzell* by implying that they did not grant her the appreciation warranted by the

hard work that went into its creation (Speght 47). Where the former type of reader is an uninformed commentator, Speght envisions those she addresses as learned textual pundits.

In creating an intellectual community where she, the writer, holds a teacherly influence over those reading her work – and is thus able to shape their views on those who critiqued the *Mouzell* – Speght contributes directly to the learned/literate dichotomy and critique of patriarchal controls that Bathsua Makin and Mary Astell discuss at length later in the century. However, as an early-century female writer, Speght is constrained by the patriarchal strictures and male-oriented literary economy that she is operating within. As a result, her commentary appears in a less overt way than Makin's and Astell's, masked behind an (admittedly not very subtle) generalized commentary on “readers” as a whole. This being said, by refusing to conform completely with the early modern feminine virtues of modesty and silence, Speght resists the patriarchy in a significant way; Helen Speight calls the “absence of feminine modesty, beyond the purely conventional” the “most striking” aspect of *Mortalities Memorandum*, and I am compelled to agree with this assertion (453).

It is also important not to discount the implications of the writer/reader literary community on the wider work of *Mortalities Memorandum* and, in particular, the “Dreame.” Kate Lilley notes that “Speght's defense of the credibility and value of her authorial signature in the dedication, and her solicitation of more ‘courteous’ readers in the epistle, prepares the way for the dream's complex pseudo-autobiographical narrative of the genealogical predicament of the female author” (101). Although I would argue that the “Dreame” is far from *pseudo*-autobiographical, this statement from Lilley demonstrates that some scholars, though not many, have noticed the power and narrative importance of the dedication and epistolary poem to the interpretation and consideration of the “Dreame.” To Lilley, the “deferral of the proper text”

through the paratext “can be read as marking out the space of a prerequisite interlocution between the female author and her nominated audience” – an interlocution that guides the audience through their reading experience of the ‘proper text’ (100).

This interlocution applies to not only the “Dreame,” but *Mortalities Memorandum* as well. As mentioned earlier, Speght admits in the dedication that her main purpose in writing this work is to provide comfort to her readers and to help them prepare for death through their reading of the titular text. In creating a scenario where she establishes a certain authority over her readers and then shows them the struggle she went through in order to achieve that authority (in the “Dreame”), Speght sets herself up as someone worth listening to when it comes to the more serious subject matter of *Mortalities Memorandum*. As a female writer at this time, drawing such attention to her gender in the prefatory materials, even if her intended readership is most likely female, is perhaps the best way to ensure readerly trust. A memorandum is “an injunction to remember something” (*OED*, “memorandum, int. and n.”, B3), and Speght needs to convince her readers that her words are worth remembering.

Although the female intellectual community created by the combined effects of the dedication and the epistolary poem arguably has the widest impact on the reception of *Mortalities Memorandum* as a whole, that set up by Speght in the autobiographical “Dreame” is particularly notable in the act of tracing the broad preoccupation of these communities within the literary works of early feminist educational advocates and activists. In the “Dreame,” Speght co-opts the dream vision genre, which was particularly popular in early medieval Europe, in order to recount her educational journey in an imaginative space. This dream vision is one of only two written by British female writers<sup>2</sup> in the early modern period – the other was *Ane Godlie*

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<sup>2</sup> Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, a Hispanic writer who lived from 1648-1695 as a cloistered nun in colonial Mexico, also wrote a dream vision around this time, entitled *Primero sueño* [First Dream]. In *Early Modern Women’s Writing and*

*Dreame*, written by the Scottish Elizabeth Melvill in 1603 (Vecchi 4). In Speght's poem, the poetic speaker – whose identity I view as inextricable from Speght's – enters into a dream state where she is stricken by Ignorance, which is presented as an affliction to be remedied through hard work. Along her journey, the speaker is guided by female allegorical figures such as Thought, Experience, Age, Erudition, Industrie, and Desire. Together, they guard the speaker from the temptation to abandon her scholarly path, guiding her until she has been “cured” of the malady of Ignorance. Although the speaker is eventually pulled away from her quest for knowledge by an “occurrence” that remains a topic of debate among scholars, the poem stands as a strong testament to the value that a good education added to Speght's life (Speght 57, line 234). In addition, it also argues articulately for an expanded female education for all. In true Speght fashion, however, this advocacy is cloaked.

In the opening section of the “Dreame,” Speght establishes the ill effects of the ‘malady’ of Ignorance on the speaker. When she enters into the dream state, the speaker stands as a foreigner in a strange land. Although she views her location as “a place most pleasant to the eye,” it is a place where she gazes on everything “stranger-like” (Speght 49, lines 21, 23). This strange place is, as we will see, a place of learning and knowledge, and the speaker's initial status as a foreigner denotes her ignorance at the beginning of the text. As she stands gazing out on the strange landscape, the figure of Thought comes to her and inquires after her, noticing that she seems “disconsolate” (Speght 49, line 28). The speaker reveals that she suffers from a “griefe...called *Ignorance*, / Which makes [her] differ little from a brute” (Speght 49, lines 43-44). Speght summarises the state of Ignorance thus:

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*Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*, Stephanie Merrim examines this work, noting that Cruz's work treats “the Soul's quest for knowledge” (xliv). In a similar fashion to Speght's poem, the narrator of Cruz's dream vision meets a band of female characters while on a spiritual journey.

What is without the compasse of my braine,  
 My sicknesse makes me say it cannot bee;  
 What I conceive not, cannot come to passe;  
 Because for it I can no reason see.  
 I measure all mens feet by mine owne shooe,  
 And count all well, which I appoint or doe. (Speght 50, lines 61-66)

Here, the speaker is a person whose worldview does not extend beyond the bounds of her own experience because she has not been blessed with the benefits of learning. She is, by her own admission, “wanting wisdom” (Speght 49, line 24). Ignorance is not only a state of being, but an illness that must be cured, and the astute and informed female allegorical figures fulfill traditional gender roles by acting as the healers who provide curative instructions to the poetic speaker.

The female intellectual community created in Speght’s “Dreame” is one of many teachers and a single student. The poetic speaker is the beneficiary of the collective wisdom of her female guides, and these guides are adamant about the fact that they cannot help her alone; their instructions must be combined in order to lead to her cure. When the speaker asks Thought how to cure her malady, the latter responds “...in my judgement I doe often faile. / And therefore I’le commend unto your trial / *Experience*, of whom take no denial” (Speght 50, lines 76-78). Speght implies here that, as non-allegorical characteristics, thought without experience leads to one being unable to accurately produce a reasonable judgment. In addition, experience cannot be gained without age; when asked how to find Experience, Thought answers that “if I did abroad enquire, / ‘Twas likely *Age* could answer my desire” (Speght 51, lines 83-84). The speaker’s efforts to find the cure lead her to Age, who informs her that

The onely medicine for your maladie,  
 By which, and nothing else your helpe is wrought,  
 Is *Knowledge*, of the which there is two sorts,  
 The one is good, the other bad and nought;  
 The former sort by labour is attain'd,  
 The latter may without much toyle be gain'd. (Speght 51, lines 91-96)

Knowledge, which can be found “in *Eruditions* garden,” is gained through association with *Industrie*. The collectivity needed among all of these figures in order for the speaker to be cured of her Ignorance speaks to the power of sisterhood and female solidarity for the encouragement and expansion of female education.

Not only does the fellowship of the textual community speak to the necessity of female solidarity, but Speght also uses it as proof of the power of sisterhood against the critics of female education. Early in the poem, the speaker mentions that “sometimes when I seeke the golden meane, / My weaknesse makes me faile of mine intent,” noting how, when alone, she finds herself easily swayed by the slightest hindrance to her self-improvement (Speght 50, lines 55-56). Once she has a host of protective female companions, however, the speaker is not as easy to beguile. Shortly after the speaker is told that *Industrie* (hard work) will guide her to “*Erudition's* garden,” a figure named *Disswasion* appears in her path and advances several potential impediments to her reaching such an enlightened place. These hindrances include “...dulnesse, and [her] memories defect; / The difficultie of attaining lore, / [Her] time, and sex, and many others more” (Speght 52, lines 106-108). Interestingly, these supposed obstacles to female learning are not unlike those that Makin and Astell counter in their more direct educational tracts much later in the seventeenth century. This attempt by *Disswasion* to deter the speaker from her

quest for knowledge is unsuccessful, as her female companions come to her aid when they see that she is unable to counter Disswasion's objections. Indeed, Lisa Schnell calls this intervention of the "female community" particularly "significant," noting how "Thought is suddenly joined by an entire company of female companions who all take arms against the enemy Disswasion" (70). Industrie informs Disswasion that "her friends shall make of thee thy purpose misse" (Speght 52, line 120). They provide logical and articulate rebuttals to Disswasion's arguments on behalf of the speaker, demonstrating their solidarity with her and their refusal to abandon her in her pursuit of knowledge.

The rejoinders to Disswasion's objections listed by the female allegorical figures follow similar rhetorical and logical strategies that will be found in the works of Bathsua Makin and Mary Astell in Chapter Three. Desire informs Disswasion that their opposition is not mandated by God ("These oppositions come not from above"), and Truth notes that reason discounts everything Disswasion says (Speght 52, line 116). Industrie notes that the speaker will be supported and kept on course by her female friends. Disswasion's objection that her sex is not suited to learning is the issue that is taken up most strongly by the female community, and Truth provides a logical, articulate response. This response is first crafted by citing the spiritual equality of women and men: "Both man and woman of three parts consist, / Which *Paul* doth bodie, soule, and spirit call" (Speght 53, lines 127-128). Women, Truth notes, were given the ability to learn by God, and therefore ought to exercise those gifts:

And from the soule three faculties arise,

The mind, the will, the power; then wherefore shall

A woman have her intellect in vaine,

Or not endeavour *Knowledge* to attaine. (Speght 53, lines 129-132)

The God-given talent for learning “must be employ’d,” as “All parts and faculties were made for use” (Speght 53, lines 133, 135). Truth follows this rebuttal by using several stanzas to cite an index of talented scholarly women from all fields of learning, from poetry and rhetoric to science and mathematics. Elaine Beilin draws particular attention to this “series of classical exempla of women in public life,” noting how it “removes any doubt about where and how women should use their minds” (269-270). The exempla of women cited by Truth have employment, and some even held powerful intellectual influence over prominent men. Aspasia, for example, “was in Rheth’ricke so expert, / As that Duke *Pericles* of her did learne” (Speght 54, lines 146-147). Later in the century, Makin and Astell use similar rhetorical strategies to rebuke the extensive male disapproval of expanded female education. It is in this wider conversation that the line between Speght and the subjects of the poem becomes particularly blurred; one gets the sense that Speght is speaking *through* her writing, embedding a broader social commentary within the execution of her literacy narrative. This way, her critique of patriarchal limits on women is not as overt as it was in the *Mouzell*, which was a work of non-fiction prose.

It is interesting and particularly important to note that Disswasion is the only ungendered allegorical figure mentioned in the “Dreame.” Given that the gender of every other figure is clearly stated and that this poem is a thinly veiled autobiography of Speght, it is quite easy to read Disswasion as an allegorical depiction of the male public opposition to female education at the time that *Mortalities Memorandum* was published. Disswasion is the force that the speaker and her female guides actively resist and, like the male critics that Speght compels her readers to resist in the epistle, Disswasion, the only ungendered or male figure in the poem, is represented as an “ignorant Dunce” who shares his opinion without the possession of the *good* kind of knowledge mentioned in the “Dreame” – a kind of knowledge that, Age admits early in poem, is

to be gained through Industrie and labour. Ultimately, Disswasion does not prevail in their efforts to distract the Speaker, and she completes her educational journey with the help of her female companions. Although she eventually has to return to the realities of domestic life, the speaker experiences an extended period of freedom where she is allowed to expand her mind, free from persecution.

In imagining such a space, Speght creates a sort of feminist educational utopia where knowledge is freely available and there are no restrictions placed on female learning. It is an idealized space where women are free to learn what and as they please with the help and guidance of other women. It is also a garden space; the speaker is told to search for Knowledge in “Eruditions garden” where “it [Knowledge] doth grow” (Speght 51, line 100). The garden is a place of “pleasure” where the speaker can search for the “plant” of Knowledge free of restraint (Speght 55, lines 169, 171). In her discussion of this garden as a potential stand-in for Eden, Shannon Miller notes that the speaker is “purposefully alone” with “no complementary Adam to be found” (160). Although I am unconvinced by Miller’s reading of the “Dreame” as a rewriting of Eden, her commentary on the solitary nature of the poetic speaker is particularly useful. Unencumbered by patriarchal limits, the poetic speaker is able (and encouraged) to reach her intellectual potential. That it is an imaginative space, however, speaks strongly to the power of Speght’s embedded critique within the text. The convergence of fantasy and reality that Speght integrates into the poem reaches its peak when the poetic speaker is pulled away from her quest for knowledge to “whence [she] came, and where [she] must remaine” – the domestic sphere (57, line 240). Elaine Beilin suggests that Speght’s strategy with *Mortalities Memorandum* “was to turn away from the attack and counterattack of the [Swetnam debate] ... and instead to rewrite the earlier discourses of dream allegory and classical exempla in order to assert her possession of

knowledge even as she records the imposed limitations on it" (267-268). There is a good amount of scholarly consensus that the "occurrence" which called Speght away from her authorial ambitions was her marriage to William Procter in 1621, shortly after *Mortalities Memorandum* was published. Her marriage causes her to fade into obscurity: "As Rachel Procter, she becomes silent to us for the next six years or so and obscure for the next fifteen" (Speight 455). She never published again, and her work remained largely unstudied until the last thirty years, when she rightly began to earn her place among the noteworthy female writers of the early modern period.

In detailing her own educational journey in the "Dreame," Speght provides both an early example of a seventeenth-century female literacy narrative and a powerful rebuttal to male critiques of expanded education. She operates according to the patriarchal strictures of the time and within the necessities of feminine convention to deliver this rebuttal; it is made clear that the space of female learning is an imagined fantasy space, and also that her character learns important religious lessons that guide her through the remainder of her life. However, this conformity does not negate the power of her advocacy. If anything, she was required to "make some accommodations to conventional social attitudes" in order to reach publication, the avenue most likely to succeed in disseminating her ideas to a wider audience (Vecchi 4). Creating an allegorical literacy narrative whose detail of an educational process is fairly broad until the closing stanzas, when some personal details begin to creep in, also means that any reader can stand in her place. Indeed, Elaine Beilin suggests in her article "Writing Public Poetry: Humanism and the Woman Writer" that the female allegorical figures in Speght's "Dreame" "generalize...the struggle that leads to individual intellectual attainment, and perhaps they are Speght's way of extending her own experience to other women" (270). Linda Vecchi notes this universality as well: "by allegorizing the experiences of her 'Dreame,' Speght universalizes

them; in effect turning her personal ‘Dreame’ into what Randall Martin has called an “Everywoman story” (3). The relationship that Speght creates with her audience in the dedication and epistolary poem creates a level of trust between author and reader that compels us to identify with her story and recognize her struggle. Thus, perhaps the strongest power of Speght’s text is not its subversive non-conformity to patriarchal norms, nor its imagination of a forceful intellectual sisterhood, but rather its ability to manipulate the sensibilities and perspectives of its readers.

### **“Spirituell Flowers”: Elizabeth Isham, Familial Bonds, and Spiritual Education**

In the spring of 2002, a scholar named Tom Cogswell came across a manuscript that had been in the archives of Princeton University since the 1970s (Stephens, *Gentlewoman’s Remembrance* 2). This manuscript, titled *My Booke of Remembrance* and written by an early seventeenth-century Northamptonshire gentlewoman named Elizabeth Isham, contains a sixty-thousand-word spiritual autobiography that gives an unprecedented glimpse into the perspective of an unusually educated woman on her spiritual, domestic, and social life. Indeed, Isaac Stephens notes how the autobiography, “an intensely private document...allows us to enter her mind, so to speak, and view how an early seventeenth-century woman perceived – through primarily a religious understanding – her relationship with God, her family, and her overall world” (*Gentlewoman’s Remembrance* 2). In addition, the *Booke of Remembrance* is an invaluable resource for those studying the history of women’s reading, as Isham details both her spiritual and secular reading practices, and often records her thoughts on the written material that she consumes. She also provides us with details about her close relationships with her female

relatives, detailing a real female intellectual community that was self-sustaining and that continued through the generations.

Since the text was “rediscovered,” a good number of scholars have flocked to it in an effort to expand our knowledge of early modern women’s writing. Researchers such as Julie Eckerle, Margaret JM Ezell, and Anne Cotterill have dedicated articles to unraveling the *Booke*’s mysteries, and Isaac Stephens has dedicated an entire monograph to Isham and her life, entitled *The Gentlewoman’s Remembrance: Patriarchy, Piety, and Singlehood in Early Stuart England* (2016). Stephens’ monograph functions as an effective biography and examination of Isham’s religion, education, singlehood, and written works. In addition to the topics broached in Stephens’ book, scholars have also paid special attention to the notion of familial inheritance in Isham’s writing. Most recently, Edith Snook wrote a chapter in *Women’s Bookscapes*, edited by Knight, White, and Sauer, entitled “Elizabeth Isham’s ‘Own Bookes’: Property, Propriety, and the Self as Library.” In this chapter, Snook mainly examines a booklist left behind by Isham in the Isham family papers, which contains approximately seventy-five titles that Isham appears to have owned in her lifetime. As we will see, Isham’s relationships with and connections to members of her family were just as important to her as her relationship with God and had an equally strong influence on her life. Although scholars have noted the importance of Isham’s connections to her female relatives, no one has yet examined the impact of the female intellectual community on the text as a whole, let alone in conjunction with other seventeenth-century texts. The following pages demonstrate that the consideration of the female intellectual community in Isham’s work is vital to understanding how Isham viewed her world – even in ways that she does not say explicitly in the *Booke*.

Firstly, however, having a good understanding the unusual course of Isham's life will help reveal the feminist potential of her text. She was born in 1609 to Sir John and Lady Judith Isham of Lamport Hall in Northamptonshire, seventy-five miles north of London (Cotterill 226). The oldest of three children who were fairly close in age, Elizabeth had a sister named Judith, born in 1610, and brother named Justinian, born in 1611. Sir John was the first Isham baronet, and "secured much of [the family's] wealth in the early seventeenth century" (Stephens, *Gentlewoman's Remembrance* 1). An intensely religious family, the Ishams were Puritans. At "its most basic level, [Puritanism] describes a particularly intense form of English Protestantism that largely centered on a strict observance of Calvinist theology, on an exaltation of Scripture and the Word preached, on antippery, and on an often austere style of piety and way of life" (Stephens, "Confessional Identity" 26). Many of these qualities can be seen in Isham's *Booke*, particularly in terms of the exaltation of Scripture and God's word, and intense piety. The Puritan reliance on the Word of God meant that education was a cornerstone of life at Lamport Hall in the early seventeenth century.

As a child, Isham received a generous education that sparked a life-long love of books and the written word. She was provided with prayer books and other devotional materials and was taught to read by her mother and grandmother. She admits that traditional feminine "worke" – domestic tasks like embroidery and sewing – came more easily to her, but her aptitude for this type of work rather than studying was merely a trial to be overcome with perseverance (Isham fol. 9v). Much of Isham's childhood learning was centered on spiritual matters: coming "to a fuller knowledge" of God (Isham fol. 3v). As she grew older, her life was marked by intense loss: her paternal grandmother died in 1621, her mother died in 1625, and her sister Judith in 1636 (Cotterill 227). She continued to learn, however, and with age began to read some secular

texts. More about her education will be revealed in the pages to come, as a discussion of her learning is inextricable from one about her intellectual community.

One of the reasons why Isham's *Booke* is such a valuable historical record is that it provides, in detail, her perspective and justification for her choice to remain single. Although her singlehood is not the focus of this inquiry, it is worth mentioning briefly because of the large role it has played in scholarly examinations of Isham and her life. Isham first mentions the possibility of her marriage when she's describing her sixteenth year, noting how "I was so pleased with the devine truth. that I desired not to marry" (fol. 18v). Interestingly, she was supported in this initial choice by Lady Isham, who "desired [Isham's] father that he would not be hastie in marrying of me. nor force mee to any against my owne liking" (Isham fol. 18v). Given how much Isham's mother meant to her, something that is demonstrated in the coming pages, it is certain that this support meant a great deal to her.

Although Sir John Isham had a few suitors in mind for his eldest daughter over the course of her lifetime, the only person who ever tempted her to marry was a man named John Dryden II of Cannons Abbey, whom she entered into a courtship with in 1630, and is not to be confused with the poet of the same name (Stephens, *Gentlewoman's Remembrance* 3). Interestingly, Isham never mentions Dryden by name in her *Booke*; on folio 22v, she mentions her proposed suitor for the first time, and enters into a section of intense self-examination in the *Booke*, referring to this time as "this grievous triall" (fol. 22v). She admits soon after to developing a tenderness for this unnamed man, but fears to "offend God in [her] affections" (Isham fol. 23v). And herein lies her justification for remaining single. In her *Booke*, when she's recounting the details of her life from around the time that she was eighteen, she makes the following note:

through the vehemency of my zeale I offered my affections to thee my God at divers times desiring that it might be more acceptable to thee (which I thought therefore would be better for me) that I might not marry. and though I thought it would be a hard matter to me in re-garde of my kindred and others who would be earnest with me to the contrary. yet I reposed my confidence in the Lord... (Isham fol. 20v)

This passage demonstrates several things. Firstly, it shows that Isham was willing to be an object of scorn in the eyes of her family and friends in order to remain single. Most importantly, it provides readers with Isham's justification not to marry: so that she could dedicate herself wholly to God and his Word, an argument that is logical given the family's adherence to Puritan doctrine. Furthermore, it is worth considering that this justification provided a woman who simply did not want to marry a vindication for doing so. I am not suggesting here that Isham's faith was insincere – rather the opposite – but merely that her case demonstrates that there were options available for women who wished to remain single. After all, she does admit that “[her] mind desired to be free in a single life,” and “therefore [she] avoided all opportunity of love” (Isham fol. 23v). Although Isham's father continued to press her towards marriage in the years to come, he eventually accepted her decision and allowed her to remain at home with a yearly allowance.

Although Isham left behind more than her *Booke*, it is this text that forms the key study of this consideration of her writing.<sup>3</sup> While many scholars have called Isham's *Booke of Remembrance* a spiritual autobiography, there is no official consensus on the genre of the work. Despite generic titles given to the text by scholars, it is important to note that “sixteenth- and

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<sup>3</sup> There is also another autobiographical document that survives. It comprises a single folio page, and according to Margaret J.M. Ezell, is “inscribed with lists and short jottings” (72). In this document, she lists years of her life and significant events that happened therein.

seventeenth-century life writing evolved before generic conventions for autobiographical writing had solidified and before the term ‘autobiography’ itself was even used” (Eckerle 98). This explains why it is difficult to place a label on the *Booke*: it is part autobiography, part confession to God, and part thought experiment. Isaac Stephens notes that “it was Augustine’s *Confessions* that served as Elizabeth’s chief literary model” when composing her life narrative and, as such, it is written in first person and addressed to God (“Confessional Identity” 35). It details Isham’s life from girlhood until 1639, when it was completed, and is “one of the earliest female-authored prose narratives about the self” (Eckerle 97). It has value for scholars of many disciplines, with ample material for literary critics, historians, botanists, those interested in the history of reading, and many others. Of particular interest to this study is the way that Isham portrays and discusses her loving relationships with the women in her family, who band together during times of spiritual hardship and doubt.

As is the case with Speght, Isham sets up a notable female intellectual community within the pages of her text. Also like Speght, this community is one whose members support and encourage each other in their pursuit of learning and the written word, particularly when it comes to the word of God and the maintenance of feminine piety. There is one way, however, in which Isham’s intellectual community differs from all of the others presented in this study: it was real, not “imaginarie in manner,” as is noted on the title page to Speght’s “Dreame.” This community lived and breathed, and the *Booke of Rememberance* survives as a written testimony to its existence. In Isham’s *Booke*, the intellectual community comprises four people: Elizabeth herself, her sister Judith, her mother Lady Isham, and her paternal grandmother, who she normally refers to as “my Granmother.” Lady Isham and the grandmother take on the roles of teacher, providing both the texts that the girls read and guidance for the act of reading them.

Elizabeth and Judith are the students, sponges for knowledge who absorb the information and words presented to them. It is an atmosphere where the girls' spiritual education is allowed to flourish unimpeded. And though they do get input from male advisors, such as their father Lord Isham and John Dod, a local chaplain, Isham's fondest memories at that time of her life involve her female relations.

The intellectual community in Isham's *Booke* is linked inextricably with the encouragement and maintenance of feminine piety as part of spiritual education. At its core, the community consists of a group of women who share incredibly close bonds, and who support and encourage each other to remain devout and dedicated to God. Throughout the *Booke*, Isham appears especially close to her mother, and particularly grateful for her education. She says the following to God at one point: "I am unwilling to omit many things concerning your servant my mother; because that my education, was much bettered by her meanes: I growing up with her as a branch with the roote" (Isham fol. 10v). The imagery used here is touching; in her early years, Isham evidently viewed her world as inextricably linked to Lady Isham. Elizabeth and Judith were often tasked with prayer memorization and would then recite what they had memorized to their mother and grandmother. When they outgrew their prayer books, they were provided with new ones. It seems as though, for two young girls receiving an education at home during the early seventeenth century, they wanted for nothing.

In the *Booke*, Elizabeth presents the Isham women as a close-knit community, but as tends to happen with siblings close in age, tensions arise between Elizabeth and Judith as children. Contrary to what readers might think, given the status of the *Booke* as a testament to a highly educated woman in the early seventeenth century, Isham did not have a natural aptitude for bookish pursuits. She writes that she "was naturally a child apt to [her] worke but [her] sister,

was redier at her Booke” and despite the fact that her parents “commend[ed]” Elizabeth, they “would say that [Judith] had chosen the better part” (Isham fol. 5v). The “worke” she speaks of here is that of the traditionally feminine domestic sort: needlework and the like. Elizabeth goes as far as to say that Judith “was of a riper wit” than herself (Isham fol. 5v). This is particularly notable and says much about the learning environment at Lamport Hall: Elizabeth was more naturally inclined towards traditional feminine “work” such as embroidery, and it was Judith, who was eager for book learning, who was praised more by Lord and Lady Isham. Thus, intellectualism in women was not derided, but praised. As many children are, Isham was motivated to become more bookish because of the comparison to her sister and, as she freely admits, a fear of others’ opinions. She speaks of the fact that her brother “did not understand the name of Wisdome that I might obtaine it; which want I well remember in my selfe and that I was so in the opinion of others who sumtime thought I would be an Ignorant” (Isham fol. 5v). Naturally, as the *Booke* is a spiritual biography, she notes that it was God who remedied this ignorance by granting her “the Knowledge of [Him] wherein [she] glor[ies]” (Isham fol. 5v). Eventually, Elizabeth overcomes her jealousy of her sister and peace is restored within the female intellectual community – although from the beginning, her issues with Judith were mostly dealt with through introspection.

The female members of the Isham family also supported each other during times of spiritual turmoil. One member of the community who is particularly prone to melancholy is Lady Isham, who seems to have spent more time sequestered in her chamber than anywhere else in the house when Isham was a child. Lady Isham left behind a written record of her thoughts during her melancholy that is an inspiration for Isham to create her own “rememberances” later in life: “I can no better express my mothers troubles then out of the nots [notes] of her owne hand –

writing which she kept (carring then about her) as rememberances and instructions to her selfe” (Isham fol. 11r). Her mother’s “rememberances” also provide Isham with guidance: “she desired in her nots or table Booke to make good use of all the Lords mercies and corrections to her writing thus to her selfe” (Isham fol. 11v). These reminders for self-improvement become a prominent feature of Isham’s own *Booke*, a strong indication that she drew inspiration from her mother in the construction of her text. As the years go on, Isham reports her mother spending more and more time inside, and is often called to read to her mother during such times. When Isham is older, she is often reads to her mother when the latter is ill, even when Isham “had bine at worke” (Isham fol. 17r). These readings continue, and as Lady Isham gets weaker and “could endure no body to speak aloud or read she said it did her good to thinke of that she had read” (Isham fol. 19r). The women of the family spend much time together during Lady Isham’s illness, and after her death Elizabeth acts from her example: she speaks of a time when she was grieving and found no solace “till [she] lighted upon a place in Dubertus [i.e., Guillaume de Salluste Du Bartas, an influential Protestant poet] of the manner of deaths” (Isham fol. 19v). Although the sisters grieve for their mother, “thinking [them]selves very unket<sup>4</sup> without her as sheepe without sheparde,” they endured the pain of their loss together, taking comfort in their sisterhood as the last two members of the original Isham female intellectual community (Isham fol. 19v).

The notion of inheritance is a vital component of the female intellectual community in Isham’s *Booke*. In particular, the passing of books from one generation to another is an essential part of not only Isham’s relationships with her mother, grandmother, and sister, but the Isham

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<sup>4</sup> Although no footnote is provided for this word in the online edition of *My Booke of Remembrance*, “unket” is a variant spelling of “unked,” which means unnatural or abnormal (*OED*, “unked, adj.,” 2). Children without their mother are apt to feel desolate, and since Isham refers to she and Judith as feeling like a “sheepe without sheparde,” the intended meaning of “unket” seems clear. Sheep without a shepherd will wander astray.

family in general. For example, the earliest gift that Isham mentions receiving was a Psalm book from her mother “in which [she] much delighted because of the verce of and haveing learned” the psalms (fol. 5r). Isham also recounts that a few years later, “[her] mother gave [her] and [her] sister a prayer booke a piece, and [she] was much stirred betimes to this spirituall exercise of prayer by reading of the exhortation” (fol. 8r). This process of inheritance continues throughout the text. Once Isham out-grows her older prayer books, her mother buys her one “with pruftes [proofs?]. Which [she] liked well to redd, as [she] did, in those first bookes which were bought” for her (Isham fol. 10r). Later on, Lady Isham lets Isham “keepe some bookes of hers,” and her grandmother shows her a book of “Christian praies and meditations” that belonged to Elizabeth’s great grandfather Isham (Isham fol. 16v). There are several other instances of the gifting of books to be found within Isham’s *Booke*, all of which demonstrate a clear pride in the educational and religious history of the family. Several scholars have noted the Isham family habit of giving or bequeathing books. After listing practically every instance of familial book-giving in her article “Elizabeth Isham’s ‘Own Bookes’,” Edith Snook suggests that Isham “receives comfort from reading the books that belonged to others, for they allow her to remember her kin as readers and to forge a material connection to them through books” (83). Indeed, to read the books of her ancestors is a way of shaping “a Christian identity through the family line; this is an inheritance, as her uncle says, that can be valued more than land” (Snook, “Own Books” 83). When considered this way, the inheritance of books not only provides the Ishams with a way of maintaining their spiritual legacy, but of maintaining a sort of physical connection to future members of their family through the materiality of the books.

In the *Booke*, Isham often refers to comfortable “places” in the various tomes that she reads. The earliest example of this can be found on folio 6v, where she notes that she calls to

mind some “comfortable places of Scripture” when she is feeling envious towards her sister (Isham fol. 6v). There are also some favourite “places” of Lady Isham that Isham had written down before the former’s death: “...these places which my mother delighted in she wished me to writ downe for her. which now I keepe” (Isham fol. 15r). It is not just to the female members of her family that Isham feels a connection, however; after she is shown the prayer book of her great grandfather Isham, Elizabeth remarks that “since [then] I have bine very glad to meete with these places and something else of his owne writing” (Isham fol. 16v). These “places,” both literal (in terms of the page they are written on) and figurative (what is written, potentially in the form of memorable passages or commonplaces on certain topics), are ones that Isham can repeatedly return to for comfort and guidance. Hillary M. Nunn has noticed this preoccupation with place as well, suggesting that “in consulting her great-grandfather’s writings, Isham visits a space that he has created, a textual location made of paper that offers a direct connection to her ancestors” (76). Thus, not only is the material book the locus on which the female intellectual community is centered, as the physical object that mediates learning, but it also provides Isham with a physical way of maintaining connections with her family members long after they have perished. Towards the end of her life, Isham bequeaths her own *Booke* to her nieces, and as I demonstrate below, she seems to follow in the “stepes...wherein [her] forefathers have walked” by doing so (Isham fol. 16v). In naming the text *My Booke of Rememberance*, she draws attention to the materiality of the only physical copy of this piece of writing. Drawing such explicit attention to the text’s material container and the talk within of “places” in writing could lead her nieces to draw comfort and instruction from her writing in a similar way that Isham did with the familial writings that she read as a child.

Isham's *Booke of Rememberance* speaks not only to the value of a more traditional education, but also to the value of experience and learning from the example of others. In particular, the examples set by her grandmother Isham had perhaps more influence on her than those of any other authority figure in her early life. In the text's opening pages, Isham speaks of visiting her grandmother during a time of illness and having the opportunity to peruse the matriarch's prized books: "in this time of my Granmother's sicknes I comming dayly to see her alighted upon her Bookes (which lay in her window) wherein she much delighted" (fol. 5r). In browsing through the pages and enjoying her grandmother's company, Isham "gathered spirituall flowers out of the garden of her [grandmother's] sweetnes" (Isham fol.5r). This visit with her grandmother is a formative one for Isham, and it is notable that it is the experience of seeing her grandmother's disposition during a time of turmoil that has the most influence on her in this moment, rather than the books themselves. Isham takes "spirituall flowers" – ideas that plant themselves in her mind and grow – not from the books that she peruses, but from her grandmother's "sweetnes" – her temperament and actions during a difficult time (Isham fol. 5r). Afterwards, Isham creates a notebook where, after "lighting upon prayes for this porpose [she] writ them downe for [her] owne use" (Isham fol. 5r). The "porpose" she speaks of is turning to the written word during times of difficulty, as her grandmother does several times in the *Booke*. There are other instances in the *Booke* when Isham looks to her grandmother's example and teachings for guidance. She recalls an inane fight with her siblings, after which she "call[ed] to mind [a] Lesson of my Granmothers to me" – a lesson rooted in Scripture "wherein as in a glasse I saw my owne errowes" (Isham fol. 5v). Indeed, her grandmother's teachings had a profound effect on Isham's life, decisions, and responses to certain situations.

In time, the dynamic of the little community shifts with the deaths of all members but Isham, and she finds herself trying to create another female intellectual community to mimic the one she had as a child, but this time with herself at the helm. This shift, which takes place while Judith is still alive, comes as a result of her being the oldest daughter at the time of Lady Isham's death, when Lord Isham "gave [her] in charge to keepe things of the house, and to looke over his maides" (Isham fol. 20r). As such, Lady Isham's death signals the final transition of Isham from student to teacher, with her occupying all of her mother's former domestic roles. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Isham takes over the role of teacher from her mother and grandmother, acting as the maternal figure who guides the maids and female servants at Lamport Hall in reading passages from scripture and, when they are illiterate, reads aloud to them. Even in her mother's illness, she "learnt one of [her] mothers maids to read" and, despite facing difficulties, "stuck close to the teaching of one who was industerous to learne. and thereby profited" (Isham fol. 17r). These efforts, which began before Lady Isham's death, continue on throughout the rest of Isham's life.

The close relationship that Isham sees cultivated between her mother and grandmother during their lifetimes is one that she tries to emulate in her adult relationship with her sister, once they have grown up and moved beyond their childhood differences. In the early pages of the *Booke*, Isham compares the relationship between her mother and grandmother to that of Naomi and Ruth in scripture: "there agrement hath ofton made mee call to mind of the love betwixt Naomi and Ruth which they would sumtimes mencion" (Isham fol. 4v). She describes her grandmother reading to Lady Isham in her chamber while the latter was ill, noting that they "rejoyced together before thee [God]" and found comfort in each other (Isham fol 4v). Later on, Isham notes that her matriarchs "lived and loved together the best that I knew any mother and

daughter-in law,” providing Elizabeth and Judith with a good example of strong female bonds and the power of sisterhood (fol. 10v). Although Elizabeth acknowledges that her relationship with her sister was slightly fraught with jealousy as children, in adulthood they strive to fill the spaces left by the deaths of the family matriarchs. Elizabeth teaches Judith how to make a “purs” for their brother Justinian (Isham fol. 21v), and they keep up the habit of reading spiritual texts together: “I somtimes (or daily) read. whereby both my selfe and sister had comfort for I read in Mr. Dods Booke on the commandements” (Isham fol. 24r). When they did not read together, Elizabeth and Judith would “repete to one another as [they] sat at worke, those things which [they] could remember...that was remarkable or might edifie” (Isham fol. 25v). Thus, the sisters find comfort in both books and each other’s company. On folio 30r, Elizabeth describes the tender relationship between the sisters before Judith’s death, marking a stark contrast to the (perhaps one-sided) competitive nature of their relationship as children. Upon Judith’s tragically early death, Elizabeth remarks that it was “some comfort...to behold or take my last farewell of that beloved object which was deare unto me” (Isham fol. 30v). For the majority of her adult life, Isham found herself without those who had provided the stability, comfort, and guidance of her childhood and early adulthood. As such, she was forced to adapt to the situation and attempt to create a new community – which she does in an interesting way.

Through familial inheritance of both books and learning, Isham is able to ensure the perpetuation of the female intellectual community even after the members of the original community have passed away. While I have already examined how she does this by holding prayer groups and acting as a sort of spiritual guide to the maids and other female servants at Lamport Hall, there is one other way that she can be seen to perpetuate the female intellectual community: through her relationship with her intended readership. Given what we know about

the form of the text, the fact that it was a diary, and was presumably intended to be a personal document, we might be led to question what we can deduce about the readership of the *Booke of Remembrance*. Luckily, Isham has left behind some clues to assist us in our deductions. On folio 2r of the manuscript, Isham included the following annotation:

Not that I intend to have [this] published. but to this end I have it in praise a  
 than[k]fullness to God. and for my owne benefit. which if it may doe my Brother or his  
 children any pleasure I think to leave it to them. whom I hope will charitable censure of  
 me. (fol. 2r)

The annotation, while only a single note on one page of the manuscript, is perhaps the most telling piece of evidence within its pages about Isham's intention for the text. It was intended for private perusal, and she decided to collect her "rememberances" because her mother did the same thing. Given the family's history with passing on texts that they have owned or written, however, we must not assume that she never intended it to be read by anyone else. Indeed, upon her death, as suggested in the annotation, Isham bequeathed the *Booke* to her brother Justinian's "first four daughters" (Stephens, *Gentlewoman's Remembrance* 4). As a result, it is arguable that some of the pieces of advice left in the *Booke* were not just there as reminders to Isham's future self, but also to her nieces for whenever they may read her "rememberances" in the future. Unlike Speght's "Dreame," where the intellectual community created with the reader is inclusive to anyone who picks up and identifies with the text, that created for the intended readers of Isham's *Booke of Remembrance* is exclusive to a select few. That scholars and readers alike are now privy to the thoughts and meditations held in Isham's diary can be attributed to both time and historical recovery – nothing else.

There are several instances in Isham's *Booke* that suggest she had an intended readership other than herself. In the text, there are passages where Isham meditates on philosophical or moral subjects, noting retrospectively what she knows now (when she was writing the text) versus what she knew "then" – when she was a child. Perhaps the most overt is when she makes a direct comment about children and learning:

...perceving the inclination of children to be apt to learne that which is not so good and to rejoyce in it; therefore now I thinke it better by way of prevenion to season them in the best; and although I past this censor upon my selfe, yet I suppose *sum others* [emphasis added] may apprehend sooner or better. (Isham fol. 7r)

While some might read this excerpt as one of Isham's moral or philosophical musings, it is also possible to read it as wisdom speaking to inexperience. The inclusion of the phrase "sum others" in this excerpt is suggestive of this, especially considering that she admits on the front page of the *Booke* that she plans on leaving the manuscript to her brother's daughters. In that case, it can be read as though Isham is informing the reader of what she did as a child, and what she wishes she could have done differently, hoping that they, the "others" to whom she is speaking, will avoid her mistakes. Additionally, this is not the only instance in the text where she speaks on the nature of childhood and growing up. There is another moment where she speaks of observing "that evill inclination in our childehood that comming to ripper years breakes forth": the habit of envying "at anothers hapines that doth as well or better then our selves" (Isham fol. 9r). While it is completely possible that Isham was simply using this space in her manuscript for reflection, just as the genre of the text calls for, it is also possible that she included it as a lesson for those she intended to read it one day – her nieces.

The inclusion of these reflections in the *Booke* leads to some interesting questions. As has already been noted, I suggest here that Isham is ensuring the continuation of the familial female intellectual community by bequeathing her remembrances to her nieces upon her death. This is especially pertinent given that their mother, Jane, had passed away suddenly in the late winter of 1639, and that Lady Isham and Judith had already died (Stephens, “Confessional Identity” 34). In *The Gentlewoman’s Remembrance*, Isaac Stephens argues that the *Booke* acts as a “memorial testament” to Lady Isham and Judith, chronicling the lives of these women in a way that no other extant written document does (4). As a result, Isham may have left the *Booke* to her nieces partly to ensure that they knew their grandmother and aunt. Hillary M. Nunn has suggested something similar: “left to her nieces as a record of her own faith, Isham’s *Booke* constructs a bridge between the youngest members of her family and the ancestors they might not otherwise know” (78). Furthermore, in examining the *Booke*, Isham’s nieces would have the opportunity to learn of their aunt’s moral and spiritual struggles as a young girl, read about the lessons she learned as she grew up, and live by her example in the way that she dedicated her life to God. Although Justinian would have undoubtedly provided his daughters with the best possible education, particularly given how the *Booke* reveals that he loaned secular texts to his sisters and encouraged them to read, there would have been no chance for them to have the sort of female intellectual community that Isham enjoyed as a child and adolescent. Thus, in the absence of living older female relatives, the *Booke* takes on the role of teacher, acting as a tangible stand-in for the absent aunt. Indeed, the significance of the material book to the Isham female intellectual communities is a thought that deserves more consideration.

Isham lived her life at Lamport Hall, tending to the house. She died in the family home in 1654 at the age of forty-five, meaning that there are over fifteen years of her life that are

undocumented by the *Booke*, which still stands as the most complete record of her life. She also left behind a booklist, recounting books that she counted among her possessions in the later years of her life.<sup>5</sup> There are around seventy-two books on this list, of which “almost all...are identifiable” (Snook, “Own Books” 78). Edith Snook likens this booklist to an early form of life writing, suggesting that “with the inventory entitled ‘My own Bookes,’ Isham not only defines the contents of her library, but she also forges a record of who she was” (“Own Books” 79). Snook also notes that there are some discrepancies between the books that appear on Isham’s inventory and those that she names as having read in her *Booke*. The booklist, she suggests, places “emphasis...on propriety,” particularly highlighting Isham’s “identity as a woman whose interests are defined by her faith and her work (Snook, “Own Books” 86-87). No secular titles appear on the list, but rather “domestic and religious texts,” the type that you might expect to find in the personal library of such a woman (Snook, “Own Books” 78). Despite this, the *Booke* recounts her reading of some secular texts, such as Sidney and Spenser. Thus, one overarching message can be taken from these documents: that no matter how hard scholars might try, it is impossible to capture the true scope of someone’s life based on the paper remains they leave behind.

Isham’s *Booke of Remembrance* is a testament to her strong will, religious devotion, and deep love of family. It provides an early example of a more overt literary narrative in its discussion of Isham’s reading habits and creates a wide and varied bookscape in its consideration of the texts that she reads. The female intellectual community is the cornerstone of her

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<sup>5</sup> Isham is not the only woman from her immediate family to have left behind a record of her book ownership. Two more Isham booklists survive – Elizabeth’s mother Judith (née Lewin) and her younger sister Judith. The survival of these lists support several points that this chapter goes on to suggest, but particularly that there was an inheritance of both books and literary habits in the family and that the Isham women were a very close-knit female intellectual community whose members relied on each other perhaps more than any other intellectual community mentioned in this study. The full booklists can be found in Volume 9 of *Private Libraries in Renaissance England*, co-edited by R.J. Fehrenbach and Joseph L. Black (2017).

educational journey, and its presence in this text is all the more vital because we know that this community actually existed. All of the other communities mentioned in this study are imaginary fantasy spaces, but Isham did not have to resort to fantasy. She had the luck of supportive parents, even in her father, and was fairly unrestricted in her access to reading materials when compared to other women at the time – as we will see with Cavendish, who grew up in similarly privileged circumstances to Isham, but was provided with a more traditionally feminine education. Some might argue that Isham’s feminism is restricted, but Julie Eckerle summarises the subtlety of the feminist potential of the *Booke of Remembrance* quite nicely:

in the midst of quite typical Christian humility and devotion, Isham simultaneously defends her choice to live the life of an unmarried intellectual woman who is willing to take issue with standard opinions; form her own opinions based on her reading, experience, and consultation with others; and oppose marriage with a quiet, patient, and powerful persistence. (102)

Isham’s feminism can be seen in her courage to push for a life that she actually wanted rather than one that was dictated to her. She was not a public figure in the way that Speght was; she did her best to live a quiet, unassuming life in the peace of the Northamptonshire countryside. Her quiet existence does not, however, negate the power and import of her type of feminism to the wider history of the subject. Isham’s activism lies in her quiet perseverance to the written word and refusal to bend her will to cater to her father’s desires.

These writings of Rachel Speght and Elizabeth Isham contain many of the cornerstones of early or budding feminism. There is a tentativeness and adherence to social norms in their works, but also a strong voice and passionate defence for the intellectual capabilities of women. They both deal with the intermingling of education and domesticity, and while they were more

restricted than Cavendish, Makin, and Astell by the society that they lived in, they nevertheless persisted in their intellectual and authorial pursuits. Speght is the most outspoken of the two, but Isham would not have felt the need to be deliberately controversial anyway: she was writing for private reflection. Perhaps more than the other texts examined in this study, the works of Speght and Isham are particularly strong testaments to the power of sisterhood. Indeed, it seems as though strength in numbers was a consistent feature in early seventeenth-century feminism. Three writers wrote responses to Joseph Swetnam, each encouraged by each other; Speght's poetic speaker is guided through her quest for Knowledge and kept from straying by her allegorical friends; and the Isham women are a powerful force for spirituality and female solidarity. While the later writers made waves alone, there is something special about women working together to achieve their ends – something that modern feminism has embraced.

## CHAPTER TWO

### “Discoursing Our Opinions”: Female Community and Written Word in Cavendish’s *The Female Academy and Sociable Letters*

In the years following the publication or crafting of the works of Rachel Speght and Elizabeth Isham, female writers slowly became bolder in expressing themselves through the written word. After the English Civil War and during the Interregnum, an English marchioness named Margaret Cavendish began publishing works under her own name in a variety of genres. While Speght and Isham were tentative and quiet in their activism, Cavendish manipulated the modesty required of female writers of the time in order to express her views, lamenting her ‘poor’ skill in extensive prefatory materials while simultaneously proving in the pages of her texts that she had talent as an author. Although Cavendish did publish widely, her dramatic and more speculative works like *Sociable Letters* demonstrate a preoccupation with female intellectual communities. Two works in particular will be examined here – *The Female Academy*, first published in 1662, and *Sociable Letters*, first published in 1664. In the earlier works by Speght and Isham, the existence of the community deserved commentary. Cavendish, on the other hand, moves beyond this recognition in the two works examined in this chapter by using the female intellectual community as a tool to demonstrate her extensive learning and to express her thoughts and ideas. Cavendish has no need to explain how her female intellectual communities came into being, as Speght and Isham did; the function of the communities extends beyond their sheer existence to begin to stand *for* something and to serve a purpose for the female writer.

In these two works, Cavendish speaks through her fictional groups of women, demonstrating her learning on various topics, expressing her opinions on the state of womanhood

in the seventeenth century, and at times even getting political. Her views on women are contentious to some scholars; at times, she reads as an anti-feminist who subscribes to patriarchal norms, and at other times she presents a solid case for the intellectual capabilities of women, questions the need for women to marry, and acts as a precursor to later writers like Bathsua Makin and Mary Astell. Indeed, Annette Kramer argues that “the important feminist educational tradition that [Mary] Astell and [Mary] Wollestonecraft's prose represents does not begin with their work. Margaret Cavendish...anticipated their ideas in dramatic texts that adamantly and articulately address the issue of women's education and its potential contributions to society at large” (58). This notion extends beyond Cavendish’s dramatic texts to include works like *Sociable Letters*, which survives as a reservoir of ideas that takes the form of a series of fictionalized letters between two imaginary women. Thus, while Cavendish’s space in the development of feminist thought is contested by some, there is no denying that her works should be seen on the trajectory of more overtly feminist works of later centuries. As this chapter will demonstrate, Cavendish generally works with the broader preoccupations of the works examined in this study, despite her debated place within the history of feminism.

Margaret Cavendish (née Lucas) was born in 1623 to a wealthy family in the picturesque Essex countryside. In her autobiography, *A True Relation of My Birth, Breeding, and Life* (1656), the first thing she notes is that her father “was a Gentleman, which Title is grounded and given by Merit, not by Princes” (Cavendish, *True Relation* 41). She emphasizes that her father’s position in society was earned, not given. As a child, Cavendish received the education that was appropriate to a young lady of her age and station, but nothing more. She is quick to state that her mother cared more for the manners of her daughters than their education; Cavendish and her sisters had “all sort of Vertues” such as “singing, dancing, playing on Musick, reading, writing,

working [needlework], and the like” (Cavendish, *True Relation* 43). However, these occupations “were rather for formalitie than benefit,” for their mother “cared not so much for [their] dancing and fiddling, singing and prating of several languages; as that [they] should be bred virtuously, modestly, civilly, honorably, and on honest principles” (Cavendish, *True Relation* 43).

Therefore, their mother seems to have been more concerned with shaping her daughters to be good wives than encouraging them to develop their young minds. This being said, the prevalence of female communities in Cavendish’s works is unsurprising, given the close relationship that she seems to have had with her sisters in their youth. Cavendish was a naturally inquisitive child when it came to books, revealing that she quite often “chose rather to read, than to imploy [her] time in any other work, or practice,” and she would ask her brother, the “Lord Lucas,” for help “when [she] read what [she] understood not” (Cavendish, *True Relation* 60). At the same time, however, Cavendish “took great delight in attiring, fine dressing and fashions” – a habit that makes her unique among the writers examined in this study, who mostly view fine fashion as something that distracts women from education and learning and that breeds vanity (Cavendish, *True Relation* 60). This is one of many contradictions that complicates Cavendish’s place in the history of feminist thought.

In May 1644, two years after the outbreak of the English Civil War, Cavendish travelled to Paris as a maid of honour to Queen Henrietta Maria, the wife of Charles I, which was an occupation that she had a “great desire” to take on (Cavendish, *True Relation* 46). She would have been twenty-one years old at the time. While in Paris, she learned that her family had been sequestered from their estates due to their royalist loyalties, and she was encouraged to remain with the Queen by her mother, despite her yearnings to return home to England to be with her loved ones (Cavendish, *True Relation* 47). Nearly one year after her move to Paris, Cavendish

met “my Lord the Marquis of Newcastle,” William Cavendish, a widower nearly thirty years her senior (Cavendish, *True Relation* 47). They were married in late 1645. Despite their age difference and the fact that she “dread[ed] Marriage” and “shunn’d Mens companies,” Cavendish grew to love her husband – she “joy’d at the fame of his Worth, [was] pleas’d with delight in his Wit, [and was] proud of the respects he profest for [her]” (Cavendish, *True Relation* 47). Their marriage was a happy and companionable one. As her husband had lost most of his wealth and estates for being a Royalist dedicated to the Crown, the couple spent over half of their marriage abroad, eventually settling in Holland where they lived a modest but comfortable life until the Restoration.

Being married to the Duke of Newcastle provided Cavendish with the opportunity to have the education that she was denied as a child. She was able to read freely and was encouraged by her husband in her literary endeavours. Indeed, many of her works contain dedications written by William Cavendish in praise of his much younger wife. In the introduction to her edition of *The Female Academy*, Sharon L. Jansen notes that the Duke “read to and with his young wife, engaged with her, challenged her, and fostered her interests in a broad range of topics, including politics, philosophy, literature, and science” (13). She also had the opportunity to meet influential thinkers like Thomas Hobbes and René Descartes while she and her husband were in exile during the Civil Wars (Jansen 15). The couple returned to England in 1660 following the end of the Interregnum, spending their retirement reading and writing on Cavendish’s estate (Jansen 23). The author died in December 1673 at the age of 50.

Cavendish was a great experimenter in literary form, and though she received much criticism in her time from those who scorned her attempt to encroach on male-dominated intellectual spaces such as science, she has become a celebrated figure both in the female canon

and in discussions of feminism. However, in spite of her innovations in genre and subject matter, Cavendish's place among the history of feminist writers has been debated by scholars for decades. Not many scholars contest her place in the history of women's writing. A good portion of modern scholarship dedicated to Cavendish's works, including this chapter, examine the feminist potential of her writing. However, it is the contradictory statements about women and their place found in many of her works that limit the solidification of her status as one of the first feminist writers. Guyonne Leduc argues that Cavendish "seems to argue both for and against the sociocultural explanation of women's inferiority," and, in regard to the question of women's education, she holds "contradictory positions" (18-19). Indeed, it is generally agreed that "the author's views about women's inferiority change according to the nature of her works" (Leduc 20). Thus, in a play like *The Female Academy*, where the dramatic action is centered on a group of forward-thinking and independent women, Cavendish's views on women and their education might appear more progressive than in other texts where women's traditional societal roles are maintained. One such text is *Sociable Letters*, which can be viewed in some ways as a microcosm of the types of ideological contradictions that scholars claim complicate Cavendish's place in the feminist literary tradition. Leduc does note that while Cavendish "views [women's] intellectual capacities as equal to those of men," she also "shows that women internalize the pejorative judgements passed on them" (19). This idea aligns quite well with how I view Cavendish. She lived and wrote in the middle of the century when women truly began to use their words to their advantage, and as such occupies a middle ground where she is less tentative than Speght and Isham but not quite as overtly outspoken about women's education as Makin and Astell. Her advocacy, in the case of the works examined here, at least, remains masked in fiction and, as will be demonstrated in the coming pages, uses subtle transgression in order to

remain within the bounds of acceptable writing from a woman. As it is, Cavendish was vilified and ridiculed in her lifetime – had she been any more outspoken, it is likely that she would never have been published.

**“Propound your theme”: Community, Uniformity and Patriarchal Anxiety in *The Female Academy***

In 1662, Cavendish published a collection of fourteen *Playes* in a single volume. Six years later, she published an additional six plays in *Plays, Never Before Printed* (1668). No matter their content, most of these plays foreground female characters, and, in addition to *The Female Academy*, several plays among this number also focus on groups of women living together outside of the company of men, or engaging in behaviours that disrupt the established patriarchal hierarchy in traditionally male spaces. *The Convent of Pleasure* (1669), for example, finds its locus in a group of unmarried women who elect to avoid matrimony by setting up a community where they live together away from men. Lady Happy, the play’s protagonist, reveals early in the dramatic action that she intends to “incloister [herself] from the world, to enjoy pleasure, freedom, or happiness” (Cavendish, *Convent* 100). She plans to surround herself with “so many Noble Persons of [her] own Sex, as [her] Estate will plentifully maintain” (Cavendish, *Convent* 101). Even more contentious is *Bell in Campo* (1662), which features a group of women who, refusing to sit idly by as their husbands leave for war, form their own army and contribute to the military effort. Alyce R. Baker-Putt suggests that in writing these plays, Cavendish “created literary worlds in which females could participate in venues denied them” (37). In *The Female Academy*, *Bell in Campo*, and *The Convent of Pleasure*, Cavendish “defies conventional female roles by creating female spaces in which female characters participate in predominately

male roles, offering a redefinition of woman” (Baker-Putt 37). By using imaginative spaces to allow women the agency to enter into arenas to which they were normally denied access, Cavendish is able to express her frustration at this exclusion while remaining, albeit very loosely, within accepted gender norms. This is most definitely the case with *The Female Academy*, which is the only work among the plays mentioned that focuses exclusively on an educational space.

The intellectual community established by Cavendish in *The Female Academy* is the first community examined here that is centered on institutional instruction. In the opening scene, we learn that an educational institution has been set up for young women of “honourable birth” to be “virtuously and wisely educated” (Cavendish, *Female Academy* 108). The academy is, as a “lady” informs her companion, “a house wherein a company of young ladies are instructed by old matrons as to speak wittily and rationally and to behave themselves handsomely and to live virtuously” (Cavendish, *Female Academy* 108). The school is immediately established as a female-only space, but one whose barrier from men is liminal at best. Indeed, although no men are admitted, there is a “large, open grate” built into the physical structure of the school “whereon the outside men stand, which come to hear and see [the ladies],” but “no men enter into the academy nor women but those that are put in for education” (Cavendish, *Female Academy* 108-109). Thus, aside from being a space that bars the entry of men, sealing the community’s most eligible single ladies off from masculine grasp, the Academy is also an exclusive space that, by very nature of its rules and status as a place “of charges,” maintains the existing societal structure of class privilege (Cavendish, *Female Academy* 108). Although it is an educational institution for women, it only caters to *some* women.

Indeed, by its nature as a school that charges tuition to all students who attend, the Academy is selective in who it thinks deserves a proper education. This is the exact nature of the

educational institutions proposed by Bathsua Makin and Mary Astell that will be examined in Chapter Three. The academy admits “none but those of ancient descent” and “honourable birth,” but also those who are “rich, for it is a place of charges” (Cavendish, *Female Academy* 109). This caveat implies that those from privileged backgrounds or noble family lines who found themselves without sufficient funds would not be granted access to the education provided at the Academy. Thus, those who are registered as students at this institution are the most eligible women of marriageable age in the community, as they are both born of elevated social status and have the necessary wealth to afford the school’s tuition.

Although it is not widely studied, *The Female Academy* has been examined by several scholars in recent years. Alyce R. Baker-Putt examines this play in conjunction with two other plays in her article “Redefining the Female Self through Female Communities: Margaret Cavendish’s *The Female Academy*, *The Convent of Pleasure*, and *Bell in Campo*.” Baker-Putt argues that Cavendish uses these plays as a way to contend that women can indeed strive in places and positions that society deemed them too weak or fickle to fulfill at the time. Rebecca Merrens studies this play comparatively with Ben Jonson’s *Epicoene* in an article about female speech and male anxiety – a theme that is prevalent in *The Female Academy* and will be examined in detail here. The potential implications of women sequestering themselves from male company has been examined by Hero Chalmers in an insightful article about *The Female Academy* and *The Convent of Pleasure*. Chalmers also notes how this particular play by Cavendish must have been partly inspired by her husband’s play *The Varietie*, which was printed in 1649, as “the two plays share both a general structure and terminology,” such as the use of “discourses” to refer to speeches spoken by characters within the dramatic action (82). However, this play has rarely been the sole focus of scholarly inquiry, and deserves consideration on its

own merit. Although it could be easy to dismiss *The Female Academy* as simplistic and straightforward, it is the simplicity of the narrative that allows Cavendish to express her opinions and beliefs about various topics related to gender.

Readers of this play will quickly notice that the narrative follows a predictable structure. The play opens with an expository scene between two ladies, providing the reader with essential knowledge about the Academy and how it functions. Following this scene, a company of young ladies and older matrons enter into the room that is open to male view through the open grate, and one young lady is prompted to speak. She delivers a ‘theme’ – a discourse on a topic selected by the matrons – and then the scene ends. The following scene provides the male reaction to this young lady’s discourse, and then another ‘theme’ in the Female Academy begins. In frustration, the young men of the community decide to set up an academy of their own in the grated room that adjoins the ladies’ debate room where they respond to the ladies’ discourses. The topics discussed by the men gradually become more insipid as the narrative progresses, their discourses degrading to vain complaints of men scorned as a result of being sealed off from the marriageable young ladies within their community. This is the structure that persists throughout most of the play – a female discourse followed by a male reaction scene and a discourse at the male academy. There are a few scenes where other members of the community either provide useful context or try to gain entrance into the grated room, but in general *The Female Academy* is quite formulaic. In the last scene of the play, the primary Matron of the academy is called outside of the Academy, where she is confronted by a crowd of angry men for blocking access to their potential future wives and filling their heads with ideas above their station. She dismisses their ideas out of hand by stating that these young ladies were merely receiving an education that would form them into good, virtuous wives. The ending of the play has caused some contention

among scholars as to how “feminist” this play can be considered. However, as I will touch on later, this ending may not be as unequivocal as it appears.

The simplicity of the play’s structure extends to the characters themselves. Of all speaking parts within the narrative of the play, not a single one is named. Every character has an ambiguous title, such as “matron,” “lady speaker,” “first gentleman,” or “first wife.” As such, some names are used to refer to multiple characters, particularly during the discourse scenes in the Female Academy itself. The student who is speaking is always referred to as “lady speaker,” regardless of her actual identity. In Cavendish’s other plays that deal with female communities, such as *The Convent of Pleasure* and *Bell in Campo*, the characters within those groupings are mostly named. Given the simplicity and repetitive nature of *The Female Academy*’s narrative structure and the lack of true identity in its characters, I argue here that Cavendish uses this play as a mechanism through which to both demonstrate her knowledge on various topics and to comment on male anxiety that often resulted from situations where patriarchal control was challenged – such as when women have control over their own intellectual journeys. It is not, as Rebecca Merrens notes, “a battle between distinct characters...motivated by individual desires and needs” but rather “a broadly sketched conflict between women attempting educational gains and men struggling against changes to the gender hierarchy that structures their world” (248). Erin Lang Bonin refers to this lack of identity as a “cultural vacuum” that “envelops the play because Cavendish imagines something that has not been conceived before – an advanced educational institution for women” (340). The sheer existence of the Academy and the commentary made within its walls are more important than the intricacies of the interpersonal relations of its inhabitants.

The ideas explored in *The Female Academy* are varied and would have been topics of wide philosophical debate during the seventeenth century. The young ladies in attendance engage in discourse on everything from the wisdom and proper behaviour of women, the act of discoursing, truth, friendship, theater, vanity, vice, and wickedness, to boldness, bashfulness, and virtuous courtships and suitors. None of these topics are academic subjects, but rather issues that can apply to the lives of women who are about to enter the marriage market. However, these topics also stand on their own as subjects of philosophical or rhetorical debate, and it is the heterogeneous nature of these topics that allows the ending of the play to stand while maintaining the strength of the feminist work that Cavendish does in her arguments. As Rebecca Merrens argues:

In this play, Cavendish fashions a radical alternative for her female characters who deny that female speech must either be sexually licentious or pratingly insipid: by showing the prospect of women ‘bred up’ for philosophical ‘learning’ she offers – perhaps for the first time in early modern drama – female characters whose ennobling pursuit is public discourse. (244)

Indeed, the fact that the play ends with one of the Matrons of the academy revealing that the women are getting an education designed to make them better wives, and the abrupt manner that this is revealed after so much male anxiety and prattling on insignificant topics, suggests that the Matron is simply trying to placate the men. I do not think that the conventional ending to the play negates the work that Cavendish does in foregrounding the intellectual capabilities of women.

Occasionally, one of the matrons of the Academy will challenge the “lady speaker” or ask her to expand upon a certain point made during her discourse. For example, when a student

is discoursing on theater, a matron interrupts her speech and asks her to “give [the matron] leave a little while to instruct [the young lady]” so as to challenge the speaker and make her think (Cavendish, *Female Academy* 137). The same happens when another young lady is presenting a speech on “virtuous courtships and wooing suitors,” a topic that these women may need more guidance on than any other (Cavendish, *Female Academy* 146). A matron interrupts and poses questions that make the speaker reconsider or defend her position even more, thereby strengthening her argument. These discourses act as the perfect opportunity for Cavendish to air her opinions, and the rebuttals of the matrons allows her to defend or strengthen her ideas without the interference or interruptions that come with actual debate. Thus, although Cavendish does use her fictional educational space as a way to demonstrate the scholarly capabilities of women, the female intellectual community in this play moves beyond academic concerns to act as a mechanism through which Cavendish expresses her views on a variety of topics related to the female condition.

The lack of concrete identity of any characters in this play allows the ideas and discourses that Cavendish presents to stand for themselves. One young lady speaks on discoursing, establishing a contrast between “discoursing within the mind and a discourse with words” (Cavendish, *Female Academy* 116). One, she says, is appropriate for introspection, and the other is shallow: “the mind is not so ready in speaking as the brain in thinking, and the brain can present more thoughts at one time than the mouth can deliver words at one time” (Cavendish, *Female Academy* 117). The third discourse is on “the behaviour of our [the female] sex,” where they state the societal expectations placed on seventeenth-century women in great detail (Cavendish, *Female Academy* 121). According to the speaker,

it is not enough for a woman to behave herself according to her degree, quality, dignity, birth and breeding, age, beauty, wit, and fortune, but according to time, place and occasion, business, and affairs, as also to the humours, capacities, professions, dignities, qualities, births, breedings, fortunes, ages, and sexes of those persons she is in company and conversation withal. (Cavendish, *Female Academy* 121)

Although the lady speaker of this discourse does not outrightly critique the expectations she is listing, the sheer length of the speech stands on its own as a testament to the unrealistic nature of contemporary gender codes. Topics like these, as well as the discussions on truth, theatre, and other virtues and vices, do not necessarily relate to women and the marriage market, demonstrating women's capabilities of discussing diverse subjects. It is in this subtle way that Cavendish most commonly provides commentary on society in *The Female Academy*.

At times, though, Cavendish does get quite political, expressing opinions that would have earned her censure within her historical moment if she expressed them more overtly. In particular, she comments on what she perceives as the lack of wisdom in courtly politics. She personifies wisdom as “a person of perfect and upright shape, of well-composed features, of a manly garb and an assured countenance” (Cavendish, *Female Academy* 112). This figure, according to standards of the time, exemplifies the peak of seventeenth-century dignified masculinity – the same type of masculinity that men in positions of power were said to epitomize. Cavendish challenges this notion by stating that “sometimes [Wisdom] hath been in great human councils, but that is very rare” (Cavendish, *Female Academy* 113). She goes further still in her fairly overt critique of governing bodies by stating that Wisdom “is a stranger even in kings' courts and princes' palaces, and so great a stranger he is in many courts and councils that if by chance he should be there, they thrust him out as a troublesome guest and laugh at his

advice as foolish and condemn his council as treacherous” (Cavendish, *Female Academy* 113). It is quite daring of Cavendish to include opinions like this in works that she was publishing under her own name. However, this comment is cloaked by the wider discourse that it is part of, on “whether women are capable to have as much wit and wisdom as men” (Cavendish, *Female Academy* 110). As such, Cavendish is able to succeed in her critique of political establishments by masking her views in a theoretical discussion held by nameless characters in a piece of comedic drama that concludes with women in conventional marital roles.

However, this same discourse on wisdom has wider implications beyond anti-court criticism. Near the play’s exposition, one of the lady speakers delivers a theme comparing the wit and wisdom of men and women and expresses herself in a clear and articulate manner. She personifies both traits as stereotypical men and women of the time, with Wit as woman and Wisdom as man. In this discourse, the lady speaker discusses the various qualities associated with each state of intelligence. The male Wisdom is associated with the pillars of seventeenth-century masculinity; his “constant habitation is in the strong tower of Honesty,” and his courtiers and clerics are figures such as Truth, Reason, Understanding, Observation, Experience, Judgement, Patience, Industry, and Opportunity (Cavendish, *Female Academy* 112). To all readers, Wisdom would appear to be an ideal of an upright contemporary gentleman.

On the other hand, the female Wit exudes the stereotypical feminine traits of the day. She is “the daughter of Nature” and “very beautiful, and for the most part her countenance is very amiable and her speech delightful; in her accouterments, she is as all other of the female sex are, various” (Cavendish, *Female Academy* 110). To the lady speaker, Wit is associated with the artistic. Her daughters are the nine Muses, who form a female community around her, and her servants and courtiers are “poets, men of all nations” (Cavendish, *Female Academy* 112). Sharon

Jansen suggests in her edition of the text that “what passes for wisdom amongst most men” is not true wisdom, and thus, to most people, wisdom is considered a fool (Cavendish, *Female Academy* 112 note 23). The speaker also notes, however, that Wit is “wild and various...[and] busy and meddles with every thing, cause, or subject,” and though she asserts that “women are more capable of wit than wisdom, by reason that they are both of the female gender, which may cause some sympathy in their natures,” the men of this play seem to align more with the qualities of wit and the women with those of wisdom (Cavendish, *Female Academy* 114). The behaviour of the young men is ‘wild and various’ indeed and grows more out of control as their hysteria increases. They interfere at any given opportunity with the activities of the Academy, and act brashly and childishly when events do not unfold according to their desires. Conversely, the young ladies carry on in their studies with grace and patience, ignoring the men and doing their best to be industrious and hard-working. The seemingly intentional association of the two sexes with the opposite gendered intellectual trait stands as a strong testament of what Cavendish is implying about male anxiety in this play – a notion that will be explored in more detail in the coming pages.

Aside from acting as a mechanism through which Cavendish can express certain opinions and views, the female intellectual community in *The Female Academy* also acts as a foil that satirizes the frivolous and egotistical discourses held at the rival male “academy” in the grated room that adjoins the ladies’ classroom. The simplistic structure of the play seems designed to encourage the reader or audience to analyze the stark contrast of male and female behaviour. Indeed, although “both men and women in *The Female Academy* tend to reify masculine superiority in their discourses, this is wittily offset by the men’s huffing rudeness and the women’s self-possessed rationality” (Chalmers 82). In Act 2, Scene 3, the reader learns that “a

company of young gentlemen have set up an academy next to the ladies' academy" (Cavendish, *Female Academy* 115). The motivation for this is immediately visible as immature: "the men are very angry that the women should speak so much and they [the men] so little," so they make "that room which they stood in to see and hear the ladies speak into a place for themselves to speak in that the ladies may hear what they can say" (Cavendish, *Female Academy* 116). Most obvious is the fact that the men's motivations for the establishment of their rival academy is wholly different from that of the ladies. The latter want an education, whereas the former want to begrudge the women this education and make sure their crude outrage is heard. This outrage escalates throughout the dramatic action to the point where the contrast between the maturity and sophistication of the young men and women gradually becomes starker and more apparent.

The superficial causes of the male anxiety in this play are highlighted when shown in contrast with the sophisticated and eloquent discourses that the ladies have at their academy. In this play, there are times when the men and women take on some of the gender roles or traits traditionally characteristic of the opposite sex; the women are mature, logical, and calm, and the men are temperamental, hysterical, and moody. As compared to the philosophical and moral debates held within the ladies' classroom, the men cover topics that are contrived and frivolous. Their first discourse, which could more aptly be called a rant, does not even cover a specific theme. The male speaker states: "wherefore, let the theme be what it will, our discourses will soon run on them, but if we could bring women as easily into our arms as into our brains, and had we as many mistresses in our possessions as we have in our imaginations, we should be much more happy than we are" (Cavendish, *Female Academy* 119-20). The men use this so-called discourse to air their general grievances about the female academy, and then move on to discussing topics such as the beauty, ungratefulness, and overall nature of women, speeches that

are all aimed particularly at the young ladies, who can hear every word through the open grate that forms a transparent border between the two spaces of discussion and debate.

Lightly masked within the dramatic dialogue of the young men is a fear of the loss of patriarchal control and associated gender roles. These young men seem most upset about their lack of access to the bodies of the marriageable young ladies in their community, and they use religion as an excuse for their furor:

'tis a sin against Nature for women to be encloistered, retired, or restrained. Nay, it is not only a sin against Nature, but a grievous sin against the gods for women to live single lives or vow virginity, for if women live virgins, there will be no saints for heaven nor worship nor adoration offered to the gods from earth, for if all women live virgins, the race of mankind will be utterly extinguished. (Cavendish, *Female Academy* 120)

The key notion here is *virgin*. Religion is merely a rationalization for their fear at being unable to fulfill one of the basic duties expected of young men at the time, which was to produce heirs that would ensure the conservation of their patrilineal family line. Interestingly enough, the young ladies never overtly state that they are locking themselves away to purposefully avoid marriage, as the women in *The Convent of Pleasure* do. In order to gain access to Lady Happy's female community, women need to be "resolv'd to live a single life, and vow Virginity" (Cavendish, *Convent* 101). Indeed, the men later reveal their troubling belief that Nature "made [women] only to breed" (Cavendish, *Female Academy* 127). This also suggests that these men feel a sense of consternation at not having access to the bodies of these young women in order to satisfy their sexual desires, hence their objectifying claim that "those women which restrain themselves from the company and use of men are damned...accused by men, judged by Nature, and condemned by the gods" (Cavendish, *Female Academy* 120). This perspective is unsurprising, given that

Christian practice at the time taught both men and women that it was the duty of the young woman to make her body available to the sexual needs of her husband, regardless of her consent.

In addition to a fear over their lack of access to female bodies, the young men in *The Female Academy* also display an irate anxiety about uncontrolled female speech, an idea that is discussed by Rebecca Merrens at length. She notes that a “philosophical education for women is not, for Cavendish, a primarily private endeavour, but one which alters the entire structure of gendered social relations in the world of her play” (244). She also suggests that “in one sense, female speech registers for what it reveals of male characters: the Gentleman’s efforts to shame and silence the Academicians expose the anxieties that motivate male needs for a ‘prehemency,’ and the Academy makes clear the tenuousness of a ‘Masculine Power and Authority’ that is so easily rendered irrelevant” (Merrens 253). By not having access to female bodies and being unable to control what women say, the young men of the play are truly helpless in their efforts to maintain dominant societal structures and contemporary gender roles. The sealing off of these young women reveals, as Merrens suggests, the delicate balance required to maintain the status quo.

The separation of the sexes in this play highlights the reliance that the men of the time had on the subjugation of women in order to fulfill the mandates of seventeenth-century masculinity. In one of the discourses at their so-called ‘academy,’ the young men note that “those women that retire themselves from the company [of men] are very ungrateful...to men, who are their defenders, protectors, their nourishers, their maintainers, their instructors, their delighters, their admirers, their lovers and deifiers” (Cavendish, *Female Academy* 127). Following this statement, the speaker lists, in great detail, the many ways that men provide for women in traditional households – duties that are necessary because of the subjection of their

female counterparts. Furthermore, the male speaker in this scene notes that “men are the instructors to inform [women] of arts and sciences,” educational subjects that women “never have had the patience to study, for they would never have allowed so much time and solitary musing for the perfecting or delivering those conceptions as those that first invented or found them out” (Cavendish, *Female Academy* 127-8). Despite the abounding evidence of the young ladies’ eloquence and learning on a variety of topics, the young men in the rival ‘academy’ refuse to admit that women have the capability of pursuing scholarly interests without their help, let alone teaching other women in an academic context free of men. They also note that men are “women’s only true lovers,” claiming that “women are apt to quarrel, rail, and fight with each other” – a statement that, given the harmony and comradery among the women at the academy, is clearly not true (Cavendish, *Female Academy* 129). The entire speech provided in this scene satirizes the true extent of women’s supposed natural dependence on men, revealing that women are only dependent on men because they have been made to be so. It also supports Guyonne Leduc’s assertion that, in many of Cavendish’s plays, to “infringe upon masculine territory is deemed a transgression of sexual boundaries” (31). These women provoke male rage precisely because they have placed themselves outside of male reach and, in the case of the female teachers, into the male role of instructor.

As the dramatic action proceeds, the young men at the rival academy grow ever more irate and irrational. All of their so-called ‘discourses’ become opportunities for them to vent their frustrations at their lack of access to the young ladies in the female academy, attributing to these women the qualities of “scornful pride,” “obstinate retiredness,” “reserved coyness,” and “facile inconstancy” – all as a result of their willful separation from the men (Cavendish, *Female Academy* 133). In a transitional scene, two gentlemen discuss the overly emotional discourses at

the male academy and note that “the young gallants...begin to be whetted with anger” (Cavendish, *Female Academy* 134). The logic and coherence of the male speeches become so scattered that, a few scenes later, another older gentleman gives some credit to the young ladies, opining that “the women’s lectural discourse is better than the men’s, for...the men’s discourses are simple, childish, and foolish in comparison of the women’s,” later going on to say that “there is no sign of [the women’s] simplicity or folly in their discourse” when his companion rebuts his opinion (Cavendish, *Female Academy* 135). The companion in question responds that the men’s discourses are so elementary because “the subject of the discourses is of women, which are simple, foolish, and childish,” but this train of thought does not really hold up when the reader or audience are able to so easily compare the hysterics of the men to the cool composure and steady debates held by and among the young women (Cavendish, *Female Academy* 135). These transitional scenes, where the opinions or views of members of the local community outside of the two academies are often expressed, act to guide the audience towards the views that Cavendish is expressing.

The fact that the young women do not acknowledge the pining of the men is perhaps the thing that frustrates the latter into disruptive action. An older gentleman of the community remarks that “[t]he Academy of Ladies take no notice of the Academy of Men nor seem to consider what the men say, for they go on their own serious way and edifying discourses,” to which a second gentleman responds by informing the audience that, in response to the ladies ignoring them, the young men “have sworn to leave off talking and instead thereof they will sound trumpets so loud, when the ladies are in their discoursings, as they shall not hear themselves speak” (Cavendish, *Female Academy* 140). The ladies cannot literally ignore what the men are saying, however, as the men purposefully set up their ‘academy’ in the grated room

that was meant to be used as a space where members of the community could come to listen to the ladies speak. As a result, the students at the female academy hear the dissenting speeches of the men, but refuse to engage in such immature banter. They “seem to listen to what [the men] speak,” like the men do to the ladies, but the ladies “take no notice of [the men] in their literal discourses...for they neither mention the men nor their discoursing or arguments or academy, as if there were no such men” (Cavendish, *Female Academy* 140). Once again, the stark contrast between the actions of the young men and women denotes the satire that Cavendish thrusts upon them – the men are attributed with the traditional “silly” feminine qualities, and the young women are depicted as stoic and straight-faced. These qualities of forbearance prevent the ladies from successfully delivering their discourses in the face of the noisy interference of the men, who reveal the true extent of their anxiety about female speech that they cannot control.

The rising hysteria of the young men of the community comes to a head near the end of the play, when they note that “if [they] should let these ladies rest in peace and quiet in their enclosed habitation, [the men] shall have none but old women, for all those young ladies that are not in the academy talk of nothing but of going into a female academy” (Cavendish, *Female Academy* 143). This statement evokes not only fear over a lack of access to the young ladies within the female academy that has already been set up, but also an anxiety that the idea will spread to a wider area. In the statement, the male speaker does not speak of “the” female academy, but rather of “a” female academy, as though the interest in female-led education might move beyond the borders of their community. If they leave the young ladies in their local academy to their own devices, they run the risk of it becoming “a mode and a fashion for all the youngest, fairest, richest, and noblest ladies to enclose themselves into an academy,” a risk that is, according to the men, “not to be suffered” (Cavendish, *Female Academy* 143). The anxiety

that they feel over their loss of control over these women reaches a peak that becomes disruptive and leads to the final climactic scene of the dramatic action.

The play reaches its climax when the young men devise a plan to “unroost” the young women from their educational haven by attempting to enter into the academy with blaring horns, making so much noise that the young ladies cannot think (Cavendish, *Female Academy* 143). When they arrive at the academy, an older matron greets them and reveals that she has been sent by the young ladies “to know the reason or cause that [the men] will not let them rest in quiet or suffer them to live in peace, but disturb [the ladies] in both by a confused noise of trumpets” which the men “uncivilly and discourteously blow at their grate and gates” (Cavendish, *Female Academy* 152). The men reveal that they disrupt the education because the ladies are sealed off from access, that “as for their education, it is but to learn to talk, and women can do that without teaching,” and “as for their retirement, nature did never make them for that purpose, but to associate themselves with men” (Cavendish, *Female Academy* 153). In an abrupt turn of events, the matron reveals that the men are “in great error of mistake,” for the ladies “have not vowed virginity [n]or are they encloistered, for an academy is not a cloister but a school wherein are taught how to be good wives when they are married” – reasoning that is later co-opted by Makin and Astell (Cavendish, *Female Academy* 153). However, the men resist what she says several times before acceding to her revelation that the ladies’ education has been all to their benefit, and agree to leave if the matron acts as a mediator to the women in the men’s favour.

The ending of this play has been interpreted in several ways by scholars who have examined it. To Laura Favero Carrarro and Antonella Rigamonti, the young ladies in *The Female Academy* can be read as “projections of the author herself” and a community that “elaborate[s] on the male/female relationship with total disenchantment” only to “break down and surrender to

male pressure” quite suddenly (144). To these two scholars, the play’s climax does a disservice to its overall feminist potential. However, they do concede that the “sheer length” of the ladies’ speeches “hint at a more covert function”: to “stall men for awhile, [to] defer the moment when the ladies will have to face them” (Carrarro and Rigamonti 146). Rebecca Merrens also sees the ending as “a perplexingly mixed solution to the crisis of female speech” in the play, suggesting that the “seeming contradiction” between the feminist potential of the play and the adherence to gender norms “may reflect Cavendish’s limited ability to see beyond the property-based concerns of her own class which, as the Gentlemen make clear, requires access to passive young women through which they may transmit property and privilege to heirs” (253). In an insightful article about the politics of feminine retreat in Cavendish’s drama, Hero Chalmers suggests that the “last-minute claim that the women have merely been educated to make them better wives does not preclude *The Female Academy* from presenting a serious consideration of female education” (82). It is this suggestion that aligns the most closely with my own interpretation of the play’s climax.

Although it is understandable why some scholars might dismiss the climax of *The Female Academy* as Cavendish surrendering to convention or retreating into internalized misogyny, I read the outcome of this play in a different, more hopeful light. As has been previously noted, the structure of the play is designed to force the audience or reader of the dramatic action to compare the actions and speeches of the young men and women in their separate communities. Rather than an abrupt shift to fit societal convention, perhaps the play’s ending is a mere continuation of the satire that occurs throughout the dramatic action, where the audience is meant to compare the men and women until the last word is spoken. On the last page, the matron reassures the men that they will undoubtedly receive the ladies’ affections: “If you be

worthy gentlemen, as I believe you all are, [the ladies'] love will be due to your merits, and your merits will persuade them to love you" (Cavendish, *Female Academy* 154). Based on the rude and callous behaviour of the young men throughout the play, the matron has seen nothing that would realistically make her classify these men as "worthy" of her students' affections. Furthermore, while talk of marriage is promised, we do not actually see any unions take place. Thus, I suggest here that the ending of Cavendish's play, while seemingly subscribing to patriarchal dramatic modes, wittily subverts these very conventions in order to provide a complete satire of male anxiety about women outside of their control.

This objective would not be possible without the existence of the female intellectual community, seen for the first time in this study in the form of a tangible educational institution, which acts both as the catalyst for and foil of the hysterical male behaviour seen throughout the dramatic action. While this use of the female intellectual community focuses less on the intimate interpersonal relations between characters with realized identities, as seen in the works of both Rachel Speght and Elizabeth Isham in Chapter One, it does resist patriarchal norms in a slightly more overt and public way, just as Bathsua Makin and Mary Astell do later in the seventeenth century. Overall, *The Female Academy* demonstrates more widely how a prominent female writer of the mid-seventeenth century was able to assert her views on women's education in a more public way than previous writers had done, but still had to do so by masking her advocacy within the relatively comfortable confines of fiction.

### **"Dear Madam": Intellectual Bonds and Community in *Sociable Letters***

Aside from her plays, Cavendish also employs female communities in interesting ways in *Sociable Letters*, first published in 1664. This work is a collection of fictionalized letters between

two imaginary women who debate and discuss various topics, including conventional ones like marriage and religion, but also less ‘feminine’ ones like war, politics, literature and science. The dialogue between them constitutes a microcosm of the type of female intellectual community seen most commonly in this study, with one member occupying a teacherly position and the other as the student. In *Sociable Letters*, Cavendish still uses the female intellectual community as a tool to present her ideas, but the community is foregrounded even more by nature of the text’s genre, which is difficult to classify. Lara Dodds proposes that “for Cavendish, epistolary form becomes a flexible medium for literary invention that encompasses autobiography, satire and social commentary, and essayistic reflection,” a flexibility demonstrated by the wide variety of letters present in the collection (28). The text only reveals one side of the conversation; the letters provided are addressed to a “Madam” by an unnamed letter writer who signs off on all her letters with the signature “Your faithful Friend and Servant.” However, the letters always give enough context about the content of Madam’s letters to ensure that the reader does not feel like they are excluded from the conversation. What results is a creative avenue for Cavendish to express her opinions on various topics that simultaneously emphasizes the strong connection between the two friends.

*Sociable Letters* has been treated more widely by scholars than *The Female Academy*. Laura Dodds has noted that this work “has been lauded for its observations of daily life and its incisive analysis of marriage,” making it an invaluable resource for those researching the social history of the upper class in seventeenth century England (23). Although it is a work of fiction, it is generally agreed that Cavendish pulled experiences from her own life as inspiration for some letters, and that some figures mentioned are based on or are immediate representations of people from Cavendish’s life. In her study of the work, Dodds focuses on reading practices, arguing that

“in its various portraits of readers and reading, *Sociable Letters* is a valuable fictional representation of the material and social determinants of literary production in late-seventeenth-century England” (24). In “Intimate Correspondence: Negotiating the Materials of Female Friendship in Margaret Cavendish’s *Sociable Letters*,” Whitney Sperrazza focuses on materiality and argues that Cavendish’s contribution to the “friendship letter genre has gone unrecognized because [the text] experiments with different modes of intimacy than those dictated by the genre’s conventions” (457). Although *Sociable Letters* has been examined in more detail than *The Female Academy*, Sperrazza is correct in her assertion that “most scholarly work on *Sociable Letters*... does not focus on female friendship, and instead builds on Catherine Gallagher’s influential work on Cavendish’s ‘ideology of the absolute self’” (458). Thus, this discussion aims to contribute to the small but growing body of scholarly work that negotiates the dynamics of female friendship in *Sociable Letters*, placing it in alliance with works by other writers from the century that share similar concerns about female intimacy and communities.

Cavendish establishes her reasons for writing a work like *Sociable Letters* in a prefatory note addressed to “noble readers.” She reveals that she has “Endeavoured under the Cover of Letters to Express the Humors of Mankind, and the Actions of a Man’s Life by the Correspondence of two Ladies, living at some Short Distance from each other, which make it not only their Chief Delight and Pastime, but their Tye in Friendship, to Discourse by Letters” (Cavendish, *Sociable Letters* 42). Unlike *The Female Academy*, which makes almost no mention of literature or the material book, the entire premise of the female friendship in *Sociable Letters* is mediated through the written word in the form of letters. In the preface, Cavendish specifies that the women speak in the letters as they would “if they were Personally together,” so that the letters “are an Imitation of a Personal Visitation and Conversation” (Cavendish, *Sociable Letters*

42). Cavendish emphasises that she wants the letters to represent a close, intimate friendship and not the “Romantical Letters” of acquaintances “which are but Empty Words, and Vain Compliments” (Cavendish, *Sociable Letters* 42). Thus, in this text, the written word is not only central to the navigation of intimate female friendship, but to its entire existence. The writer notes that a physical friendship is not possible; in the first letter, she relates that Madam was “pleas’d to desire, that...[since they] cannot converse Personally, [they] should converse by letters” as if they were “speaking to each other” (Cavendish, *Sociable Letters* 47). Although not explicitly named, this statement makes it clear that there is some sort of impediment preventing these two women from seeing each other as much as they would like. Thus, in the context of *Sociable Letters*, the friendship between these two women simply would not exist without the physical act of writing on the material page; the letters are intended to “present [their] personal meetings and associations” (Cavendish, *Sociable Letters* 47). By making these letters stand in for a more traditional female friendship, this work “intervenes in the early modern epistolary process and negotiates alternatives for the traditional bodily and material markers of intimacy between letter writer and interlocutor” (Sperrazza 458).

The letters written by the unnamed female correspondent to Madam demonstrate a tenderness and affection between these two close friends. In the first letter, the writer takes the time to compliment Madam extensively and note how important their friendship is to her:

...I am never better pleased, than when I am reading your Letters, and when I am writing Letters to you; for my mind and thoughts are all that while in your Company; the truth is, my mind and thoughts live alwayes with you, although my person is at distance from you; insomuch, as, if Souls die not as Bodies do, my Soul will attend you when my Body lies in the grave. (Cavendish, *Sociable Letters* 47)

This passage is striking. It extends beyond the “Vain Compliments” of “Romantical Letters” that Cavendish admits in the preface that she is purposefully trying to avoid to express a tender affection between two kindred spirits (Cavendish, *Sociable Letters* 42). In fact, the emotion and intimacy expressed in this letter is reminiscent of the type of feelings that would be expressed to a romantic partner. Considering that both of these women are married and often talk discuss marriage as a topic of conversation, the intense bond that they share and express through their letters is particularly compelling. Although not the focus of this chapter, it would be interesting and worthwhile to investigate the queer potential of this text. Such a study would add to the small but growing body of work that investigates queer voices of the early modern period.<sup>6</sup>

The letter writer and Madam discuss female friendships a lot in the text, often detailing squabbles among mutual acquaintances as a way to demonstrate the strength of their own friendship. In Letter 23, the writer illustrates a falling out between two women known to both of them, making an interesting statement in the process. She notes that “Women for the most part take delight to make Friendships, and then to fall out, and be Friends again, and so to and fro, which is as much Pastime and Recreations to them, as going abroad and staying at home” (Cavendish, *Sociable Letters* 70). She goes on to wish “all Friends were as constant Friends as [her and Madam], who are inseparably united” (Cavendish, *Sociable Letters* 70). This type of contrast is often seen in Cavendish’s writing: one type of woman is degraded in order to make the excellence of her protagonists all the more apparent. She uses this tactic in *The Female Academy* when “citizens wives” from the community attempt to gain access to the grated room to listen to the young ladies speak and are denied entry because they are not “ladies and

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<sup>6</sup> For more information about queer voices in early modern literature, please see “Queering the Seventeenth Century: Historicism, Queer Theory, and Early Modern Literature” by Jeremy W. Webster, published in *Literature Compass* 5(2), 2008.

gentlewomen of quality” (Cavendish, *Female Academy* 124). Throughout *Sociable Letters*, the letter writer emphasizes the strength of her affection for Madam, cementing the strength of their friendship in the mind of the reader. The very structure of the text ensures that we are constantly reminded of their bond through the way that the writer signs her letters: “Your most faithful Friend and Servant” (Cavendish, *Sociable Letters* 128).

The withheld identity of these two women creates a link between *Sociable Letters* and *The Female Academy* that might otherwise not be immediately obvious. I noted in my discussion of *The Female Academy* that the lack of concrete identity among any of the play’s characters allows the ideas that Cavendish presents to stand for themselves. Whitney Sperrazza suggests something similar about the writer’s friendship with Madam in *Sociable Letters*: “because Madam, the collection’s unnamed correspondent, is imaginary, the text becomes less about this specific female friendship and more about the construction of female friendship through letters, an exploration of how intimacy is marked in a genre that defines its very parameters by the relationship it signifies” (458). Although the mechanics of the female intellectual community in this text are different than in *The Female Academy* – the level of intimacy among members of the two communities is completely different – Cavendish nevertheless uses the letters as an opportunity to air her thoughts on different topics. One such letter is Letter 123, in which Cavendish, thinly veiled as the letter writer, engages in commentary and criticism on the works of Shakespeare. James Fitzmaurice highlights this letter in particular, noting that “Cavendish was not merely the first woman to launch a serious and sustained critique of Shakespeare. She was the first person to do so” (20). At other times, she comments on marriage from the perspective of someone within that institution – a topic that she could not address in such detail in *The Female Academy*, where those delivering the “themes” were young unmarried ladies. Thus, while the

dynamic of the female intellectual community ensures that there is more of a focus on friendship and solidarity in *Sociable Letters* than there is in *The Female Academy*, Cavendish uses the two texts to voice her opinions in strikingly similar ways.

Not only is the existence of the female intellectual community mediated through the exchange of the written word, but the material book also occupies a key role in the mutual interests of the women. After their most common topic of marriage, reading is perhaps the second most popular topic in their letters. Much like in the Isham family intellectual community, the act of gifting material books from one person to another is a key manner of showing affection between the letter writer and Madam. They also spend time discussing texts that they are reading and, in one case (Letter 72), act as critics for each other's writing. Madam sends the letter writer a "poem of [her] own making or Composing" and "desire[d] [her] Opinion of it" (Cavendish, *Sociable Letters* 127). Their bond is strong enough that they can be honest with each other: "I know your Humour is, that I should Speak or Write freely my Thoughts...give me leave to tell you, the Poem is good in that kind, but I do not like such kind of Poems, which are onely Complements and Gratulations put into Verses" (Cavendish, *Sociable Letters* 127). In Letter 198, the letter writer sends Madam a poem of her own writing in response to a man who claimed that women filled their time with dressing and fashion. In Letter 86, the writer discusses her reception of the text enclosed within the cover of a book sent to her by Madam, and Letter 77 details the writer's opinion on a romance that Madam asked her to read and express her opinions on. They also discuss other people's opinions on certain texts (Letter 109) and the merits or shortcomings of specific writers (Letter 123, which has already been mentioned as one of the first sustained critiques of Shakespeare by a published writer). Aside from Letter 123, Cavendish also embeds a significant amount of literary criticism about other writers within the pages of

*Sociable Letters*. Such an example is Letter 146, when she discusses why she prefers Virgil over Ovid – an opinion that was solicited by Madam. In this letter, she modestly claims that her “Reason, Skill, or Understanding in Poetry and Poets, is not Sufficient to give a Judgment of two such Famous Poets” and then proceeds to give sound, logical, and thought-out reasonings as to why she prefers one over the other (Cavendish, *Sociable Letters* 206). The sheer number of letters that mention a common love of reading, books, and sharing ideas, or “frequent attempts to situate [books] within social and interpersonal contexts” (Dodds 30) demonstrates how important these things are to these two women.

Cavendish uses her characters’ tendency to provide literary criticism as a way to comment on the popular and great writers of her time. In Letter 73, she gets quite critical of the level of ego that she views in many poets:

I was reading to day several Satyrs of several Famous Poets, wherein I find, that they Praise Themselves, and Dispraise all Others, which expresses a great Self-dotage, and a very Ill Nature; besides, they seem more Covetous than Generous, to desire All the Praise, and to give their Neighbour not Any; In truth, Writers should never speak of themselves, but in Praefatory Epistles, or in a History of their own Lives, wherein they may freely declare their own Acts and Opinions. (Cavendish, *Sociable Letters* 128)

This type of commentary is particularly interesting coming from Cavendish. She claims that writers of her time are too self-aggrandizing and then proceeds to list ways that they can appear less so – tactics that she herself adopts in her writings. She tends only to speak of herself in the prefatory materials to her works and made a narrative of her life available to those interested by publishing *A True Relation of My Birth, Breeding, and Life* (1656). Although this commentary demonstrates the careful thought that the letter writer puts into her critiques, it is

also a wonderful manifestation of the subtle way that Cavendish frequently critiques great men of her time. Much like she does in her discussion of Wisdom being absent from many princely courts in *The Female Academy*, Cavendish here critiques her fellow writers through the veil of a fictionalized letter that forms part of a thought experiment. Given the small number of women that were writing and publishing under their own names during the mid-seventeenth century, it can be assumed that Cavendish is using this space to critique the male writer. It is speeches like the ones delivered by the female speakers and in the satirical way that Cavendish critiques male anxiety about female speech in *The Female Academy* that we can truly begin to unlock the feminist undertones and potential of Cavendish's writing.

The care and consideration taken by the letter writer (and, it can be assumed, Madam) in discussing the texts that they both read and love demonstrates that both of these women were the recipients of a good education. Although it is not something that she places particular emphasis on in this text, it is worth noting that Cavendish does provide some commentary on the value of women's education in *Sociable Letters*. Early in the text, she laments the terrible quality of the education received by most women of her time, noting that this type of education "is an Education of the Body, and not of the Mind" which shows that the parents of young women "take more care of their Feet than their Head, more of their Words than their Reason, more of their Musick than their Virtue, more of their Beauty than their Honesty, which [the letter writer thinks] is strange" (Cavendish, *Sociable Letters* 73). To the letter writer – and, by extension, Cavendish – seventeenth-century women's education "is more for outward Shew, than for inward Worth" (Cavendish, *Sociable Letters* 73). In Letter 175, much later in the text, she laments having received such an education, as she "never went to School, but only Learn'd to Read and Write at Home," taught by "an Antient Decayed Gentlewoman whom [her] Mother

kept for that Purpose” (Cavendish, *Sociable Letters* 241). Though subtle, this letter mentions once again a notion introduced by Cavendish in *The Female Academy*, which was published two years before *Sociable Letters*: an all-female educational institution. However, given the knowledge and eloquence that the letter-writer demonstrates throughout the course of the text, it is evident that she took it upon herself to self-study and read texts and study subjects normally outside of the bounds of feminine learning. Ultimately, *Sociable Letters* continues the work that Cavendish does in *The Female Academy*, demonstrating that women who received a more traditional female education in the mid-seventeenth century could step beyond the bounds of their prescribed learning by bettering themselves through independent study or intellectual communities with other women – and, in some cases, start to envision a system that would allow young women to receive an institutionalized education, even if such an idea had to remain within the confines of fiction for the time being.

Although *Sociable Letters* does begin to hint at the possibility of institutionalized education for young women, it is also important to note that Cavendish does provide an example of an intellectual community in this text that is reminiscent of that among the Isham household in *My Booke of Rememberance*. In Letter 150, the letter writer details how her neighbours made her aware that her waiting-maids – young women from privileged families who come to her to learn and serve – spent their spare time idly and seemed to feel a sort of disconnect from their mistress as “they oftener Heard of their Lady, than Heard, or Saw her themselves” (Cavendish, *Sociable Letters* 211). This neglect of her staff came about as a result of her living “so Studious a Life,” so, in an effort to cure the idleness of her staff, she proposes to the governess of her house (presumably the head housekeeper), that she could try various activities with them, such as spinning flax on a wheel (Cavendish, *Sociable Letters* 211). Finally accepting the governess’s

amused verdict that none of the letter writer's talents lie in housewifery or more traditional feminine activities, the writer agrees with the suggestion that her maids should be allowed to spend their time reading. The governess notes that "none can want Employment, as long as there are Books to be Read" (Cavendish, *Sociable Letters* 212). As a result of spending their time reading, "they will Inrich their Understandings, and Increase their Knowledges, and Quicken their Wit, all which may make their Life Happy" (Cavendish, *Sociable Letters* 212). Thus, it appears that the letter writer "let [her] Attending Maids have Books to read," seemingly in a genuine effort to make them happy and improve their minds, with the added bonus of being able to turn back to her own writing. The letter writer cares about ensuring that her waiting-maids are spending their time virtuously, rather than "Dress[ing], Curl[ing], and Adorn[ing] themselves," vain habits that, as will be seen particularly in Chapter 3, these writers see education and reading as a cure of (Cavendish, *Sociable Letters* 211).

A deeper investigation into some of the more understudied works of Cavendish demonstrates that her place within the history of feminism may not be as complicated as some scholars seem to believe. *The Female Academy* and *Sociable Letters* are both works from a female writer who is evidently frustrated with the lot being dealt to her sex but is restricted, for various reasons, from expressing those opinions overtly. Although she did succeed in publishing a wide volume of works under her own name, a luxury not afforded to many female writers earlier in the century (Rachel Speght being an exception to this rule), Cavendish was required to embed any critiques that she had of patriarchal structures within her fiction. By juxtaposing the hysteria and superficiality of the men of *The Female Academy* to the measured and scholarly nature of the women, she is able to accentuate the consternation and alarm that seventeenth-century men felt when women attempted to reach beyond the patriarchal strictures that limited

female potential. This outrage is reminiscent of the type of discourse that was found earlier in the seventeenth century during the Swetnam Debate that Rachel Speght was part of with her first published work *A Mouzell for Melastomus*. In *Sociable Letters*, on the other hand, Cavendish demonstrates the potential for a smaller female community with the material book at the centre while simultaneously conducting an impressive experiment in literary genre through the epistolary form. Therefore, while one might expect her place among the writers examined in this study to be more contentious than harmonious, Cavendish constructs formal and informal educational spaces in several of her works.

## CHAPTER THREE

### “Barbarous Custom”: Bathsua Makin’s and Mary Astell’s Educational Spaces

In the final chapter of this thesis, I want to turn to female-authored educational tracts published in the last twenty-five years of the seventeenth century. Compared to Speght, Isham, and Cavendish, who either had to or chose to mask their advocacy for an expanded female education within fiction or private works, Bathsua Makin and Mary Astell send their texts forth into the world with straightforward arguments based on logic and effective rhetorical strategies. Published in 1673, Makin’s *Essay to Revive the Ancient Education of a Gentlewoman* adopts a male persona in order to co-opt the power and authority that comes with the male voice in order to convince fathers of young women to send their daughters to all-female institutional educational spaces such as the one Makin herself erected on the outskirts of London. In her work, Makin creates a female intellectual community between herself, the reader, and the women that she lists in a catalog of female worthies. Conversely, in *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, Astell not only admits her gender, but classifies herself as a lover of her sex. She proposes a female education based on spiritual understanding in an effort to combat vanity and a dependence on commodity culture, two things that she sees as highly toxic to women and their relationship to God. Astell’s female intellectual community is twofold – she crafts a close relationship with her readers while simultaneously attempting to sell them the idea of obtaining an education at an idyllic school away from the designs of women. When considered together, these works demonstrate not only the vast amount of change in female educational advocacy that took place across the seventeenth century, but also how powerful intellectual communities could potentially move beyond the bounds of the female imagination and into the physical realm.

**“Noble Revenge” and a Female Continuum in Bathsua Makin’s *An Essay to Revive the Ancient Education of Gentlewomen***

Bathsua Makin was a lifelong scholar and educator and, although she published her seminal work much later in her life, she lived contemporaneously to many of the other writers examined in this study. She was born in 1600 and was the daughter of a London schoolteacher named Henry Reginald. Her father owned and ran a school in the parish of St. Mary Axe, an establishment that was “sufficiently well-known that John Stow specifically describes it in his *A Survey of London*” (Brink 315). She received a “remarkable” education from her father, who encouraged her in her intellectual pursuits (S. Miller 226). When he died in 1637, Henry Reginald left all of his books to Makin, who would have cherished them as some of her most prized possessions (Brink 318). At the age of 22, she married Richard Makin, with whom she would eventually have and raise seven children (Brink 317). Although she spent a good portion of her early adulthood occupied in a more traditional role as a mother, she was also employed by Charles I as a tutor and governess to his eldest daughter, the Princess Elizabeth (van Beek 27). As a result, she was “awarded a pension of forty pounds annually by Charles,” which means that Makin would have been in the position of contributing monetarily to the running of her household, an uncommon occurrence among seventeenth-century British women after they were married (Brink 318). However, she “seems to have had some difficulty in collecting the pension,” and later gained the patronage of Lucy, Countess of Huntingdon, as a way of supporting herself financially. (Brink 318-319). Huntingdon was another notable female intellectual of Makin’s time, and this association led Makin to become “a member of an elite intellectual circle which included John Pell, Samuel Hartlib,” and the Countess herself (Hiner 47). She was also a correspondent of Anna Maria van Schurman, a rapport that will be touched

on later. Although the exact date of his death is unknown, Richard Makin died some time prior to 1664, long after their children would have grown into adulthood. Later in her life, Makin founded a school for girls outside of London, which she advertises cheekily in her *Essay*. In this school, she “spent much time on the classics” but had to compromise and “could only spend half of the time on the study of Latin, French, Greek, Hebrew, Italian and Spanish” (van Beek 30). The remainder of the time, she taught her pupils more traditional feminine skills such as dancing, music, singing, writing, needlework, and bookkeeping (van Beek 30). Makin died in 1675, two years after the *Essay* was published, at the age of seventy-five.

Although Makin is best known for *An Essay to Revive the Ancient Education of Gentlewoman* (1673), she also published some writing much earlier in her life. At the age of sixteen, Makin published *Musea Virginea* (1616), a collection of poems “from which her knowledge of Latin, Greek, French, Italian, Spanish, German, and Hebrew clearly emerges” (van Beek 30). It is perhaps this extensive proficiency in a number of languages that made Makin such an attractive candidate to Charles I as a governess and tutor to the young Princess Elizabeth. Jean R. Brink makes the claim that with the publication of *Musea Virginea*, Makin became “one of the first middle-class women to publish her poetry in England,” a statement that, given the relatively small number of texts published by British women in the seventeenth century (especially when compared to the much larger volume of works published by men), may not be that distant from the truth (314). The wide gap between the publication of her two very different works - *An Essay to Revive the Ancient Education of Gentlewomen* was published when Makin was seventy-three years old – is indicative of the fact that Makin took her roles as mother and educator very seriously. This also suggests that it was a desire to exhibit her generous education and advocate for other young women to receive a similarly generous education that motivated

Makin to publish her works, rather than a keen desire to be an author, as in the case of Cavendish.

Makin's most famous work has a remarkably long title: *An Essay to Revive the Ancient Education of Gentlewomen, in Religion, Manners, Arts & Tongues, with An Answer to the Objections against this way of Education*, and it was published anonymously. This educational tract is presented through an epistolary frame. The text opens with dedicatory letters, a feature that was very common in the early modern period, with one addressed to "all ingenious and virtuous ladies" and the other "to the reader" (Makin 137-38). The actual work begins with a fictionalized letter addressed to the speaker of the main text by a gentleman friend, who argues against the expansion of female education with the reasoning that "women do not much desire knowledge" (Makin 139). This expository letter sets up the conventional argument that young women should not receive the same type of education as young men because "they have other things to do they will not mind if they be once bookish" – learning will be a distraction from more pressing duties (Makin 139). Additionally, "the end of learning is to fit one for public employment, which women are not capable of" (Makin 139). Interestingly, Makin adopts a male persona for this text, a decision that has caused some contention among feminist scholars, and she uses the rest of her tract to attempt to refute the claims made in the first letter by the conventionally-minded gentleman. She proceeds to prove that women are indeed intellectually capable by listing a long catalog of biblical, mythological, historical, and contemporary learned women, and follows this catalog with suggestions about how "Care Ought to be Taken by Us to Educate Women In Learning," providing suggested reading and a suggestion to attend her own school on the outside of London (Makin 163). Of course, the contemporary readers of this text would not have been aware that Makin herself was engaging in self-promotion. In the *Essay*, she

discusses women as a distinct grouping, making her “one of the first women writers in England to define her sex as a sociological group, who, more than being connected by biological characteristics, share common social, economic, and political needs” (Stanton 72).

Makin’s *Essay* has been examined by a number of scholars in recent years, even though little was known about her before the 1980s (Brink 313). However, she has been “a somewhat neglected and misunderstood member of seventeenth-century intellectual circles,” especially considering that she has often been “overshadowed by the auspicious Mary Astell,” whose *Serious Proposal*, examined later in this chapter, bears a remarkable resemblance in places to Makin’s *Essay*, which was published over twenty years earlier (Hiner 47). Her work is quite rarely considered on its own; rather, much like this chapter, many scholars have examined it comparatively with Mary Astell’s *Serious Proposal* because the two texts work so well together. It has recently begun to appear in the undergraduate classroom, appearing in anthologies such as *Bathsua Makin and Mary More, with a reply to More by Robert Whitehall: Educating English Daughters*, published in 2016, and *Early Modern Women on the Fall*, published in 2012, both of which were released by the Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies. In general, Makin’s “credentials as a feminist foremother” are “important though inhibited” – some scholars have argued that her work is not as progressive because it is not as overtly anti-establishment as Astell’s (Myers 174). However, as this chapter aims to demonstrate, “pro-education arguments and proto-feminism are the firmest of partners in women’s writing” (Myers 174). The fact that she cloaks her activism in convention is not a weakness of this text, but a strength, a choice that may have had an impact on Astell’s ability to publish *A Serious Proposal* in the 1690s.

Makin’s adoption of a male persona has been one of the most striking things about her text to scholars in recent years. Already mentioned here is the fact that Makin did not publish this

work under her own name; rather, she published it anonymously. Although the text is addressed to “all ingenious and virtuous ladies,” it is written in the male voice and framed as a refutation of conventional patriarchal views about why women should not be educated in the same manner as men (Makin 137). Nancy Weitz Miller has argued that “this identification with the masculine is aimed at achieving what Kenneth Burke...calls ‘consubstantiality’ – a oneness with the dominant group, which, in this case, consists of gentlemen with potentially educable daughters” (226). Perhaps, given the advertisement she places for her school near the end of the text, Makin’s *Essay* is as much a ploy to gain more students at her school as it is a genuine argument for the intellectual capabilities of women. This choice also lends her argument credibility; by “cutting off her identification with women, Makin removes any implication that she is complaining about her own situation and could therefore be perceived as an irate woman speaking for a radical few” (N. Miller 226). By addressing rather than shunning those who share the dominant perspective, Makin may be more likely to sway opinion. She “suppresses her authorial self in the interest of her cause of education, which, ideally, would make such suppression unnecessary in the future” – a sacrifice that may have proven successful, given that Astell published *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* under her own name just over twenty years later (N. Miller 226).

Much like Speght’s and Isham’s texts, Makin’s *Essay* creates a community with its reader, this time by virtue of it being an argumentative piece. The overall structure of the text – a dense catalog of learned women throughout history followed by a suggested curriculum for expanded female education – is designed both to flaunt the author’s learning and to inspire both young women and their fathers to abide by this revised educational scheme. The first dedicatory letter, addressed to all women but “more especially to her Highness, the Lady Mary, eldest daughter to his Royal Highness, the Duke of York,” acts to convince contemporary young

women, who would have grown up indoctrinated with traditional patriarchal customs, that they have the potential to become as learned as their brothers (Makin 137). The speaker notes that “the barbarous custom to breed women low is grown general amongst [the public] and hath prevailed so far that it is verily believed (especially among a sort of debauched sots) that women are not endowed with such reason as men, nor capable of improvement by education as [men] are,” and to go against this view is looked upon as “a monstrous thing” (Makin 137). The notion that breeding women “low” (intellectually) is “barbarous” might make female readers question their own upbringing, and the satirical tone of the lines that follow only reinforces this questioning:

A learned woman is thought to be a comet that bodes mischief whenever it appears. To offer to the world the liberal education of women is to deface the image of God in man. It will make women so high and men so low; like a fire in the housetop, it will set the whole world in a flame. (Makin 137)

This letter is designed to make young women question the fundamental ideas instilled in them by the dominant patriarchal culture, and to create a sense of trust in the speaker, who goes on to “beg the candid opinion of [their] sex, whose interest [he] assert[s]” (Makin 137). In asking the opinion of her female readers, Makin includes them in the conversation happening between the two men whose epistolary exchange forms the narrative frame of this text. Although they do not contribute directly to the text, the prompt to have an opinion about female education might cause women who have not really thought about their disenfranchisement before to do so, thus jumpstarting the first step needed for true structural change: for individuals to *think*.

However, Makin (cloaked as the male speaker) is also sure to cater to her male readers in this dedicatory letter, providing logical reasons as to why women obtaining a decent education

would be beneficial to society as a whole. Firstly, the reader is reminded that “women were formerly educated in the knowledge of arts and tongues, and by their education many did rise to a great height in learning,” suggesting that the choice to not educate women to a higher standard is a defect of the current time rather than a long-held historical tradition (Makin 137). The speaker goes on to suggest that education is a way to get women “to scorn those toys and trifles they now spend their time about” and “to attempt higher things” and to be better “help-meets to [their] husbands” (Makin 138). Furthermore, letting women reach higher is also a way to encourage young men to be better, more upstanding citizens: “were a competent number of schools erected to educate ladies ingenuously, methinks I see how ashamed men would be of their ignorance and how industrious the next generation would be to wipe off their reproach” (Makin 138). By framing her argument this way, Makin is able to cater to both intended audiences (aspiring female students and their fathers), providing them with fodder for their potential arguments, without explicitly alienating the other. Makin seems to be of the opinion that being too radical is a sure way to achieve none of her aims. After all, she does not plead for “female preeminence”<sup>7</sup> as “some have wittily done,” as “to ask too much is the way to be denied all” (Makin 138). To her, remaining within the bounds of acceptability is the surest way to achieve her aims.

Makin attempts to provide even more assurance to her male readers in a second prefatory letter, this time addressed simply “to the reader” (Makin 138). Despite this fact, it is addressed primarily to the male readers of the text. Makin pleads with the ladies for a little patience before they begin perusing the body of the text, and then notes that she “would desire men not to

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<sup>7</sup> This is most likely a reference to *Female pre-eminence, or, The dignity and excellency of that sex above the male: an ingenious discourse* by Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa, which first appeared in Latin in 1529. However, this text was not translated into English until 1670, three years before the publication of Makin’s *Essay*.

prejudice and cast aside this book upon the sight of the title” (Makin 138-139). The “custom” that the speaker is aiming to refute – that women do not have the capacity for true learning – is “ill” and one that “men will not willingly suffer to be broken” – this perspective is one that not many men would have had at the time (Makin 139). Makin then charges the men to listen to reason: “If I have solidly proved what I do pretend to and fairly answered the objections brought against my assertions, and if I have proposed something that may be profitable to mankind, let it not be rejected” (Makin 139). This call to reason aligns with the mandates of contemporary gender codes, as men were supposed to be the more reasonable of the two sexes. In order to cement the respectable identity of her male persona, Makin goes on to state that “I am a man myself that would not suggest a thing prejudicial to our sex” – a proclamation that reinforces the authority that accompanies a male voice. Indeed, she co-opts male power in order to assert her opinions. This is a not new idea when it comes to Makin scholarship – Kamille Stone Stanton, for example, makes note of “the use Makin makes of the appropriated [male] power,” which “moves her work out of the traditional into something far more progressive, perhaps even, as some have argued, feminist” (73). By reinforcing the gentlemanly identity of her male persona, she presents a “credible ethos” (N. Miller 229) and guarantees that her male readers are more likely to be susceptible to her ideas and, by extension, more likely to enrol their daughters in her school or other ones like it.

Thus, there are two distinct readerships being targeted by Makin in her text. She is both a realist and an opportunist, wanting to appeal to the potential frustrations in young women while simultaneously attempting to convert fathers of potential students to her way of thinking – that educating young women would be beneficial to society as a whole, not just women. It seems as though she realizes that true structural change will not happen without contributions from the

dominant group, and given the public scorn and criticism faced by other female writers of her time (including Cavendish), it is unsurprising that she masks her gender and co-opts the immediate power assigned to the male voice. Her choice is not a sign of cowardice or bowing to the pressure of the opposition, but rather a “canny stratagem – an argumentative ruse which objectifies women’s oblique relation to their culture and embodies their seizure of power and cultural authority” (Myers 180). The overall structure and surface goal of the text, which is to advocate those in positions of power for expanded female education, is effective and well-executed. Makin crafts *An Essay to Revive the Ancient Education of Gentlewomen* in such a way that the contemporary female readers of the text realize that there are historical classical and biblical precedents to support their right to a proper education.

Interestingly, the most notable community within the text itself is not between the addresser and the addressee, who are ostensibly two men – the man who wrote the first letter, and Makin’s male persona, who refutes the first man’s claims through the form of a pamphlet. Instead, Makin creates a linear community of learned women throughout time in her catalog of “female worthies,” as many writers of the day called such a rhetorical tactic. This “catalogue of worthies...or the collective biography of celebrated women is a remarkably adaptable and persistent female didactic mode, recurrently available for feminist purposes” (Myers 182). This tactic, which will also be seen in Astell’s *Serious Proposal*, was employed by Speght earlier in the century in her *Dreame*. Rather than listing these famous women temporally, Makin categorizes them “by their contribution to or participation in the learned arts” (N. Miller 227). Women, according to the catalog, have formerly been educated in arts and tongues, languages, oratory and public discourse, logic, philosophy, poetry, and many other vocations traditionally left to men in the seventeenth century. This catalog of learned women, which is extensive and

occupies a large portion of Makin's text, "frankly privileges women as culture's inventors, conservators, and foremost promoters" (Myers 176). For example, she credits women with the creation of influential poetic verses: "the Sibyls could never have invented the heroic, nor Sappho the sapphic verses, had they been illiterate" (Makin 144). Makin has several different rhetorical strategies that she employs to make her catalog of female worthies as effective and convincing as possible – some of which work well, once again, within the established norms of patriarchal practices.

One of the most effective strategies that Makin employs when listing her famous women is to explain how they had connections to or influence over famous men that readers would likely be familiar with. Some of the women mentioned are given credit for educating or inspiring these men; Socrates, for example, "acknowledges he imitated Aspasia in his *Facultas Politica* and doth not blush to call Diotima his tutoress. These two women were so learned as to teach this great philosopher" (Makin 152). Cornelia, on the other hand, read "public philosophy at Rome [and] brought up her sons, the Gracchi, so that they were the only men famous in their days" (Makin 146). These accomplishments made her "admired by Cicero for diverse of her works" (Makin 146). Speaking of Cicero, Makin praises his daughter Tullia in her section demonstrating that women have been good orators. Constantia, the wife of Alexander Sforza, read the works of St. Hierome, Ambrose, Gregory, Cicero, and Lactantius (Makin 147). Leontium, she tells us, who wrote books criticizing Theophrastus, was a student of Aristotle (Makin 152). By aligning these women with recognizable male historical figures, Makin impresses upon the audience the significance of their learning. After all, those aligned with figures such as Cicero and Socrates must have had great intellectual talents indeed.

Another tactic that Makin employs throughout her catalog of learned women is to weave in some more contemporary voices that her female readers would likely be familiar with. One such voice is Margaret Cavendish, another author examined in this study. The “present Duchess of Newcastle” is presented as “Eminent” in her craft “by her own genius, rather than any timely instruction,” and “over-tops many grave gown-men” (Makin 145). Makin also mentions her late pupil, the Princess Elizabeth, “daughter to Charles I,” who “could read, write and understand languages at nine” (Makin 145). Not only is this another contemporary example of a learned woman, but it also demonstrates Makin’s pedagogical capabilities – that she was able to teach a young girl of only nine to become fluent in several languages is a testament to her remarkable erudition. Perhaps most significant to a wider English audience would be the mention of Queen Elizabeth I, whose reign was still looked upon as the Golden Age of England during the late seventeenth century: “How learned she was, the world can testify. It was usual for her to discourse with foreign agents in their own languages. Mr. Ascham, her tutor, used to say she read more Greek in a day than many of the doctors of her time did Latin in a week” (Makin 147). By detailing the talents and accomplishments of early modern women in addition to those long passed, Makin gives her contemporary female readership inspirational examples of women to emulate.

Perhaps the most notable contemporary voice that Makin mentions in her *Essay*’s catalog of female worthies is Anna Maria van Schurman, a respected Dutch painter and polemicist who wrote a text quite similar to Makin’s. That text, titled *The Learned Maid or, Whether a Maid may be a Scholar* was published first in the Netherlands in 1648. Anna van Schurman is mentioned no less than five times in the *Essay*, first in the section where the speaker addresses notable linguists, but most significantly in the section that demonstrates that women throughout history

have been adept at logic. Here, van Schurman's *Dissertations* is mentioned as an example of good and effective female logic. Makin had direct contact with Schurman – indeed, they “held each other in high esteem” and corresponded with each other for several years during their lifetimes (van Beek 39). Interestingly, they corresponded in Greek. Multilingualism “was a typical Renaissance feature,” and “it is possible that [van Schurman and Makin] wanted to show off their exceptional erudition” by writing their correspondence in Greek (van Beek 31). Furthermore, their ideas about women and their nature are quite similar. Sara L. Uckelman has examined Makin and van Schurman in relation to metaphysics, and notes that both women express a view “that is only implicit in male authors through the end of the seventeenth century and into the next: the view that men and women participate in the same nature when it comes to their capacities and desires for learning and education” (109). Makin's several mentions of van Schurman in her list of female worthies demonstrates her keen admiration for the writer, and connects someone from her life into the wider cosmos of intellectual women.

By connecting notable women from the seventeenth century to famous women throughout cultural folklore and history, Makin suggests to her female readers that widespread female learning is not a thing of the past, but a possibility for the present. If Makin's targeting of a male readership is most evident through her adoption of a male persona and refutation of common patriarchal arguments, the manner in which she does so – the catalog of female worthies – is the feature of her *Essay* that truly cements the female intellectual community between Makin and her female readers. This use of the catalog constitutes “an enabling mythology strategically designed to empower women and to redefine – really, to reinvent – their relation to a culture that currently devalues and deprives them” (Myers 183). Makin even calls women to action within the text: “I hope women will make another use of what I have said.

Instead of claiming honor from what women have formerly been, they will labor to imitate them in learning those arts their sex hath invented, in studying those tongues they have understood, and practising those virtues shadowed under their shapes” (163). The catalog also creates a continuum of female worthies from across the millennia, linking women from disparate times and backgrounds together through their shared talents in the learned arts. This creates, in effect, the largest intellectual community examined in this study. Mitzi Myers has made a wonderful suggestion about the larger significance of the linear female intellectual community that Makin creates in her *Essay*: “gesturing towards women’s past cultural centrality, Makin would rescue them from their contemporary marginality, would weave them into a collective women’s tradition, a matrilineal continuum that flows into the networks of seventeenth-century female intellectuals that she records with satisfaction” (183). Not only does Makin do important work for women’s position in the seventeenth century, but she also does the type of work that feminist historical and literary scholars do every day – rescuing past women from the fringes of historical marginality.

Following the catalog of female worthies, Makin transitions into her recommendations for how female education can be reformed and formulaically lists and then rejects objections against female learning. This section further deepens the connection between author and female reader, as the speaker takes several moments during this section to address women directly and give them credit where it is due. Makin chastises potential male critics of her arguments by noting that “whatever is said against this manner of educating women may commonly be urged against the education of men,” simultaneously exposing the double standard often espoused by men invested in the patriarchy and implicitly telling the female readers that there is no proper substance to the arguments against their expanded education (173). Near the end of the text,

Makin takes one more opportunity to urge her female readers to remain steadfast in the face of male power: “Let a generous resolution possess your minds, seeing men in this age have invaded women’s vices, in a noble revenge: reassure those virtues which men sometimes unjustly usurped to themselves, but ought to have left them in common to both sexes” (186). This statement is the end of the text’s last polemic, just before the postscript where Makin advertises her school.

While the proposals brought forth by Makin are designed to expand female minds, she frames her ideas as a way to remedy what she views as faults in contemporary women that distract from their piety and dedication to God. She suggests that much of the teaching that young gentlewomen receive is based on outward appearance, commodities and vanity: “merely to teach gentlewomen to frisk and dance, to paint their faces, to curl their hair, to put on a whisk, to wear gay clothes, is not truly to adorn, but to adulterate their bodies, yea (what is worse) to defile their souls” (Makin 163-164). Makin calls this educational habit the “under-breeding” of women (164). What Makin views as the bred vanity of young women of her time causes them “not at all or very little to endeavour to know God [and] Jesus Christ” (163). She also frames educating women as an anti-Catholic act, suggesting that “it would...be a piece of reformation to correct [female illiteracy], and it would notably countermines those who fight against [Protestants]” (Makin 164). Education, therefore, is a way to ensure that young ladies stay pious and do not revert to popish tendencies – it is a “hedge against heresies” (Makin 167). This tactic of advocating for the expansion of female learning is repeated several times by the authors examined in this study; Isham’s love for religious literature is a key component of her *Booke of Rememberance*, Cavendish’s two correspondents in *Sociable Letters* spend some time discussing their religious beliefs, and Astell uses a similar strategy in her educational tract later in the

century. In the case of these works, it is an effective tactic, as it demonstrates how female education will help reinforce gender norms – that women are virtuous, pious and chaste – thereby marking her work as “a negotiation made from within the already established trenches of quiescence” (Stanton 80).

The most obvious but perhaps least crucial community mentioned in the text is the hypothetical one that would result from widespread acceptance of Makin’s proposals: the group of young women within the proposed schools themselves. However, these communities are difficult to make note of as their inner workings are not revealed. Rather than forming an attachment to figures with established identities within a tangible institution – a notion that can even be applied to *The Female Academy*, regardless of the uniformity of identity among its characters – Makin uses her *Essay* to propose the future existence of these institutions along with a curriculum that would expand female institutions while ensuring that students would still acquire the domestic skills needed by seventeenth-century women according to convention. She also uses this work as an opportunity to attract potential clients to her school. After learning why and how women should be educated, readers are informed in the *Essay*’s postscript that “a school is lately erected for gentlewomen at Tottenham High Cross, within four miles of London in the road to Ware, where Mrs. Makin is governess” (Makin 186). At this school, young ladies will spend half their time learning “all things ordinarily taught in other schools” – traditional feminine arts – but “the other half [is] to be employed in gaining the Latin and French tongues, and those that please may learn Greek and Hebrew, the Italian and Spanish, in all which this gentlewoman hath a competent knowledge,” among many other skills and subjects (Makin 186). Thus, although there is no imaginative intellectual community within an institutional setting in this work, as there is in *The Female Academy*, readers end their experience with this text by

being directed towards a tangible female intellectual community already in existence that they can participate in (or, in the case of the male readership, send their daughters to) for a yearly fee. This is a logical conclusion to the text for both intended readerships.

It is worth noting that the progressiveness of Makin's text moves beyond the class-based prejudices of the earlier texts to suggest that women from all social backgrounds have the mental capacity to succeed in intellectual endeavours. Makin makes it clear that all those who have the proper mental and intellectual capacities would be welcome in schools like her own. The speaker distinguishes women into "two sorts": those who are "RICH of good, natural parts" and those who are "POOR of low parts" (Makin 163). This seeming separation of women into two categories is actually a separation of them into four groups. There are four kinds of women: rich and bright, rich and dim, poor and bright, and poor and dim. She makes no attempt to mask her exclusion of women from less privileged social backgrounds, asserting that "those that are mean [poor] in the world have not the opportunity for this education: those that are of low parts, though they have opportunity, cannot reach this" (Makin 163). "My meaning is," says Makin, "persons that God hath blessed with the things of the world, that have competent natural parts, ought to be educated in knowledge" – even those who are poor (Makin 163). In these statements, Makin asserts that some poor women have the possibility to succeed in educational endeavours, but often cannot due to not being able to afford it. Rich women, on the other hand, have the opportunity because of their access to funds, but do not always succeed because of a lack of natural intellectual talent. Thus, while Makin does admit that it is unlikely that poor women will receive such an education because of their lot in life, she does not make any claim that they are incapable because of any mental deficiency.

**“For the Sake of God”: Religious Retirement, Female Solidarity, and the Rejection of Commodity in Mary Astell’s *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Part I***

The last work to be examined in this study is *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Part I* by Mary Astell, first published in 1694. Astell was born in 1666 in Newcastle-upon-Tyne to Peter Astell, a coal merchant, and his wife Mary, who was also the daughter of a coal merchant. Astell’s family were well-connected in their community, and her “grandfather, father, and uncle Isaac all were members of the coal Hostmen, a powerful guild in Newcastle” (Perry). Although she lacked a proper formal education, Astell was taught philosophy and theology by her uncle Ralph Astell, an unmarried “intellectual and...man of letters” (Perry). She also studied other subjects such as French, literature and logic, and “saw some advantages (as well as the more obvious disadvantages) to...independent education” (Weiss 64). Her inconsistent learning as a child would have undoubtedly influenced the development of her ideas on female education.

As an adult, Astell moved to London. When exactly she moved is unclear, but Ruth Perry has suggested that it was sometime in 1687 or 1688, when the so-called Glorious Revolution brought “riots to her native Newcastle, where her family, who had been staunch royalists during the civil war, now sympathised with James II and opposed William and Mary” (Perry). In London, she was able to establish some security and comfort within her own small but affectionate female intellectual community. She never married, but enjoyed “many close and enduring friendships from women of high social standing, including her neighbour, Lady Catherine Jones, as well as Lady Ann Coventry, Lady Elizabeth Hastings, and Elizabeth Hutcheson” (Broad 67). She also associated with Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and Elizabeth Elstob (Weiss 64). These women would have been invaluable to Astell’s health and happiness, especially considering she was “an unmarried gentlewoman in late seventeenth-century London”

– these women “not only provided her with an income (some were her patrons), but also supplied the comfort and support of a family” (Broad 67-68). It goes without saying that the love and consideration received by Astell from this group of supportive women must have informed her later works, particularly *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, which focuses partly on the importance and value of strong female friendships. The effect of this real-life female intellectual community on Astell would not have been unlike that of the Isham women, who learned together and encouraged each other to stay virtuous and pious – a benefit of female solidarity that, as will be seen, is a key cornerstone to Astell’s *Serious Proposal*.

After Cavendish, Astell is the most widely examined female writer in this study. Her most well-known works centre on the female condition within existing systems of oppression, such as *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694) and *Some Reflections Upon Marriage* (1700). However, she also published on a variety of other topics, such as religion (1705’s *The Christian religion, as profess’d by a daughter of the Church of England*) and politics (1703’s *An Impartial Enquiry into the Causes of Rebellion and Civil War in this Kingdom*). Astell published both longer works and pamphlets, and “like other women intellectuals, she was first widely read, debated, and imitated, and then satirized, plagiarized, and finally written out of mainstream political theory” (Weiss 64). While Astell was known to scholars like Daniel Defoe in her own time, it was not until the latter part of the twentieth century that she began to resurface in scholarly enquiry.

Although women’s issues are a large focus of Astell’s works, she normally frames her arguments through a philosophical or political lens. To many scholars in the late twentieth century, Astell’s religion and politics ran contradictory to the promotion of women’s freedom found in her works. She was an “avid High Church Anglican and an ardent Tory,” something

that those studying her works took note of in examinations of her feminism (Michelson 30). To some, there is a “seeming incongruity of her theological and political conservatism... alongside her radical critique of contemporary gender constrictions, marriage practices and educational restrictions” (Michelson 30). Her beliefs have been seen “either as a significant drag on her feminism, or as barriers which she successfully overcame” (Smith, “Cry Up Liberty” 193). Thus, Astell “presents a challenge to some of our modern preconceptions about feminist pioneers” (Broad 65). In *A Serious Proposal*, she does not attempt to assert that women are superior to men or that they would be if given the chance, but rather focuses on how women’s education would ameliorate female souls. For Astell, women’s liberty was “a spiritual rather than a political concept: it consisted in a women’s freedom to choose (or not to choose) that which was good for her soul, and it could be exercised by any woman, anywhere, regardless of her social or political circumstances” (Broad 66). Although she comments on existing systems of power, she focuses more on a woman’s ability to become an educated independent thinker within those systems rather than trying to dismantle those systems altogether, a focus that would become a cornerstone of later iterations of feminist thinking – perhaps beginning with the Suffragettes.

In “‘Cry Up Liberty’: The Political Context for Mary Astell’s Feminism,” Hilda L. Smith suggests ways that Astell’s conservative politics may have given her an advantage over her more left-leaning female contemporaries:

While women on the political left, and among the religious sectarian movement, held values more conducive to questioning women’s subordinate status in society, their position within those movements denied them the independence and incentive to question the basic principles of their factions (not to mention their leaders). In addition, to link those values directly to women’s status would have separated them from the male

compatriots and their efforts to undermine the authority of the established church and the monarchy. These women were subordinate to a broader agenda; for them to have focused exclusively upon the status of women would have raised questions about their loyalty and their full commitment to political and religious change. (194)

Smith suggests that Astell's more conservative political and religious leanings place her, in general, more in line with the dominant culture, meaning that she has more authority (and less chance of censure) than her more liberal sisters in questioning certain aspects of the status quo because she is mostly aligned with the norms of contemporary society. Thus, while Astell's conservatism and religious beliefs have been criticized by some modern feminist scholars for not being 'feminist enough,' there are evidently some strong advantages to working within the existing system, which is a trend seen in almost every writer examined in this study. By only slightly resisting the dominant culture, one seemingly stands a better chance of enacting true change than if one released a more radical critique into the world.

The views that Astell espouses in her works – including *A Serious Proposal* – are framed largely through a philosophical framework. The philosophy that Astell puts to good use in her works is based heavily on the Cambridge Platonists, a school of thinking that advocates for reason and, at the same time, a rejection of materialism and commodities. It is likely that she was first introduced to this way of thinking by her uncle who, as was mentioned earlier, educated her in philosophical ideas. As a Cambridge-educated man, Ralph Astell introduced her to the philosophy that he studied there, such as “Platonists like Henry More and John Smith” (Perry). Aside from studying their works and agreeing with their views, Astell also had direct contact and extensive correspondence with John Norris, another of the Cambridge Platonists. In 1695, just a year after *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* was published, John Norris published *Letters*

*concerning the love of God, between the author of the proposal to the Ladies and Mr. John Norris.* Her familiarity and interaction with this school of philosophical thought had a serious impact on the way that Astell would formulate her arguments in her later works.

First published in 1694, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, for the Advancement of their True and Greatest Interest, Part I* is one of the first texts printed in England that scholars might consider to be written in a feminist tone. Astell is certainly bolder than Makin in her advocacy for female education and did not feel the need to write through a male persona as Makin did in her *Essay*. Although she did not publish under her own name, as Cavendish did, the gender of the *Proposal's* author is made very clear – it is written by “a Lover of her Sex.” The first part of the *Proposal*, examined here, proposes the erection of an all-female educational establishment where women can study together, focusing on topics like philosophy and rational thinking in an effort to remain spiritual and dedicated to a love of God while rejecting the commodity culture that Astell scorns vehemently throughout the text. Of all the writers examined in this study, Astell is perhaps the most critical of patriarchal systems of power, even if she does not challenge them directly, instead advocating for an expanded female education focused on the self-improvement of individual women rather than wider improvement of women’s intellectual promise as a wider sociological group. To Astell, educating women will help them become more dedicated to God and to reject vanity and other distractions from piety. They will also gain a sort of freedom, as “freedom from temptation and sin is closely related to freedom of choice” (D’Amore 145).

Although it was not until the latter half of the twentieth century that Astell resurfaced in scholarly enquiry, she has been the subject of much research since then. Although *A Serious Proposal* has been examined from multifarious perspectives, there has been a sustained focus on the role of religion, philosophy and politics within Astell’s educational advocacy. Michal

Michelson and William Kolbrener have written on the politics of the Anglican church in the work, whereas Hilda L. Smith and Penny A. Weiss focus more broadly on the wider political context that the *Proposal* finds itself situated within. There are also several studies that place Astell's text within a tradition of utopia, such as Manuela D'Amore's "'Custom, Tyrant Custom': Reason and Utopia in Mary Astell's *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*" and Alessa Johns's "Mary Astell's 'Excited Needles': Theorizing Feminist Utopia in Seventeenth-Century England." A consideration of Astell's proposed institution as a sort of utopia is particularly useful given how other writers, particularly Rachel Speght in her *Dreame*, envision their imaginative educational spaces as idealized. Astell proposes a real-life feminist utopian space, a departure that demonstrates how circumstances changed throughout the seventeenth century to allow women to be more daring in their visions of female-only educational spaces. Most central to the idea of female intellectual communities in *A Serious Proposal*, however, are those scholars who consider Astell's representation of friendship in her work, most notably Jaqueline Broad and William Kolbrener. Broad argues that "if we focus on Astell's concept of friendship in the first part of her *Proposal*, then her feminism is somewhat more modern than it at first appears" (67). In the *Proposal*, Astell's "programme for feminist reform does not consist in self-transformation alone, but also a transformation of other women's moral values. Female friendships play an important role in bringing about this moral development" – a key idea that will be explored in this section (Broad 67).

In her *Serious Proposal*, the first (and perhaps most important) female intellectual community that Astell creates is that with her reader. As has been demonstrated thus far, the female writers examined in this study often create a community with their readers in an effort to make what they are saying personal to the reader. They also create these communities to project

an air of authority, adding credence and legitimacy to their works which might otherwise be rejected for publication on the grounds that their writer was a woman. Speght created this community through her prefatory materials, Isham did so more directly but did not publish her *Booke of Remembrance*, and while Cavendish did not use this rhetorical tactic in the works examined in this thesis, Makin surely did by using a male persona to appeal to both the men and women reading her text. Astell, on the other hand, is the first writer examined here to direct her work directly to women and not bother to cater (that much) to the potential qualms of men who may pick up her text. The intended audience of her work is made abundantly clear in the title – it is a serious proposal *to the Ladies*. Although previous writers, such as Speght, implied an intended female readership in their works, Astell's overt declaration of her audience marks a definite departure from the more tentative and male-accommodating natures required of writers earlier in the century. By targeting a specific audience, Astell creates a brand new intellectual community every time a new reader picks up her text. She crafts her *Proposal* in such a way so as to encourage her readers to identify with her and align their opinions with hers.

There are several effective tactics that Astell uses to create a relationship with her reader in *A Serious Proposal*. Firstly, she consistently addresses her female readers directly as a way of drawing them into the rhetoric of her *Proposal*. In addition to referring to the reader as “you,” she also discusses women as a wider sociological group, berating “the enchanted circle that custom hath placed us in” (Astell 287-288). The most effective example of this comes from the early pages of the text:

Let us learn to pride ourselves in something more excellent than the invention of a fashion, and not entertain such a degrading thought of our own worth as to imagine that our souls were given to us only for the service of our bodies, and that the best

improvement we can make of these is to attract the eyes of men. We value them too much, and ourselves too little, if we place any part of our worth in their opinion and do not think ourselves capable of nobler things than the pitiful conquest of some worthless heart. (Astell 288)

This statement is one of the most powerful in the *Proposal* and one of the most quoted in feminist studies of the text. It is certainly a critique of women's vain appreciation of commodities, and a statement that members of her sex have higher things to aspire to than a well-connected marriage. However, the critique that she embeds within this statement does not degrade the reader but empowers her towards self-improvement. The tone is one of encouragement rather than censure. Astell admits this goal shortly after this statement: "Pardon me the seeming rudeness of this proposal, which goes upon a supposition that there is something amiss in you which it is intended to mend. My design is not to expose but to rectify your failures" (Makin 288). In crafting such a tone, Astell ensures that those young women who are materialistic and vain according to her standards will not feel attacked, but instead feel struck with a desire for self-improvement.

Astell frames her proposal of an all-female educational institution through a desire for religious self-improvement and a rejection of materialism, a way of thinking that she views as having instilled a certain level of vanity in the young women of the day. Given the multiple meanings of 'materialism' in the seventeenth century, it is important to note that, in the case of this chapter, I am referring to materialism as "an emphasis on or preference for that which is material, at the expense of spiritual or other values," but especially "the tendency to treat material possessions and physical comfort as more important or desirable than spiritual values" (*OED*, "materialism, n." 2a). Astell notes almost immediately that the pursuit of education is "a

matter infinitely more worthy of [women's] debates than what colors are most agreeable or what's the dress becomes [them] best" (Astell 286). Here education is suggested as a way of distancing oneself from commodity culture and leaning towards self-improvement: "your glass [mirror] will not do you half so much service as a serious reflection on your own minds" (Astell 286). She urges her readers to "abandon that old and therefore (one would think) unfashionable employment of pursuing butterflies and trifles" (Astell 287), urging collective action against an earth-bound focus on the physical that she views as destructive to the well-being of one's soul and by extension, virtue.

William Kolbrener suggests that "Astell's development of her own feminine – though perhaps not fully feminist – subject, derives from her rejection of...a newly emergent latitudinarian culture driven by commercial interests" (Kolbrener, "Forc'd into an Interest" 4) and I would be inclined to agree – while reading Astell's *Proposal*, one gets the sense that one of her primary motivations for crafting the text was to encourage young women to decrease their reliance on materialistic objects for outward worth. She aims to "redirect feminine priorities from the Lockean register of materialistic epistemology to a more worthy transcendent realm" (Michelson 26). This is perhaps clearest when she states that

When a poor young lady is taught to value herself on nothing but her clothes and to think she's very fine when well accoutered, when she hears say that 'tis wisdom enough for her to know how to dress herself that she may become amiable in his eyes to whom it appertains to be knowing and learned, who can blame her if she lay out her industry and money on such accomplishments and sometimes extends it further than her misinformed desires she should? (Astell 295)

In Astell's view, young women should not be scorned for their adherence to what they have been taught, but instead should be encouraged to move beyond those short-comings and 'failures,' as she states, to reach a more spiritually enlightened and virtuous state of being. Instead, it is the hegemonic culture in favour of male interests that should be blamed and censured for limiting women's potential in service of the marriage market and the expectations of contemporary gender codes.

Astell's rejection of commodity culture forms part of her wider criticism of 'custom,' a term that she uses in reference to the dominant systems of power that she takes issue with. This critique is what informs the discussions of the scholars who have studied the politics of her works. 'Custom' is a "key element in the philosophical debate of the time" that was "perceived as the main basis of John Locke's empiricism and a bulwark for the *status quo*" (D'Amore 139). As Astell was an avid philosopher in addition to being a polemicist, it is logical that she would frame her argument through a philosophical lens. She assigns responsibility for her main issues with contemporary society to custom: "'Tis custom, therefore, that tyrant custom which is the grand motive to all those irrational choices which we daily see made in the world" (Astell 295). Aligning with custom means aligning with the majority to the point where people "think it an unpardonable mistake not to do what others do" and part with "peace and pleasure as well as...innocence and virtue merely in compliance with an unreasonable fashion" (Astell 295). It is a lack of education and independent thought that "lay the foundation of vice, and imitation and custom rear it up" (Astell 294). Thus, Astell argues that in blindly following custom, young women open themselves up to sin and temptation, concerns that can be amended by learning and thinking with reason, which is one of the key teachings of the Cambridge Platonists that Astell believed in.

In addition to strengthening the author-reader relationship through direct address, Astell also uses reason and logic to appeal to her reader's senses and convince them of why they should strive towards an expanded education. To Astell, the primary benefit of providing young women with a proper education based on literacy, philosophy and faith is to allow them "to be at least so far learned as to be able to form in [their] minds a true idea of Christianity" (303). If women "understand [their] own duty and [are not] forced to take it upon trust from others" (Astell 303), they will have a stronger conception of their religion and a stronger love of God, especially when they are taught from a young age to be vain and materialistic. It is the "kindness of education that binds... duty fastest" on women, and to Astell, the most important form of duty in the world is that to God (Astell 290). A young woman may be

taught the principles and duties of religion but not acquainted with the reasons and grounds of them. Being told 'tis enough for her to believe, to examine why and wherefore belongs not to her. And therefore, though her piety may be tall and spreading, yet because it wants foundation and root the first rude temptation overthrows and blasts it. Or perhaps the short-lived gourd decays and withers of its own accord. (Astell 296)

Being learned in the basics of religion but unable to obtain an understanding of how to truly live a Christian life leaves women vulnerable and susceptible to society's temptations, such as a dependence on commodities, and therefore more likely to sin. However, it is the naivety and ignorance purposely bred into women, and not the women themselves, who are to be blamed for this deficiency in their character; after all, "why should she be blamed for setting no great value on her soul whose noblest faculty, her understanding, is rendered useless to her?" (Astell 296). There is a difference, according to Astell, between those who have become Christians "out of choice" and those who have done so "in conformity to those about her" (296) – one is genuine

and the other made her choice in accordance with societal expectations but with a lack of true religious understanding. In order to be as faithful to God as possible, a young woman needs to be allowed to develop her mind to a point where she can think for herself and form her own opinions. In order for this to happen, she must attain a wider knowledge base than was traditionally granted to women.

Astell also demonstrates a desire for her readers to gain a proper understanding of secular knowledge so as to not be naïve and argues that this knowledge will drive young women even closer towards piety. She advocates for women to “acquire a true practical knowledge, such as will convince [them] of the absolute necessity of holy living as well as of right believing and that no heresy is more dangerous than that of an ungodly and wicked life” (Astell 304). After all, breeding naivety in young women is a way to ensure that they become unaware of the true consequences of certain actions to their futures. Instead of reading “idle novels and romances,” young women should study French philosophy “since the French tongue is understood by most ladies”; authors such as “Descartes, Malebranche, and others” will help to expand a woman’s worldview while also improving their talent in the French language (Astell 304). Indeed, “why shall it not be thought as genteel to understand French philosophy as to be accoutered in a French mode?” (Astell 304). Having a broad secular knowledge base and familiarity with ways of thinking about the information they take in will help young women navigate their way through a life filled with temptations toward sin to remain on the virtuous side of God: “Doubtless a truly Christian life requires a clear understanding as well as regular affections that both together may move the will to a direct choice of good and a steadfast adherence to it” (Astell 296).

One of the strategies that Astell uses to support her desire for expanded female education is one used by Speght and Makin as well: referring to the intellectual achievements of notable

women from the past in an effort to demonstrate that women have the capacity for higher learning. Astell begs her readers to remember the legacies of “the famous women of former ages, the Orindas of late, and the more modern Dacier, and others” and to “think how much is now and will hereafter be said of them” when to the unenlightened reader “(as great a figure as [they] make) must be buried in silence and forgetfulness” (Astell 287). The ‘Orinda’ that she refers to is Katherine Phillips, a celebrated British female poet from the mid-seventeenth century, and the ‘Dacier’ is Anne Lefeuve Dacier, a French writer contemporary to Astell who translated and provided commentary on great classical works like the *Illiad* and the *Odyssey*. Astell also refutes the (primarily male) claim that women are incapable of improving their minds by indirectly drawing from an index of learned women when she states that “there are examples in all ages which sufficiently confute the ignorance and malice of this assertion” (Astell 289). However, in comparison to Speght and Makin, who mostly list women from bygone ages, Astell places a greater emphasis on women more contemporaneous to her readers, noting how “there are no accounts in history of so many great women in any one age as are to be found between 1500 and 1600” (302). In citing women from such recent times, Astell accomplishes two feats through one strategy: she suggests a sense of intellectual degeneracy in modern women while simultaneously inspiring her readers to reach towards the standards set by women from the previous century. “Let,” she says, “the famous Madame D’Acier, etc. and our own incomparable Orinda excite the emulation of English ladies” (Astell 304).

The excitement about learning and emulation of famous women that Astell encourages is to be directed towards a “monastery or...a religious retirement” where young ladies can go to receive an education and to be guided towards an ideal life of faith and dedication to God (298). While the “lodging, diet, and habit” of the school will be chosen by the ladies who “shall

subscribe,” Astell is sure that they will choose “what is most plain and decent, what nature, not luxury, requires” (Astell 307). However, the goal of the proposed institution goes beyond mere education. Astell declares that attending the school will allow women to “expel the cloud of ignorance which custom has involved [them] in” and to “furnish [their] minds with a stock of solid and useful knowledge that the souls of women may no longer be the only unadorned and neglected things” (301). Astell uses the language of adornment and costume – the very language of the materialism that she rejects – in order to appeal to the sensibilities of the potential students of her school.

The proposed school is “a place where [women] shall suffer no other confinement but to be kept from the road of sin” and where they “shall not be deprived of [their] grandeur, but only exchange the vain pomps and pageantry of the world, empty titles and forms of state...for the true and solid greatness of being able to despise them” (Astell 299). The institution that Astell proposes is a sort of utopian space; after all, it is not uncommon for “philosophers [to] convey their political vision by depicting an ideal, legitimate, or best practical community” (Weiss 67). It is indeed an idealized space; no “provocations are given...in this amicable society but to love and to good works,” which will “afford such an entertaining employment” that those within the school’s walls will not be tempted to return to their former ways (Astell 299). The monastery is “an idealized ‘alternative’ to the ‘dominant cultural forms’ viewed by Astell as restrictive and oppressive for women” (Devereaux 57).

Astell also makes her proposed educational institution sound attractive to young women by depicting attendance at it as a way of bettering the world. She notes that the school

shall not so cut you off from the world as to hinder you from bettering and improving it, but rather qualify you to do it the greatest good and be a seminary to stock the kingdom

with pious and prudent ladies whose good example, it is to be hoped, will so influence the rest of their sex that women may no longer pass for those little useless and impertinent animals which the ill conduct of too many has caused them to be mistaken for. (Astell 301)

Not only does this statement demonstrate another of Astell's strategies of encouraging her female readers to support the erection of an educational institution like the one she is proposing, but it also indicates her desire for the spreading of this education and resulting changed virtue through dissemination. Those privileged enough to attend the school will take what they have learned into the world and educate the young women in their lives, who will in turn do the same to women they know, and the cycle will continue until the vices that Astell sees in the world will be eradicated.

Although this is a highly idealized and unrealistic idea, it is an effective and convincing rhetorical strategy, and one that exposes how the feminist limits of Astell's *Proposal* are slightly less stark than those in Makin's *Essay*. As with Makin's *Essay*, Astell's *Proposal* falls short of being inclusive to women from all backgrounds, instead privileging those who come from wealth and status. This is not only explicit in the cost to attend the school, which she prices at 500 pounds and refers to as a dowry, but also implicit in the way that Astell discusses education as a way to reject materialism. Noting that a young woman has dresses and fine things to adorn herself with implies wealth and inevitably excludes poorer women from the conversation. Therefore, despite her statement that education is "something more truly illustrious than a founding title or a great estate," she still denies the opportunity for self-improvement *at the school* to those women who are not connected to individuals with said titles or great estates (Astell 285). However, she explicitly states her desire for the wider dissemination of knowledge

to all young ladies, an idea that rejects the gatekeeping of female learning from those who cannot afford to attend such a privileged institution. In this way, she begins to hint towards an (admittedly very limited) type of intersectionality where women of a lower class are seen as deserving of the true spiritual understanding that accompanies Astell's proposed education as those who are able to attend the school.

The educational space that Astell proposes is one that, if conceived of properly, will be home to a female intellectual community defined by close female friendships based on mutual self-improvement. This emphasis on female friendships plays into the idea of the proposed school as a utopian space, as "nearly all utopian writing concerns itself with questions of love, friendship, and marriage, since an ideal society no less than an actual begins with and is made up of human relationships" (Johns 61). Astell is a "fierce advocate of platonic love" (Johns 61) and speaks of a type of friendship that moves beyond the "insignificant dearnesses" normally viewed as friendships towards "a love that thinks nothing within the bounds of power and duty too much to do or suffer for its beloved and makes no difference between its friend and itself, except that in temporals it prefers her interest" (Astell 315-316). To Astell, true "friendship is nothing else but charity contracted" (Astell 315). She creates a binary between superficial and deeper, more selfless friendships and implies that "virtuous friendship consists in mutual acts of un-self-interested benevolence" between two or more people (Broad 69). Julie Choi has suggested that Astell's "enthusiasm for an Edenic seclusion" away from the world of men may have been inspired by her own life; she was a "bookish young [unmarried] woman who could only rely on the generosity of others" who may have dreamed of an institution like the one she envisions in the *Proposal*, which would be a "practical as well as an idealistic solution" that could act as "a safe haven for single women" (14). Regardless of her motivations, it is clear that Astell's design

of friendship is based on selflessness and a deep love of the other person. She imagines a friendship that is “not merely corrective...but also both satisfying and redemptive” (Kolbrenner, “Astell’s Design” 60). By acting in solidarity with each other and providing spiritual and moral support when needed, women engaged in this type of friendship will help to keep each other away from the temptation of sin and pointed towards the love of God. In addition to the moral support that they would receive, however, these women would also get a loving intimacy with another person without the effort traditionally associated with marriage; they would have someone with whom they could have interesting conversations, relieve their pain and share their joy without the overwhelming responsibilities expected of a wife. In this way, Astell’s proposed educational space is not only a wonderful opportunity for young women who are soon to enter the marriage market, but a haven for women who, like herself, never had any plans to marry.

As with the Isham family, Astell emphasises the central role and powerful position that the material book will occupy within the female intellectual community at her proposed institution. In Astell’s female monastery, there will be no learning for the sake of learning; every topic that the students study will be examined for a reason. It is “not intended that [a student] should spend her hours in learning words but things and, therefore, no more languages than are necessary to acquaint her with useful authors” (Astell 302). Furthermore, it is not the quantity of books read by a young lady that matters, but the quality. A student at the school “need [not] trouble herself in turning over a huge number of books but take care to understand and digest a few well-chosen and good ones” (Astell 302). Here, Astell is not only advocating for reading itself, but for critical thinking and an effort to truly understand the material that one is consuming. She also creates a hierarchy in reading materials for women when she states that “there is a sort of learning...which is worse than the greatest ignorance: a woman may study

plays and romances all her days and be a great deal more knowing, but never a jot the wiser. Such a knowledge as this serves only to instruct and put her forward in the practice of the greatest follies” (Astell 303). In order to reach a true state of understanding and enlightenment, a young woman must “furnish [her mind] with good materials,” otherwise the rational mind is neglected (Astell 303). Despite the fact that Astell condemns the “constant flattery of external objects,” books – which facilitate learning – seem to escape her scorn. Even though books are a type of commodity, they serve a purpose that enables young women to expand their minds and develop critical thinking skills that will help them live true to the word of God.

Although earlier writers such as Cavendish did embed critiques and commentary of existing systems of power within their works, Astell’s *Serious Proposal* marks a bold shift towards a more overt critique of patriarchal authority. One of the ways that she does this most distinctly is in her awareness of the systemic power imbalances and double standards between men and women. Aside from the more implicit commentary about how women are naturally disadvantaged by society as a whole, Astell also takes a few moments in the opening pages of her *Proposal* to speak directly of male privilege: “Even the men, as exact as they would seem and as much as they divert themselves with our miscarriages, are often of greater faults and such as, considering the advantages they enjoy, are much more inexcusable” (288). Considering the education, credit and privilege that men receive on the basis of their gender, they have even more reasons than women to live life according to virtuous standards. However, Astell notes ironically, she “will not pretend to correct their errors who either are or at least think themselves too wise to receive instruction from a woman’s pen” (288). One of Astell’s most cutting judgements of male privilege takes place when she chastises men for gatekeeping knowledge. It is also in these moments of criticism that the reader gets the sense that although Astell is aware

that men are most likely reading her text, she chooses to keep the focus on the encouragement of her female readers. She accuses men of greed, one of the seven deadly sins within the Christian tradition, and states her belief in the intellectual equality between men and women: “I know not how the men will resent it to have their enclosure broke down and women invited to taste of that tree of knowledge that they have so long unjustly monopolized. But they must excuse me if I be as partial to my own sex as they are to theirs and think women as capable of learning as men are and that it becomes them as well” (Astell 304). Astell uses powerful imagery in this section of her *Proposal*; by referring to patriarchal systems of power as an enclosure, she exposes the truly exclusionary nature of the political arena and the academy to women. Women are “unjustly...denied opportunities of improvement from without” (Astell 289) by men – a denial that comes about as a result of the ‘enclosure’ around male privilege.

Astell also embeds a critique of marriage and male designs on young women within her discussion of male privilege, framing it as a discussion of how a lack of education makes young women more susceptible to these charms. She discusses at length how ignorant women are vulnerable and fall victim to “rude attempts of designing men” when they are uneducated (Astell 317). When the majority of their worth is placed on their beauty, they are more gullible and easier to be taken advantage of. Who, after all, can “possibly detect the fallacy who has no better notion of either [love or honour] but what she derives from plays and romances?” (Astell 293). If women were “rightly educated” and “obtained a well-informed and discerning mind, they would be proof against all these batteries, see through and scorn those little silly artifices which are used to ensnare and deceive them” (Astell 293). Thus, not only does an expanded female education provide a young lady with the tools necessary to truly understand the word of God, it

also rescinds her naivety and makes her more self-aware when it comes to navigating the marriage market.

Despite her bold critique of men, Astell maintains the existing structures of power and takes a bit of time in her *Proposal* to explain how an expanded female education would be beneficial to men. She acknowledges the significant influence that mothers have on their sons in childhood, particularly in reference to their early education. She takes time towards the end of her tract to suggest that “men, if they rightly understand their own interest, have no reason to oppose the ingenious education of the woman, since ‘twould go a great way towards reclaiming the men” (Astell 320). “Great,” she says, “is the influence [women] have over them in their childhood, in which time if a mother be discreet and knowing as well as devout, she has many opportunities of giving such a form and season to the tender mind of a child as will show its good effect through all the stages of his life” (Astell 320). This statement acknowledges the significant influence that mothers have over their children at a young age, particularly given the strict separation of public and private spheres in the seventeenth century. Allowing women to receive an ‘ingenious education’ will also make the home lives of men much more pleasant once they are married: “an ingenious conversation will make his life comfortable, and he who can be so well entertained at home needs not run into temptations in search of diversions abroad” (Astell 320). Interestingly, the manner in which Astell describes the benefits of female education embeds male critique within these benefits. Her reasoning for how women’s raised intellectuality would benefit men are all based on amending some sort of deficiency within the male sex, such as the habit to be disloyal to their wives. This cloaked critique in addition to her overt critique is perhaps the starkest contrast between Astell’s work and those from earlier in the century.

The end of the seventeenth century saw a shift in the boldness of female writers to voice their opinions and critique aspects of society that they took issue with. There was an established tradition of women speaking against custom, albeit in a masked manner or through a pseudonym or persona, and the number of women publishing texts was growing. Makin lived through all of this, quietly learning and teaching until she published *An Essay to Revive the Ancient Education of Gentlewomen* in 1673. Although she blatantly argued against common patriarchal arguments against the education of women, she did so by co-opting the power and authority that accompanies the male sex, adopting a male voice. This does not, however, discount the work that she did; she made the decision to use a male persona in an effort to cater not only to potential students at her school, but also to potential fathers who might consider sending their daughters to her school or another institution like it. Twenty years later, a twenty-eight-year-old Mary Astell published *A Serious Proposal, Part I*, flouting convention and admitting that the text was written “by a lover of her sex.” She is bold, brash, and unafraid, and even in describing the ways in which an expanded education for women would benefit men finds a way to embed critique within her explanation. In their educational tracts, both of these writers demonstrate a marked departure from the tentativeness and conformity utilized by earlier writers like Speght and Isham, highlighting a key shift in female discourse that would lead well into the eighteenth century, when the number of female writers skyrocketed, and female novelists began to enter the scene.

## CONCLUSION

### **Feminist History is a Collective Female Intellectual Community**

The desire to examine proto-feminist texts from the seventeenth century came about as a result of my increasing interest in the history of feminist thought as a fourth-year undergraduate student, where I had been taught that the first truly feminist tract was Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). I found it difficult to digest the idea that such a radical and thought-provoking text emerged fully formed from an intellectual abyss, and was convinced that Wollstonecraft owed some sort of debt to earlier feminist foremothers, even if that debt was not direct. Earlier women must have toiled hard within the restrictive patriarchal systems of their day to present their ideas and learning to the world in an effort to demonstrate the intellectual capabilities of women. As a matter of personal interest, I began to research female British writers from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. I noticed that while some women from very privileged positions were able to publish writing related to religious subjects in the 1500s, there seemed to be an explosion of female-authored texts in the early seventeenth century. As I read deeper, I realized that across many of these texts, female voices were at their strongest when they had the support and solidarity of a community of other women. The size of the community did not seem to matter; it was the strength of the female bonds that seemed to determine the success of the female author's project. And so the idea of this study was born.

As detailed in my introduction, sixteenth-century women's education was largely dictated by male-authored directives that emphasized piety, chastity, and silence above all things. In the early years of the seventeenth century, we see a debate happening around the nature and character of women, which spawned a higher level of female publication (albeit some under pseudonyms) than had been seen before. It is into this debate that Rachel Speght entered the

scene, responding to Joseph Swetnam's misogynistic pamphlet in a logical and articulate manner in her first work *A Mouzell for Melastomus* (1617). Four years later, she published *Mortalities Memorandum with a Dreame Prefix'd*, a Christian meditation on death prefaced by an intriguing dream vision that detailed her uniquely in-depth educational journey. In reality, Speght was most likely educated by her father. In the intellectual space of the "Dreame," however, she is guided through her ignorance by a host of benevolent female characters who shield her from the obstacles that crop up and encourage her when she falls to the wayside.

Around the same time that Speght was writing, Elizabeth Isham was growing up in the picturesque Northamptonshire countryside, being taught by her mother and grandmother and developing a deep love for reading, writing, and the word of God. Throughout her life, she would go on to maintain the familial intellectual community with her sister and servants, ensuring that female learning in the family continued even after her original teachers, her mother and grandmother, had passed away. In 1638 and 1639, she composed her *Booke of Remembrance*, bequeathing it to her nieces, where it would remain hidden deep in the Isham family archive until an inquisitive scholar would recover it in the early 2000s.

Thirty years after Isham composed her *Booke*, Margaret Cavendish was exiled on the Continent during the English Civil War and Interregnum because of her and her husband's royalist loyalties. Locked away from her homeland, she wrote and read widely, using constructed female intellectual communities and deep female bonds in her dramatic and epistolary works to demonstrate her extensive learning. Ridiculed and scorned during her lifetime, she would go on to become one of the first early modern British female writers to be recovered and widely studied during the twentieth-century feminist revival.

Bathsua Makin lived contemporaneously with Speght, Isham, and Cavendish, not publishing her seminal work, *An Essay to Revive the Ancient Education of Gentlewomen*, until she was seventy-three years old. She spent her life learning and teaching, acting as tutor to a young Princess Elizabeth, daughter of Charles I and Queen Henrietta Maria, to whom Margaret Cavendish had been a lady-in-waiting to during her time of exile. A thoroughly middle-class woman whose upbringing was steeped in the importance of education, Makin would go on to be patronized by influential women, ultimately providing her husband with seven children and erecting a school for girls just outside of London. When she had amassed a lifetime of knowledge and wisdom, she released her *Essay* into the world, not taking credit for the words printed in its pages but allowing it to spark debate regardless.

Twenty years after Makin's *Essay* was published, Mary Astell composed *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, having the courage to overtly critique and condemn male systems of power. Drawing from her own life experience of singlehood surrounded by close female friends, she dreamed of an institutional female intellectual community that would be a safe haven for women who wished not to marry and a place of spiritual solace for those preparing to enter the marriage market. She wished for women to abandon the vanity and dependence on commodity that society had conditioned them for in favour of self-improvement and critical thinking. She would go on to become a powerful philosophical voice and she published in a variety of genres well into the eighteenth century, only to be silenced until the rediscovery of her works by feminist scholars in the twentieth century.

In this study, I am not trying to argue for a direct correlation between the works of Speght, Isham, Cavendish, Makin, and Astell. There are certainly similarities, coincidences, and continuities of rhetoric in their texts, but there is little to no physical or textual evidence that any

of these five writers had direct contact with each other or read each other's works. While it is true that Cavendish is mentioned in the pages of Makin's *Essay*, and we know that Astell read the work of Katherine Phillips, there is no possible way to argue for a direct line of influence between female writers from the beginning of the seventeenth century to the end. Instead, what I am advocating for here is the consideration that the work done by every female writer in the seventeenth century had the ability to break barriers, no matter how small, to enable her future sisters to amplify their voices the slightest bit more and to gradually create a continuum of learned women throughout history. With time, the ability of women to publish complex and radical ideas easily and under their own names widened and the number of works by women increased every year. From the masked or silent advocacy of Rachel Speght, Elizabeth Isham, and Margaret Cavendish came the educational tracts of Makin and Astell, the novels of Eliza Haywood and Frances Burney, the *Vindication* of Mary Wollstonecraft, the celebrated tales of Jane Austen, the tragedies of the Brontës, Woolf's *Room*, and multitudes of other female authors and works that span centuries. Rather than arguing for a female literary tradition, I would like to propose the idea that feminist literary history can be viewed as one collective female intellectual community. As female writers, researchers and academics, we draw inspiration and power from the voices of our foremothers and owe a great debt of gratitude to their struggles and censure in the same way that the writers we study owed a debt of gratitude to the women who preceded them. We are part of a female intellectual continuum like that constructed by Bathsua Makin in her *Essay*.

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