

Contemplating Cavendish: An Analysis of Reader Marks in *Playes* (1662)

A Poet is the best Tutor, and a Theatre is the best School that is for
Youth to be educated by or in.

—Margaret Cavendish, 1662

After noting that the theatre is a better source of education than tedious study or the grand tour, Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle (1623–73) declares her pedagogical purpose in publishing a collection of fourteen original plays (seven of which are written in two parts). For, she insists, ‘Playes are to present the natural dispositions and practices of Mankind; also they are to point at Vanity, laugh at Follies, disgrace Baseness, and persecute Vice’.¹ Cavendish publishes her many books with the aim to teach readers through her texts.² In particular, *Playes / written by the thrice noble, illustrious and excellent princess, the Lady Marchioness of Newcastle* (1662) presents a series of intelligent, competent, and virtuous women who each, in her own way, subverts the gender norms of the early modern world. Indeed, Cavendish announces her desire to subvert gender norms in a series of prefaces that begin this volume. For instance, she insists that readers will understand the sense of what she writes, even if she does not stick to so-called conventions: ‘I do not keep strictly to the Masculine and Feminine Genders, as they call them as for example, a Lock and a Key, the one is the Masculine Gender, the other the Feminine Gender, so Love is the Masculine Gender, Hate the Feminine Gender’ (facing sig. A5r). In publishing this lavish folio, as she does, in the style and tradition of the great Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights (Jonson, Shakespeare, Beaumont, and Fletcher) Cavendish presents new paradigms of female agency and authorship.³ As I demonstrate below, an early reader signals recognition of these paradigms when interacting with portions of the play, *Lady Contemplation*, in which women are outspoken, intelligent, and critical of tradition.

Cavendish’s *Playes* is the earliest known collection of published plays written by an English woman, though it was preceded by Elizabeth Carey’s single printed play *The Tragedy of Mariam* (1613). This volume’s contents are now available through a series of digital databases including *EEBO*, *EEBO-TCP*, *Women Writers Online*, and the prefatory materials can be found on *Digital Cavendish*. The sixty surviving copies of the first and only edition of this finely bound folio are located primarily in North

¹ Margaret Cavendish, *Playes / written by the thrice noble, illustrious and excellent princess, the Lady Marchioness of Newcastle* (London, 1662) sig. A4v. All additional citations to this volume will be given parenthetically within the body of the text.

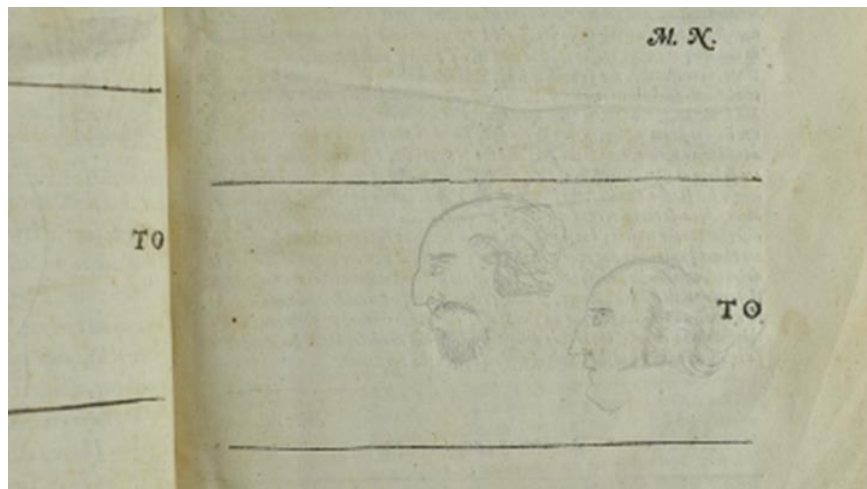
² There are now several studies addressing the pedagogical nature of Cavendish’s corpus. See Emily Bowles, “‘Under a Heap of Dust they Buried Lye, within a Vault of some Small Library’: Margaret Cavendish and the Gendered Space of the Seventeenth-Century Library”, in *Libraries, Literatures, and Archives*, ed. Sas Mays (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 40–55; Karen Detlefsen, ‘Margaret Cavendish and Thomas Hobbes on Freedom, Education, and Women’, in *Feminist Interpretations of Hobbes*, ed. Nancy Hirschmann and Joanne Wright (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2012) pp. 149–68; Rebecca D’Monte, ‘Mirroring Female Power’, in *Female Communities 1600-1800: Literary Visions and Cultural Realities*, ed. Rebecca D’Monte and Nicole Pohl (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000) pp. 93–110; Zelia Gregoriou, ‘Pedagogy and Passages: The Performativity of Margaret Cavendish’s Utopian Fiction’, *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 47 (3) (2013), 457–74; Holly Faith Nelson and Sharon Alker, ‘Memory, Monuments, and Melancholic Genius in Margaret Cavendish’s *Bell in Campo*’, *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 21 (1) (2008), 13–35; and E. Mariah Spencer, ‘A Duchess “given to contemplation”: The Education of Margaret Cavendish’, *History of Education Quarterly* 61 (2) (2021), 213–39.

³ For more on the strategic nature of Cavendish’s publications, and what it may tell us about her pedagogical purposes and the authorial ethos she creates, see Jeffrey Masten, *Textual Intercourse: Collaboration, Authorship, and Sexualities in Renaissance Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) pp. 156–64; and Shannon Miller, “‘Thou art a Monument, without a tombe’: Affiliation and Memorialization in Margaret Cavendish’s *Playes* and *Plays, Never before Printed*”, in *Cavendish and Shakespeare, Interconnections*, ed. Katherine Romack and James Fitzmaurice (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006) pp. 7–28.

American, UK, and Irish libraries.⁴ Printed by the woman, Alice Warren, for John Martyn and James Allestrye, some scholars have estimated that *Playes* was published in a batch of 100 or so copies; however, the exact number has not been determined. In addition to the annotated volume housed in New College (BT3.25.10), there are fifteen copies of *Playes* held in the Bodleian and other Oxford college libraries. The fact that these folios survive attests to the efficacy of Cavendish’s investment in her printed books, which she intended as her legacy.⁵ For, as Cavendish writes in a ‘General Prologue’ to her plays,

And when as others build them Marble Tombs,
To inurn their dust, and fretted vaulted Rooms,
I care not where my dust, or bones remain,
So my Works live, the labour of my brain. (sig. A8r)

There is a great deal of material evidence, particularly handwritten marginalia—previously addressed by James Fitzmaurice, William Poole, and Liza Blake—that suggests *Playes* was one of the more heavily read of Cavendish’s tremendous corpus.⁶ My own firsthand research supports this assertion, as several copies I have examined contain handwritten marginalia including a table of contents, corrections, donors’ notes, sections of text underlined for close reading, vertical line annotations, and a series of drawings.



Profile portraits drawn by a repeat offender in *Playes* (1662)
Found on sig. A4r of a prefatory letter addressed to ‘Noble Readers’, New College Library, Oxford, BT3.25.10

⁴ Liza Blake, ‘Locating Margaret Cavendish’s Books: Database, Map, and Analysis’, on *Digital Cavendish* (July 2018) <<http://digitalcavendish.or/original-research/locating-margaret-cavendish>>.

⁵ William Poole notes that Cambridge and Oxford libraries were ‘the greatest corporate beneficiaries of her enthusiasm’, thus receiving numerous dedication copies of Cavendish’s various works, in his ‘[Margaret Cavendish’s Books in New College, and around Oxford](#)’, *New College Notes* 6 (2015), no. 5, at p. 2. His short essay offers details on the Oxford collection while Blake’s ‘Locating Margaret Cavendish’s Books’ offers a comprehensive overview of her extant corpus.

⁶ See Liza Blake, ‘[Pounced Corrections in Oxford Copies of Cavendish’s *Philosophical and Physical Opinions*; or, *Margaret Cavendish’s Glitter Pen*](#)’, *New College Notes* 10 (2018), no. 6; James Fitzmaurice, ‘Margaret Cavendish on Her Own Writing: Evidence from Revision and Handmade Corrections’, *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 85 (3) (1991), 297–307; and Poole, ‘[Margaret Cavendish’s Books](#)’. On the size of Cavendish’s corpus, Sarah Connell of the *Women Writers Project* estimates the word count at more than one million, which makes it larger than Shakespeare’s. See Sarah Connell, ‘Education + Accessibility: Margaret Cavendish in the Classroom’, for *The Online Olios* (23 October 2020) <<http://youtube.com/watch?v=PKH-hfZlzb0&t=1215s>>.

For example, a copy held at the British Library contains a handwritten table of contents opposite the title page, which illustrates the unique nature of this book and provides context for the present study. Each play is listed on its own line and reads as follows:

- 1 Love's Adventures 2 Pts.
- 2 Several Wits
- 3 Youth's Glory & Deaths Banquet 2 Pts.
- 4 Lady Contemplation 2 Pts.
- 5 Wits Cabal 2 Pts.
- 6 The Unnatural Tragedie
- 7 Publick Wooing
- 8 Matrimonial Troubles 2 Pts
- 9 Natures three Daughters Beauty, Love & Wit 2 Pts.
- 10 The Religious
- 11 The Comical Hash
- 12 Bell in Campo 2 Pts.
- 13 The Apocriphal Ladies
- 14 The Female Academy.⁷

Cavendish's massive project thus dwarves *The Tragedy of Mariam*, and significantly expands the literary portrayal of competent early modern women. In *Plays*, Cavendish explores the many forms women take, particularly when given agency and voice. For instance, she writes of powerful empresses, virtuous heroines, brilliant scholars, orphaned ladies, spurned lovers, cross-dressing military leaders, loving wives, grief-stricken widows, wanton mistresses, and naïve innocents. Importantly, she portrays female characters who have interiority, purpose, and competence despite the contemporary treatment of women, which she likens to caged birds: 'for we are kept like birds in cages to hop up and down in our houses, not sufferd to fly abroad to see the several changes of fortune, and the various humors, ordained and created by nature'.⁸

Lady Contemplation remains one of the most extraordinary of these plays. In the pseudonymous character, we see a woman who not only resists marriage in favour of the contemplative life, but blatantly refuses many real-world interactions to pursue her outlandish (and even grotesque) daydreams. For, as Lady Contemplation explains to her friend, the Lady Visitant, 'the greatest pleasure is in the imagination not in fruition' (sig. Zz2). While a tellingly named Mrs. Troublesome notes of her, 'she makes but little use of her Body, living always within her Minde' (sig. Lll1v). Cavendish contrasts Lady Contemplation's striking refusal to engage with the physical world by developing a series of subplots, which feature female characters who face various plights common to early modern women. The first, Poor Virtue, was once a fine lady with a well-respected name, but her father's land and fortune were taken, and she is left destitute, forced to serve as a farmer's maid. Lady Ward finds herself in the care of a debauched future husband, who attempts to desensitize her to his infidelity and train her to serve as his bawd. While Lady Conversation is a sociable young woman whose willingness to interact with a variety of suitors results in one of them claiming to have lain with her in

⁷ Margaret Cavendish, *Plays* (London, 1662), British Library, 79.l.14. For more on modern productions of Cavendish's plays see James Fitzmaurice, Harald Friedl, and E. Mariah Spencer, 'The Unnatural Tragedy by Margaret Cavendish (review)' in *Early Modern Women: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 17 (2) (2022 [forthcoming]); Gweno Williams and Chris Wood, *Margaret Cavendish: Plays in Performance*, DVD recording ([York: Gweno Williams], 2004). Graham Watts has also produced a Zoom production of *The Unnatural Tragedy* with students from India. This, and other female-authored plays, are currently available on the YouTube channel, *Lost Ladies of Theatre*.

⁸ Margaret Cavendish, *Philosophical and Physical Opinions* (London, 1655) unnumbered preface.

an unlawful manner. In contrast, Lady Contemplation avoids all such troubles by leading a withdrawn, singular, and contemplative life.

Readers have repeatedly singled out *Lady Contemplation* as remarkable, with its varied portrayal of the female condition and the protagonist's extreme claim to sovereignty. For example, in the December 1818 issue of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, the critic S. K. C. notes the rarity of Cavendish's writings. Referring to her as 'Our neglected heroine', S. K. C. asserts that she 'certainly cannot be denied the praise of industry and application, and was by no means deficient in the creative faculty of imagination'.⁹ This nineteenth-century writer—who notes having an 'Oxford correspondent'—also draws out for particular praise passages spoken by the characters 'of Lady Sanspareille, Lady Contemplation, Lady Belle Esprit, and many others' from her plays.¹⁰ More recently, Gisele Venet invokes Mary Wollstonecraft when she describes the play as 'the vindication of the right of a woman to speak for herself' and refers to Cavendish as an 'articulate adventurer' who 'goes to war against the commonplaces of "the weaker sex"'.¹¹ Other scholars have offered readings related to class performance and permanence, as well as disability studies.¹² While Julie Sanders notes that Cavendish converts the private space of the 'closet' from a confining 'bird cage' to a locale of female empowerment, ownership, secrecy, and interiority.¹³ These varied critical contexts, when viewed together, suggest the complicated and potentially subversive nature of the play.

Despite its subversive elements, many critics overlook the extreme nature of Lady Contemplation's daydreams. Yet this is precisely what an eighteenth- or nineteenth-century reader appears to note when annotating the copy of *Plays* held by New College.¹⁴ This reader has marked at least thirteen entries in *Lady Contemplation*, signaling a keen interest in the gendered philosophy of Cavendish. While annotating Poor Virtue's take on melancholy and conscience, as well as Lady Ward's statements that 'all the world is mad' (sig. Iii1r) and 'old dead Authors' (sig. Iii2r) reside most comfortably in empty minds, this reader seems especially interested in the thoughts of Lady Contemplation. The remainder of this essay focuses on six instances in which the reader has marked the text.

One of the first excerpts annotated by the reader contains Lady Contemplation's explicit assertion that the pursuit of pleasure is appropriate for women. She then provides explicit guidance for obtaining such enjoyment. When Lady Visitant warns her not 'to bury thy life in fantasms' (sig. Zz2r), Lady Contemplation responds, 'Why prethee, they manage time best, that please life most; For it were better not to be, than to be displeas'd; for there is none that truly lives, but those that live in pleasure'. She continues, 'it is more pleasure for any person to imagin themselves Emperour of the whole world, than to be so; for in imagination they reign & Rule, without the troublesome and weighty cares belonging thereto' (sig. Zz2r). This passage anticipates Cavendish's construction of *The Blazing*

⁹ S. K. C., 'Poems and Plays by the Duchess of Newcastle', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 4 (21) (1818), 309–313, at p.310.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 313.

¹¹ Gisele Venet, 'Margaret Cavendish's Drama: An Aesthetic of Fragmentation', in *Authorial Conquests: Essays on Genre in the Writings of Margaret Cavendish*, ed. Line Cottegnies and Nancy Weitz (Cranbury, NJ: Rosemont Publishing, 2003), pp. 226, 217.

¹² Erika Mae Olbricht, 'Using Sex: Margaret Cavendish's *The Lady Contemplation* and the Authorial Fantasy of Class Permanence', *Pacific Coast Philology* 38 (2003), 77-98; and Jes Battes, "'No Crime to Be Bashful": Social Anxiety in the Drama of Margaret Cavendish', *Mosaic* 52 (2) (2019), 167–84.

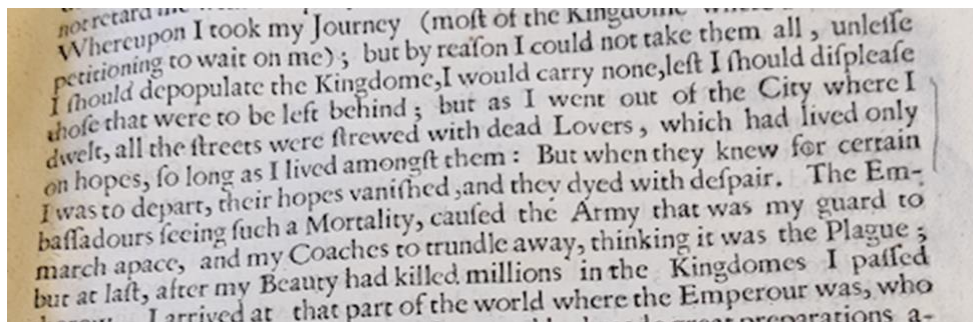
¹³ Julie Sanders, "'The Closet Opened": A Reconstruction of 'Private' Space in the Writings of Margaret Cavendish', in *A Princely Brave Woman: Essays on Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle*, ed. Stephen Clucas (New York: Routledge, 2018) p. 135.

¹⁴ Email correspondence from William Poole to E. Mariah Spencer of 19 March 2021.

World (1666) and its tutorial by the Spirits regarding the construction of immaterial worlds.¹⁵ They insist, in much the same way that Lady Contemplation suggests, that imagined worlds are to be preferred to conquered worlds because ‘conquerers seldom enjoy their conquest, for they being more feared than loved, most commonly come to an untimely end’.¹⁶ Here, Cavendish’s literary characters further complicate her philosophy of vital materialism and her sense of thoughts as imagistic in nature. David Cunning speculates that ‘Perhaps the imagistic idea itself has a feeling of compulsion and is animated and alive’.¹⁷ In this way, imagined worlds are in some sense physically and materially real, making Lady Contemplation, the Empress of the Blazing World, and Cavendish herself powerful creators. Is this what the reader notes in marking Lady Contemplation’s lines on the pleasure of imagining oneself emperor of a world?

While their precise intent when annotating remains uncertain, the reader appears to indicate an interest in Lady Contemplation’s repeated assertions that interiority and thoughts are superior to words and actions. For example, the reader also marks a portion of text in which the protagonist resists her friend’s urge to engage in a battle of wits with Lady Conversation. Instead, Lady Contemplation insists, ‘I had rather bury my self in a Monument of Thoughts, than sit in the Throne of Applause for Talking’ (sig. Fff1v). Despite her resistance, Lady Contemplation eventually interacts with Lady Conversation, and when she does so, the reader marks her defense in spending her ‘time in idle thoughts’ with the lines, ‘The Mind’s a Common-wealth, and the Thoughts are the Citizens therein, and Reason rules as King, or ought to doe: But there is no reason we should vex our Thoughts with outward things, or make them slaves unto the world’ (sig. Mmm1r). This is not just a reassertion of the superiority of contemplation or fancy but is also a repetition of a simile from *The Worlds Olio* (1655), in which Cavendish describes the mind as a commonwealth to be populated.¹⁸ In this instance, the reader seems to signal an appreciation for a conceit central to Cavendish’s philosophy of the mind.

In practice, Lady Contemplation tends towards the extremes in her many flights of fancy, despite her future husband, Sir Fancy Poet, advising her to keep her mind and imaginings cool through temperance and discourse (sig. Mmm2r). The nature of these extreme daydreams is interesting in a text that so adamantly asserts the value of private thought and imagination.¹⁹ For example, the reader marks an instance in which Lady Contemplation fantasizes that she is betrothed to a mighty emperor.



One of a series of annotations made by an 18th- or 19th-century reader of Margaret Cavendish’s *Playes* (1662).

Here the reader notes Lady Contemplation’s fantasy that her beauty kills millions of men.

New College Library, Oxford, BT3.25.10

¹⁵ Margaret Cavendish, *The Blazing World* in *Margaret Cavendish: Political Writings*, ed. Susan James (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 71.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 71.

¹⁷ David Cunning, *Cavendish: Arguments of the Philosophers* (New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 27.

¹⁸ Margaret Cavendish, *The Worlds Olio* (London, 1655), p. 95.

¹⁹ Elsewhere, I argue that Cavendish intentionally deploys the weird, the gross, and the extreme to queer or problematize the patriarchal hegemony in which she lives and writes.

She imagines the streets of her city covered in corpses as she leaves to meet her future husband: ‘but as I went out of the City where I dwelt, all the streets were strewed with dead Lovers, which had lived only on hopes, so long as I lived amongst them: But when they knew for certain I was to depart, their hopes vanished, and they dyed with despair’ (sig. Zz2r). Lady Contemplation goes on to describe her beauty killing millions in the cities through which she travels and compares the massive fatalities to a plague. Anna Battigelli considers this passage an instance in which Cavendish portrays ‘an extreme example of the contemplative cavalier’, a type of heroine who withdraws from the world as juxtaposed to the ‘active cavalier’ who responds with words and actions.²⁰ Along a similar vein of thought, Amy Scott-Douglass examines the many subplots of *Lady Contemplation* as a combined exploration of complex female identity (in this instance, both warriors and poets, or active and contemplative cavaliers).²¹

Later in the play, the reader marks another rather extreme entry in which Lady Contemplation scolds Lady Visitant for interrupting her daydream. This interruption causes an army to be routed and her imagined husband to be captured by the enemy. She explains,

I did imagine my self Married, my Husband being a General of an Army, who had fought many Battels, and had won many Victories, conquer’d many Nations, at last an unfortunate day of Battel being fought, my Husband being too active and venturous, making lanes of slain bodies as he went, and his horse riding thorow Rivers of blood, those Rivers rising so high, as his horse was forced to swim; but the blood growing thick to a jelly, obstructed his way, which made his horse furious, which fury added to his strength, forced a passage over a hill, or heap of slain bodies. (sig. Iii2v)

The reader places double vertical lines beside the horse’s wading through rivers of congealed blood. This grotesque reference to ‘a jelly’ may draw on the domestic knowledge of cooking recipes, from which women might produce jellies for consumption. Perhaps Cavendish offers a subtle critique here of the ways in which early modern women’s labour was often devalued.²² Such passages—seen repeatedly throughout Cavendish’s corpus—could also offer a gentle mockery of early modern medical texts by depicting the gross and excremental as ways of knowing, as a means of knowledge production, and/or as a demonstration of specialized or in depth knowledge.²³ In this instance, we cannot say for certain what the reader thinks, only that they have noted this passage for close reading.

When contemplating Cavendish and her long reception history, the marginalia in her books, including *Playes / written by the thrice noble, illustrious and excellent princess, the Lady Marchioness of Newcastle* (1662), confirms her efficacy to teach through her writing. For instance, Lady Contemplation is a fascinating example of a woman who subverts the gender norms of the early modern world. She does this by openly resisting marriage, preferring the contemplative life to an active one, while insisting on

²⁰ Anna Battigelli, *Margaret Cavendish and the Exiles of the Mind* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1998), pp. 26, 27.

²¹ Amy Scott-Douglass, ‘Enlarging Margaret: Cavendish, Shakespeare, and French Women Warriors and Writers’, in *Cavendish and Shakespeare, Interconnections*, ed. Katherine Romack and James Fitzmaurice (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), p. 170.

²² Delilah A. Bermudez Braatas makes a similar assertion related to Cavendish’s use of poisons in several of her dramatic works. Delilah A. Bermudez Braatas, “‘Let this Deadly Draught purge my Soul from Sin’: Poisons and Remedies in Cavendish’s Drama”, in *Cavendish II: Matter, Medicine, and Mind in the Works of Margaret Cavendish*, Renaissance Society of America Annual Conference (15 April 2021).

²³ Beatrice Bradley reads the purgative metamorphosis caused by the philosopher’s stone in *The Blazing World* this way. Beatrice Bradley, ‘Life Extension in the Blazing World’, in *Cavendish II: Matter, Medicine, and Mind in the Works of Margaret Cavendish*, Renaissance Society of America Annual Conference (15 April 2021).

the value of even her most extreme daydreams and fantasies. Importantly, a reader has annotated several passages in the copy of *Playes* held at New College, including descriptions of a river of congealed blood and millions of corpses strewn throughout several cities. The reader has also marked multiple passages in which Lady Contemplation defends her interiority and resists the encouragement of friends to interact more vigorously with the real world. The reader does this in combination with making several additional annotations, which include Sir Fancy Poet's suggestion that scholars are the worst thieves (sig. Ccc1V), Poor Virtue's definition of the conscience as the 'tenderest part of the soul' (sig. Ddd2v), and Lady Contemplation's assertion that statesmen and commanders are, and ought to be, dissemblers my nature (sig. Kkk1v). There are additional markings in *Playes*, which include passages from *Youths Glory and Deaths Banquet*, as well as the profile sketches shown above. In each instance, a reader, who Poole has suggested was perhaps 'the college's most attentive reader of Cavendish' has noted unique and interesting passages, thus signaling a sustained engagement with her dramatic works.²⁴ Might further research reveal that S.K.C.'s 'Oxford correspondent' was our pencil portraitist and reader?²⁵

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²⁴ Poole, 'Margaret Cavendish's Books', p. 5.

²⁵ S. K. C., 'Poems and Plays', p. 331.