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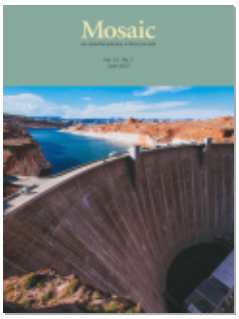

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This essay will discuss the role of social anxiety in the work of Margaret Cavendish, with a particular emphasis on blushing, speechlessness, and what we would now call introversion. The bashfulness that she presents in her work as a "crimeless defect," I will argue, is both a form of transgressive modesty and a reaction against environmental sensitivity. In plays such as *Lady Contemplation, The Presence,* and *Love's Adventures,* Cavendish is interested in staging various failures of communication.

"No Crime to Be Bashful": Social Anxiety in the Drama of Margaret Cavendish

JES BATTIS

The Thoughts that Bashfulness leaves in the Mind, are as great an Affliction as the Mind can have for a Crimeless Defect, for 'tis no Crime to be Bashful.
—Margaret Cavendish, Sociable Letters *(196)*

This essay will discuss the role of social anxiety in the work of Margaret Cavendish, with a particular emphasis on introversion and speechlessness in her dramatic work. Cavendish was one of the most prolific writers of the seventeenth century, but she also experienced lifelong difficulties with social interaction. Nancy J. Hirschman notes that "disabled individuals were […] both a commonplace and intimate part of the dominant [seventeenth-century] society and excluded from it in various ways" (169). While this dominant society often critiqued the very notion of disability, the dramatic work of Margaret Cavendish celebrated atypical sociability and radical difference. It seems vital, then, to connect Cavendish's writing on anxiety to a broader discussion of disability studies, given the ways in which her dramatic characters negotiate a confusing, sometimes hostile ideal of sociability. This essay will

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focus on her dramatic representations, both in her play-texts and the *Sociable Letters,* an epistolary text which crosses genres and presents a number of dramatic identities. I've chosen to address her hybrid drama because of its many challenges to the stage as an arena for sociability and the containment of difference. I side with Karen Raber's argument that the "ill-adapted" (465) plays are actually "an appropriate reformulation of the concept of theatre" (466) during a time when theatre was especially being policed. I will extend this point further by placing Cavendish's dramatic work within the context of transgressive sociability, and argue that her anxious characters form a positive representation of neurodiversity. Nick Walker clarifies this term by stating that "there is no 'normal' or 'right' style of human brain or human mind" (228), and I will discuss how Cavendish's atypical dramatic work makes a similar point.

The texts that I've chosen all engage with social performance in some way, and present characters or perspectives which illustrate the challenges of social interaction. Cavendish dramatizes anxiety and introversion—often read as modesty—through play-texts such as *Lady Contemplation, The Presence,* and *The Female Academy.* I'll also discuss her prose text "The Contract," which engages with a court masque and the anxiety that it produces. I'll return throughout to various scenes within *Sociable Letters*, which is hazily autobiographical while also serving as a study of difficult social situations (including how to entertain guests, and how to rein in one's imaginative thoughts in public). In *Recovering Disability in Early Modern England,* Allison P. Hobgood and David Houston Wood argue that "the notion of early modern disability is not anachronistic because human variation, though conceived of and responded to diversely, has always existed" (7). This essay will address some of the ways in which seventeenth-century writers responded to anxiety, including philosophical works and dramatic representations. My goal is not to align Margaret Cavendish with a precise lived experience of disability, but rather to discuss how her treatment of shyness, introversion, and anxiety represents a historical contribution to disability studies. Her characters challenge what it means to engage socially, to appear "on stage," and to negotiate encounters that demand compliance. Lady Contemplation, and Margaret Cavendish herself, remains fiercely non-compliant, or "singular," in Cavendish's own words. In *The Blazing World,* Cavendish's Duchess affirms that "I would rather appear worse in singularity than better in mode" (218), setting a standard for Cavendish's own radical individualism.

In the period following the English Civil War, during which Cavendish produced much of her writing, there was an ongoing philosophical discussion focused on managing passions. John Sutton describes this as an "obsession with order" (135), leading to uniformity of culture and worship, but also to the project of controlling the self. Cavendish's work intervenes within this sensory management, proposing instead a

model of contemplation based on her own social difficulties and nontraditional forms of communication. Her work may add to a broader conversation about disability culture, as well as a more specific analysis of how speech difficulties were viewed by seventeenth-century writers. Lauren Coker's work describes what she calls "disability drag" in Ben Jonson's staging of *Volpone*—how the play "perpetuat[es] the notion that [disability] was largely performative" (125)—and I want to discuss how Cavendish's hybrid drama does precisely the opposite. Her unstageable plays redefine the definition of closet drama, and her contemplative characters present a radically different way of viewing the social world. She celebrates the social awkwardness of her heroines, while carefully managing the textual stage on which these characters are made visible. Her introverted women both exist on a spectrum of disability (owing to their difficulties with speech) and offer a critical alternative to verbal communication.

The bashfulness that Cavendish presents in her work as a "crimeless defect" is both a form of transgressive modesty and a reaction against environmental sensitivity. In plays such as *Lady Contemplation, The Presence,* and *Love's Adventures,* Cavendish is interested in staging various failures of communication. She presents female characters who are tongue-tied without being shy, modest yet opinionated, dealing with a largely hostile society on their own terms. Lady Bashful appears as a character in both *The Presence* and *Love's Adventures*, while Lady Contemplation represents the cerebral worldview that defines her eponymous play. We often see the deconstruction of modesty within these dramatic works, as well as her prose fiction "The Contract," whose heroine suffers from an anxiety attack during a court masque.

This contradicts seventeenth-century work on the passions, with which Cavendish would have been familiar given her connection to a variety of philosophers and scientists. Her characters upset conventional definitions of shame and blushing as set down in the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes and Nicolas Malebranche, as well as the religious writing of Edward Reynoldes. This philosophical work would fall within a medical model of disability, which connects physical or mental impairment to a medical diagnosis. Petra Kuppers notes that the more open-ended social model of disability "radically alters the mind frame [and] the reference points for knowledge" (*Studying* 27) by placing the power of definition in the experiences of disabled people. Cavendish's dramatic characters operate within this social model while still preserving their author's role within an ableist and hierarchical society. Far from being mere plot instigators, generalizations, or "narrative prostheses" (Mitchell 17), her characters acted as bridges between her private anxiety and public performance. By positioning female characters within the experience of speechlessness, Cavendish intended to create an interface between seventeenth-century sociability and disability.

Sandra Sherman argues that "Cavendish appears in her works as an audience of one" (188), suggesting that autobiographical material continues to surface within her drama and fiction. Given this interest in creating "an absolute, unassailable self" (199), it becomes imperative to connect Cavendish's literary output with her personal experiences of anxiety and speechlessness. She was remarkably introverted when, at fifteen, she joined the exiled French court of Queen Henrietta Maria. Her duties as a lady-in-waiting consisted mostly of standing near the royal presence or sitting on a bench near the queen's quarters, waiting to be told what to do. Still, she found even minimal socialization to be frightening, and refused to speak. Courtiers assumed that she was mute, unkindly calling her a "Natural Fool" (Cavendish, *A True Relation* 46). She justified her silence as a way to avoid public embarrassment, but it was the silence itself that made her stand out. In *Sociable Letters*, her semi-autobiographical epistolary text, she struggles to explain the quality of her "retired life" to an imaginary correspondent: "It is not out of a Fantastick Humour, that I live so much Retired, […] but out of Self-love, and not out of Self-opinion [. . .] I live a Retired Life, a Home Life, free from the Intanglements, confused Clamours, and rumbling Noise of the World" (77). Cavendish lists a number of things that frighten her POV character, who is writing the letters: loud noises, unexpected visits, rude people (by which she means uneducated), crowds, public speaking, and the persistent anxiety that something terrible might befall her friends and family. Moving to Paris was terrifying for her, and she tried to return home several times, but her mother convinced her to stay. In her letters to her husband William Cavendish during this time, she speaks fearfully of "enemies" and malicious gossip.

Unexpected situations cause her to fall silent, to blush furiously, to stare at the ground in complete mortification. She freezes in place, unable to express a single idea, until either the moment has passed or she can make an awkward exit from the public situation. This extreme bashfulness, she says, "Disturbs the Thoughts so much, as the Thoughts are all in a Confused Disorder, and not any one Thought moves Regularly, neither will they Suffer the Words to pass out of the Mouth, or if they do, they are Uttered without Sense, nay, sometimes in no Language, being but Pieces of Words" (*Sociable* 196). Cavendish goes on to describe general characteristics of bashfulness, which include "Several Misbecoming Motions," like head-shaking, palsy, inappropriate laughter, trembling, mutism, and above all, a "Torrent of Blushes" (196). A number of her characters demonstrate what is now described as "selective mutism," a response to social anxiety which often appears in her work coded as bashfulness. Considering the experience of speechlessness may help us understand why this avenue of anxiety becomes significant to Cavendish's drama.

Selective mutism was first discussed by Adolph Kussmaul in 1877. The German physician was puzzled over what he called a "voluntary aphasia" that seemed to overtake certain children (Jainer 1). They could speak, but chose not to. Recent work on selective mutism has emphasized that it is not voluntary at all. In *Selective Mutism in Our Own Words,* Carl Sutton describes it as "a situational anxiety disorder of communication" in which a person "is phobic of initiating speech/being overheard in the proximity of a given trigger person or collection of people" (15). Both social anxiety and problems of communication exert a powerful force within Cavendish's literary and biographical writing. By examining these instances within a framework of disability studies, we can then explore the ways in which she challenges traditional forms of sociability for women. Her characters argue for the right to silence, personal space, and contemplation, and this is often due to their fraught experiences with public performance. Their alternative forms of sociability emerge from the need to live with speechlessness.

Cases of mutism appear in the early modern medical records of Richard Napier, a physician/astrologer who treated hundreds of patients during the first half of the seventeenth century. Napier's work is synthesized to great effect in *Mystical Bedlam,* an archival study written by Michael MacDonald, who notes the development of a seventeenth-century "reading public" fascinated by "classical medical psychology" (2). Various symptoms are recorded in Napier's records, including "distraction," which was akin to madness, and more ambivalent qualities, such as extreme skepticism and refusal to pray. Between 1597 and 1634, Napier treated over two thousand patients, ninety-two of whom received a diagnosis of "too little talk" (117). Napier himself experienced social anxiety, and MacDonald describes him as a "shy and scholarly exile" (20). In her book *Madness in Seventeenth-Century Autobiography*, Katharine Hodgkin notes that "the vocabulary of early modern madness frequently focuses on disordered speech" (54) and that "To be unable to keep one's thoughts secret to oneself was a social and personal catastrophe" (56). Refusal to speak is a less frequent occurrence, though it does appear in Napier's records.

For Cavendish, speechlessness proved to be a source of chronic embarrassment, though she also described it as a "crimeless defect." The diarist Samuel Pepys most likely witnessed this during Cavendish's visit to the Royal Society on Thursday, May 30 of 1667. Describing her dress as "antick" (Cavendish was already well known for flouting the conventions of fashion), he then notes acidly that "I do not like her at all, nor did I hear her say anything that was worth hearing, but that she was full of admiration, all admiration" (243). Cavendish was shown a number of microscopes, with which she would have been familiar (she had her own), but was unable to respond with anything other than frozen admiration. Her rigid attempts at traditional

communication resemble a failed act of "passing," which Jeffrey Brune describes as "the way people conceal social markers of impairment to avoid the stigma of disability and pass as 'normal'" (1). *Sociable Letters* contains a number of instances of failed passing in social situations, and critics like Pepys have often latched on to Cavendish's unusual behaviour in public, which he reads as failed sociability. I will go on to argue that some of these instances are not simply "failures," but acts of social resistance, which Cavendish maps on to her characters in order to challenge social norms. These productive failures align with Brune's discussion of alternative passing as a "challenge to power rather than simply an acceptance of oppression and stigma" (5).

Letters between William Cavendish and various physicians confirm that the Duchess of Newcastle sought treatment for her depression and anxiety. Margaret consulted two well-known physicians, Thomas Cademan and Theodore Mayerne. A 1648 letter between William Cavendish and Mayerne describes both the duration and the particulars of her struggle. While counselling William Cavendish about his own "hypo," Mayerne states: "As for my Lady she doth farre Exceede you for the matter of the Hypochondry. I have had hir in Cure of that disease heretofore with good succesee, and the same way I led hir then, I would have hir got again the next Autumne, and so hereafter yearely" (Portland V90: 19). Mayerne goes on to suggest that the Duchess of Newcastle has taken an unusually active hand in her own treatment, citing that she "prefers" certain types of purges, that she is wary of "the Steele" (bleeding), and that he recommends "Stomack Pills […] if she resolve to take them" (20). This suggests that Cavendish had her own ideas about purging and the nature of the stomach, which Mayerne did not necessarily support. In discussing this correspondence, Hilda Smith notes that "Cavendish was seen as a difficult case" not only due to "the persistence of her symptoms," but also because of "her habit of doctoring herself rather than following her physicians' instructions" (23). She seems to have been more interested in creating her own therapeutic culture.

This next section of the essay will address a number of anxious characters in the hybrid drama of Margaret Cavendish, with particular attention to issues with communication. I want to frame her work as a challenge to philosophical writing on shame, speechlessness, and sociability in general. At the same time, I'll highlight the specifically dramatic techniques that she uses to challenge social conventions, expanding upon Coker's idea of "disability drag" as it appears in Jonson's *Volpone*. I want to argue that Cavendish's dramatic project is both a therapeutic exercise and a transgression against restrictive bodily categories often seen on stage (with *Volpone*'s "posse" of marginal characters as a prime example of this). Rather than attempting to laugh at physical and

psychological difference, her plays—difficult texts themselves—repurpose the stage as an interior space that celebrates contemplation during a time of social upheaval. Susan Wiseman notes that this period of instability creates a tension between speech and withdrawal, in drama especially: since "printing was easier than ever before but performed drama was forbidden," the result was that the public became "intensely aware of the relationship between dramatic discourse and political situations" (16). Cavendish's work therefore dramatizes a push and pull between speech and silence, freedom and hierarchy, during an anxious period that nonetheless saw social mobility in women's writing. Katie Whitaker notes that Cavendish's early experience with mobs would instill "a basic belief in the fundamental instability of all political systems" (43), which we see in her hybrid dramas, both preserving hierarchy and challenging conventions of gender.

The closet drama became a locus for women's cultural production during this period. As Raber argues, Cavendish's hybrid closet dramas "mediate[] between the public theatre, so useful and so troubling to past monarchies in England, and non-dramatic forms of literature" (81). The result is a palimpsest of drama, philosophy, and protest which enshrines the author's own love of "singularity." Her use of multiple genres—including experimental philosophy, oral literature, and Socratic dialogue—creates a body of work that is always hybrid, always concerned with non-traditional voices and their ability to challenge social constraints. Her philosophical work is in many ways indistinguishable from her dramatic work, because both advocate for an unconfined sense of self that wants to be acknowledged for its originality.

A number of Cavendish's texts deal with bashfulness, fright, and the pressures of social interaction. Her shy, retiring characters are often paired with more socially confident women acting in a pedagogical role. In *Love's Adventures*, Lady Bashful is instructed by Mistress Reformer, who says that she "must learn to entertain visitants, and not be so bashful as you were wont to be, insomuch as you had not confidence to look a stranger in the face" (I.iv: 28). Similarly, in *The Presence,* Lady Bashful is trained by her mother, while both *Lady Contemplation* and *The Convent of Pleasure* feature mediatrix characters who remind their female charges of the rules of social hierarchy. Within these teaching dyads, it is possible to glimpse alternating versions of Cavendish herself—the adolescent girl who is "naturally Bashful" (*A True Relation* 52), and the royalist writer who has internalized what Wiseman describes as a "pleasure in hierarchy" (110). But what is the fate of these bashful characters, and how does Cavendish dramatize the difficult space between modesty and shame in order to suggest alternatives for contemplative women? To approach this question, we will need to examine philosophical and popular understandings of shame during the seventeenth century, many of which Cavendish was explicitly writing against.

In *Leviathan*, Hobbes characterizes shame as a type of grief "for the discovery of some defect of ability." This, at least, is his initial definition—a relatively neutral response to the sudden awareness of failure. Shame is the inward experience, "or the passion that discovereth it selfe in BLUSHING." Without the blush, there would be no outward trace of the affect. But he quickly adds that it "consisteth in the apprehension of some thing dishonorable" (126). It is not simply a feeling of ignorance or incompetence, but rather, the very certainty that one has done something unethical. This understanding will come to have a particular effect on women, as we see the staging of "coyness" in later Restoration drama. Peggy Thompson describes the blush as signalling "culpable agency" (2) in drama of the time, though blushing for Cavendish has more to do with sensory overload. Hobbes reminds the reader that "the secret thoughts of a man run over all things, holy, prophane, clean, obscene, grave, and light, without shame, or blame; which verball discourse cannot do" (137). To say the right thing is the mark of sensibility, while the wrong utterance—or none at all—produces shame in the speaker. In *Lady Contemplation*, Cavendish's eponymous heroine challenges the notion that proper speech is the result of a tidy mind. "The greatest pleasure," she says, "is in imagination, not in fruition […] [for] whatsoever the sence enjoyes from outward objects, they may enjoy in inward thoughts" (183-84). In the cerebral world of this play-text, masculine discourse is short-circuited by the heroine's pensive philosophy. Shame emerges not from improper thoughts, but rather from the demands of unexpected social interaction. Here, Cavendish replaces Hobbes's "defect of ability" with her character's productive turning inward, which results in a state of empowering fancy.

In his *Treatise of the Passions,* published in 1640, Reynoldes offers a detailed analysis of shame within the context of spirituality. As an Anglican bishop, Reynoldes is writing in the tradition of Thomas Adams, whose 1615 publication *Mystical Bedlam* offers a similar discussion of passions alongside a critique of vice. His emphasis on self-control owes as much to stoic principles as it does to Cartesian mechanism, revealing the ways in which this particular philosophy is both forward-thinking and rooted in the past. There is a curious type of shame, Reynoldes says, that arises from "*Greatnesse of Minde* […] either for something that such a man suffereth in himselfe, or in those that are neare unto him" (309, emph. Reynoldes's). I will go on to argue that this particular kind of intellectual shame is often what drives Cavendish's bashful characters. Lady Bashful and Lady Contemplation attempt to withdraw themselves from social interaction, choosing instead a life of serious "fancy" and inquiry, an exploration of imaginative possibility. When their escape attempts fail, the characters are caught in moments of shame. However, this is ultimately positive: their physiological reaction to sociability—a need to withdraw, to fall silent, to imagine

alternative worlds—is represented as a natural variation on human discourse, rather than a true symptom of shame or fracture.

One concept which might have bridged shame and sociability in seventeenth-century philosophy was wonder, or astonishment. Various philosophers, including Descartes and Malebranche, discuss how wonder can render us passive, but the experience of wonder also forces us to redefine "passivity" as both a mental and physical reaction. Sutton notes that "in wonder, the external world is the controller, and the brain submits to the world" (120). We are made speechless by our astonishment, just as Cavendish's characters are often speechless in response to an overwhelming world. Malebranche describes wonder as a precursor to anxiety: "It sometimes happens that persons whose animal spirits are highly agitated by fasting, vigils, a high fever, or some violent passion have the internal fibers of their brain set in motion as forcefully as by external objects. Because of this such people sense what they should only imagine" (2.1.i, 88). The pressures that Cavendish's characters feel, emerging from a hostile social environment, would occur to Malebranche as an example of "sens[ing] what they should only imagine." But Cavendish argues in her work that these pressures are real, and that both contemplation and "fancy" can serve as strategies for survival rather than symptoms of distress. We see this echoed in her visit to the Royal Society, in which she repeats that she is "full of admiration" when confronted with the wonder of microscopy. Through the critical eye of Pepys, we see her frozen in a moment of joyous crisis, responding to wonder with wonder. Although the public is disappointed by her taciturn response, Cavendish eschews rhetoric in favour of blushing honesty. Her response is to process the experience, to acknowledge her speechlessness as necessary in the face of something so intense, thereby presenting diverse communication.

In her dramatic work, Cavendish's characters often have to mediate between the wonder of private contemplation and the assault of public sociability. As an early critic of Shakespearean theatre, Cavendish distinguishes herself as a careful observer of staged performance. In addition to the dramatic work of her husband (she was present at a production of his play *The Humorous Lovers*), she was influenced by the work of Jacobean dramatists such as Jonson. Coker has identified a critique of what we might call "impairment" in Jacobean theatre, where "the spectator's gaze becomes rooted in skepticism and disbelief, and people with physical or mental ailments become spectacles" (132). Thomas Middleton's *The Changeling* would fall into this category, with its dramatic depiction of a Bedlam-style madhouse. Focusing on Jonson's *Volpone*, Coker develops the concept of "disability drag" as a critical performance within the play. In order to baffle the men who want access to his fortune,

Volpone performs a constellation of symptoms while letting the audience in on the truth of his "illness." Coker argues that this is a form of drag, since his trick "brings issues of corporeality or bodily deficit to the forefront," while the joke "render[s] the imposter's body a spectacle and [becomes] another tool for denying the physically embodied nature of disability" (124-25). In Act 3, Volpone fools Corvino with a series of false coughs—"Uh! uh! uh! uh!"—describing himself as a "dead leaf" (119). But as the play progresses, he begins to internalize certain aspects of his false illness, and he admits to fearing that the performance might become permanent:

> But in your public—*cave* whilst I breathe.
> 'Fore God, my left leg 'gan to have the cramp,
> And I apprehended straight some power had struck me
> With a dead palsy. Well, I must be merry
> And shake it off. A many of these fears
> Would put me into some villainous disease. (V.i.152, emph. Jonson's)

As Coker argues, this plays upon the public perception of illness and impairment as trickery and mental confusion. The result is that "the notion of disability as performance gets internalized" (132) by the audience. This idea remains popularized by characters such as Hamlet, whose madness is "craft." Cavendish, I argue, does precisely the opposite with her play-texts. Rather than critiquing disability as a reversible performance, she presents characters with social impairments who are celebrated for their differences. Rather than giving in to the pressures of courtly talk, Lady Contemplation admonishes her suitor: "If you had not come and hinder'd me, I should have gover'nd all the world before I had left off contemplating" (182). When she's accused of being mad, her reply is instructive: "I had rather all the World should not only say I were mad, but think me so, rather than my self to be unhappy" (244). Rather than being "mad in craft," she claims madness as a singular way of life. This aligns with a contemporary reclamation of the term "mad" in disability communities, and might serve as an early example of mad pride. In *Mad At School,* Margaret Price identifies this type of reclamation as "trying to reassign meaning […] [by] naming myself pragmatically according to what context requires" (20). Cavendish is able to "reassign meaning" precisely through her unstageable plays, which resist the tropes that Jonson employs in *Volpone*. In order to reclaim madness as singularity, she reassigns the stage itself as a curated text whose characters choose happy instability rather than appropriate conformity.

There has been a longstanding academic debate over the paradoxical nature of Cavendish's many "selves" in print: her purported need for a "Retired life" versus her desire to live on in text. Her dramatization of bashful characters seems at odds with

her own grandiosity as a public character. Smith argues that Cavendish's literary output "undercuts her formulaic claims to modesty" (18). I've chosen to focus on Cavendish's dramatic characters because I believe that she used strategies of performance to mediate her varied experiences of anxiety. "Bashful" is both a code for many different types of fear and anxiety—social, environmental, literary—as well as a seventeenth-century mode of conduct that was porous enough for her to work its weak spots. By creating bashful characters who avoid or reframe the norms of social interaction, Cavendish is able to renovate a dramatic tradition that doubted the very existence of disabled people. Rather than using "disability drag" to ultimately mock the idea of physical and mental difference on stage, her resistant work places different minds—and different social rules—in a space of dramatic power. In her work on disability drama, Kuppers notes that "bodies are stage(d) environments […] [with a] spotlight on whatever our attention is focused on" (*Scar* 9). By eschewing categories and refusing to follow the rules of sociability (or stageability), Cavendish presents atypical minds as "stage(d) environments" where power coheres within the singularity of the performer. This allows her to cut across the philosophical critiques which marginalize her perspective, forcing what Kuppers describes as "the reembodying of medically derived body knowledge" (203). Given Lady Contemplation's focus on creating new and sympathetic worlds, we might think of this as a re-worlding of the stage in favour of neurodivergent experience.

In *The Presence,* Cavendish dramatizes her own experience as a lady-in-waiting for the exiled Queen Henrietta Maria. She appears as Lady Bashful, a character who fears gossip and cannot seem to fulfill the court's baroque social expectations. She does not respond when spoken to, a crime which infuriates her colleague, Lady Quick-Wit: "Lord! how simply she looks! […] She hangs down her head as if she were working of Cross-Stitch" (I.v: 16). While bashful in social settings, the character proves to be articulate in debates regarding her own style and perspective. In a scene cut from the play, but preserved by Cavendish in the "back matter" (somewhat like outtakes), Lady Bashful is confronted by her mother, who disapproves of her unsociable nature: "I wonder you should be so Bashful as to make all the Court believe you are a kind of a Changeling, and a simple Fool!" (BM.iv: 96). This is precisely the reputation that Cavendish fought against. Lady Bashful counters that "I neither behave my self immodestly, nor uncivilly," but her mother offers further examples of social failure: "I am told you stand amongst Company like a stone Statue […] [W]hy, you are thought so simple, as that you cannot speak three words of sence" (96-97). Lady Bashful seems to experience all of the symptoms of selective mutism, described by Cavendish in *A True Relation.*

There is another character called Lady Bashful in *Love's Adventures,* and while Cavendish often chooses names which suggest a social type (Quick-Wit, Longlife), the precise repetition here suggests that Lady Bashful represents a perspective significant to her dramatic work as a whole. In *Love's Adventures*, Lady Bashful is a noblewoman trying to avoid matrimony, much to the annoyance of Mistress Reformer. When her matron urges her to look strangers in the eye, Bashful protests that "there are unaccustomed faces, and unacquainted humours. […] [B]easts lookes not with censuring eyes" (I.iv: 28). She prefers the company of animals, whose motives are logical and instinctual, rather than people driven by exceptions. This avoidance of eye contact is a repetitive issue in Cavendish's work, occurring as well in "The Contract," which I will discuss in a moment. Many people on the spectrum have non-traditional eye contact. In her monograph *Authoring Autism*, Melanie Yergeau argues that neurodiversity can be "about enriching our ideas of rhetoricity and eye contact" (21) and goes on to state: "I want a rhetoric that tics, a rhetoric that stims, […] [a] rhetoric that averts eye contact" (31). Cavendish's characters seem to experience dynamic eye contact as well. I experience this myself, and Carl Sutton's work on selective mutism links the condition with neurodivergent experience.

In *The Female Academy,* Cavendish presents a number of female students who discuss political and social topics, including bashfulness and its relationship to discourse. Given the pedagogical tone of this dramatic work, as well as the fact that its scenes might approach any topic, it is significant that the author carves out so much space in order to discuss her perennial problems with sociability. The unnamed female student, in the midst of being quizzed on discourse, begins to describe the issues revolving around feminine speech: "In mixt Companies [the speaker] must have a mixt behaviour, and mixt discourses, as sometimes to one, then to another, according as she can handsomely and civilly apply or addresse her self" (II.iv: 660). This process of mixing is a stressful one for the speaker, who admits that "the Mouth 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" (II.viii: 657). Here she describes a kind of "bottle-neck" effect in conversation, a clash between words and ideas, which gives rise to the mutism that Cavendish's characters experience so vividly: in the moment of social crisis, they are unable to transform what Hobbes calls the "Trayne of our Thoughts" into "a Trayne of Words" (101).

The final example of social anxiety that I will discuss occurs in one of Cavendish's short prose pieces, "The Contract," and represents a midpoint between fracture and control. I argue that this piece's dramatic setting, and its focus on the anxieties of witnessing a court masque, position it alongside Cavendish's play-texts. The main

character is a noblewomen who emerges from a complex financial past, and whose initial bid at marriage is thwarted when her intended—part of the contract to which the title refers—decides to marry someone else. The lady's uncle brings her to a court masque, which is described in detail (most likely from memory, since Cavendish would have been familiar with this kind of courtly entertainment). What emerges as peculiar in this scene is the prelude to the masque itself, during which the lady is continually asking questions about what will occur. First, she asks "what is a masque?" Her uncle explains that "it is painted scenes to represent the poet's heavens and hells," but then goes on to enumerate all of the objects that might appear in the masque, including "cities, castles, seas, fishes [and] rocks" (101). When her uncle predicts that everyone will be watching her with delight, she responds fearfully: "Then I shall have all eyes stare upon me; and what am I the better, unless their eyes could infuse in my brain, wit and understanding? Their eyes cannot enrich me […] for I cannot see with their eyes, nor hear with their ears, no more than their meat can nourish me which they do eat, or rest when they do sleep" (11). Here the lady re-articulates Cavendish's fundamental problem with eye contact and its attendant pressures. To her, the collective gaze offers no wit or understanding. She cannot participate in it as a communal act, because she is fundamentally a separate person: "I cannot see with their eyes, nor hear with their ears." The lady's singularity keeps her from establishing a connection with strangers, because she does not know how to translate their looks and expressions. And it is not simply the pressure of unfamiliar eyes in general that she feels, but the pain of being looked at, of being a woman who has suddenly appeared within society, now subject to its bewildering hypocrisy and unpredictability.

Ultimately, it is not the grandeur of the masque that impresses itself upon Cavendish's heroine, but rather the sensory assault of the performance and its venue. "Such a crowd," she describes, "and such a noise, the officers beating the people back, the women squeaking, and the men cursing, the officers threatening, and the enterers praying; which confusion made her afraid." Her anxiety is so profound that she is pulled into repetition, describing the officers twice, her panic humming within these grammatical structures ("officers threatening […] enterers praying"), until she is pulled into a sensory spiral. She begs her uncle to take her home, to which he responds pragmatically that "camps and courts are never silent" (12). This piece of advice seems like something that Cavendish would have been told herself, perhaps by her mother, after the young Margaret Lucas begged to be released from the queen's court. What makes this scene peculiar is that the masque's performance is granted only a paragraph of description, while the lady's negotiation of the setting, her fear of what she does not understand, stretches for several pages. Her fear of the masque is the true focus of the scene, and not the masque itself.

What is the place of Margaret Cavendish's dramatic work within disability studies? Various critics have remarked upon her social difficulties, while often relegating them to a space that was secondary to her work. Whitaker notes that Cavendish was "dogged by persistent shyness, which could leave her blushing and tongue-tied among strangers even in middle age" (29). Anne Battigelli says that she had "an interest in exploring the reliability of the senses" (54), and that her perspective was influenced by parliamentary attacks on the Lucas family during the outbreak of the Civil War. Only Whitaker's biography has attempted to explore Cavendish's experience of shyness in youth as it evolved and shifted throughout adulthood. I would argue that a number of academics have been drawn to Cavendish precisely because her self-presentation was so radically different from her seventeenth-century contemporaries (particularly the female writers who criticised her "antick" behaviour). While good work has been done on Cavendish's investment in proto-feminist and queer causes, my goal has been to examine the connection between the author's avowed social difficulties and her creation of a socially distinct literary heroine.

Raber identifies Cavendish's "disastrous fear of public speech and sociability" (78), which perhaps led her to re-imagine the stage as a more manageable space for her characters. Sherman also acknowledges that "anxiety is a feature of Cavendish's work" (203), though she identifies this with a fear of death, rather than a fear of sociability. I argue alongside their assessment of Cavendish's anxiety, while expanding it to place her work within the realm of disability studies. Anxiety is not simply a cause or effect of her work, but the space of the work itself—her own *theatrum mundi* or dramatic world. Her characters are anxious not because seventeenth-century mores teach them to be bashful or modest, but because the act of being sociable can produce world-defining anxiety. In her work on passing as sane, Peta Cox describes this performance as "occur[ing] when a person who is experiencing psychological distress or non-normative emotional states or cognition manages to avoid displaying these states in the presence of others" (100). Cavendish played with this performance in real life by varying her identity and appearance. Her characters took this one step further by either refusing to pass (with "passing" understood to be following social conventions), or by dismantling the terms of sociability to produce a hybrid model. In this sense, their singularity allows them to feel a sense of belonging. This performance on their own dramatic terms "provides a valuable sense of community and enjoyment" (107), and places them within the realm of disability drama.

Why might it be important to read Cavendish's work through the lens of disability studies? I would argue that the author's own experiences of passing—often recorded mercilessly in seventeenth-century media, as would be the actions of any

celebrity—encouraged her to craft characters on a spectrum of disability. More than simply eschewing convention, these characters intervene within discussions of passion theory and virtuous communication that were circulating during the time in which her work was most popular. Their blushing silences, frozen postures, and escape attempts help to dramatize the experiences of women living with social anxiety and situational mutism. When faced with the pressure to act "normal" in the context of a sociable seventeenth-century woman, these characters argue for divergent forms of communication: physical distance, deep contemplation, and fierce silence. In every instance of stressful sociability, Cavendish's heroines choose an alternative mode of being that often short-circuits linguistic conventions. In this regard, they are early activists who challenge the misogynistic notion that silence and blushing represented either culpability or availability in women. On the contrary, they insist upon singularity and non-verbal forms of communication, even in the face of tremendous social pressure and moral scrutiny. They resist attempts to socialize them "properly," thereby offering historical opposition to cure narratives.

This insistence offers a direct challenge to what Robert McRuer describes as "compulsory able-bodiedness" (89), which often acts as a silent, civilizing force within a variety of narratives. Philosophers such as Spinoza, Hobbes, and Malebranche, while exploring the curious exigencies and malfunctions of the body, each offer a "healthy" model which conforms to proper sociability, moral behaviour, and management of emotions. This management was particularly vital following the Civil War, as writers sought to deal with the radical changes and exigencies that had transformed the English monarchy. Even before the commodification of madness within the eighteenth century, this period saw the crystallization of what McRuer calls "the able-bodied need for an agreed-on common ground" (92) which "demands that people with disabilities embody for others an affirmative answer to the unspoken question, *Yes, but in the end, wouldn't you rather be more like me?*" (93, emph. mine). In her biographical and literary writing, Cavendish makes perfectly clear that she must be herself. She is confident in her own singularity, and her characters embody this practice of radical difference, which allows them to upend the pedagogical scenes that their author slyly crafts. Rather than learning to be like others, these characters demand that others engage with them respectfully on their own terms.

One of the most significant elements of Cavendish's dramatic project is that it has no interest in conforming to generic or social rules. Sherman describes this resistant project as "the creation of an absolute, unassailable self" (199), and I would extend this definition to one that includes alternative models of thinking and acting within an ableist society. Lady Bashful and Lady Contemplation see their differences as

"crimeless defects" which require no cure. Like their author, they are manifestly uninterested in conforming to a society that wishes to normalize them, and this resistance allows them to resonate within the history of disability studies. In *Brilliant Imperfection,* Eli Clare argues that "at the center of cure lies eradication and the many kinds of violence that accompany it. […] [C]ure arrives in many different guises, connected to elimination and erasure in a variety of configurations" (26). An organization like Autism Speaks, for example, still frames its mandate in terms of "curing" a natural genetic variation. Cavendish's dramatic work eschews narratives of cure in favour of radical singularity. Her characters provide unique models for understanding seventeenth-century models of disability, while offering strategies of political resistance to the pressures of ableism.

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