

INTRODUCTION

The Literary Contours of Women's World-Making

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When Margaret Cavendish (later famous as the Duchess of Newcastle) sent her first book of natural philosophy to the printer in 1653, considerations of worlds and world-making were at the core of her endeavors. Elbowing her way into scientific discussions revolving around theories of matter, mind, and the natural world, she began her philosophical career with humor, declaring of her atomic poems,

But my desire that they should please the readers is as big as the world they [atoms] make, and my fears are of the same bulk. Yet my hopes fall to a single atom again, and so shall I remain an unsettled atom . . . if I am condemned, I shall be annihilated to nothing. But my ambition is such that I would either be a world or nothing.¹

Imagining herself as an unsettled atom, moving restlessly to find her proper slot in the world of philosophy, Cavendish understands that her own day may not, in fact, provide her a place among her male peers; however, rather than be “nothing,” she proposes to set her own world of thought spinning independently within the larger globe of seventeenth-century natural philosophy. In related fashion, poems such as “Of Many Worlds in This World,” “A World in an Earring,” and “Several Worlds in Several Circles” prepare her readers to think more methodically about what makes a “world” identifiable as such in the first place. Subsequent poems in the volume explore planetary bodies, geometrically theorized forms undergirding the cosmos, the chemistry and physics of nature, animal affect, and propositions for organizing human society. Indeed, Cavendish spent the next twenty years working on her theories for how this world works, while insisting that there were probably other worlds well beyond our ken. While a major thread of her intellectual work thus traces aspects of (and posits theories for) the material world and its curious features, Cavendish also maintained that understanding itself – that is, epistemological frameworks and their consequences for human society – also formed worlds within this

world so that cultures within nations, and nations across continents, must also be accounted for when considering how worlds are made. Indeed, by the time she published *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* (1666), she was explicitly addressing questions of how vitalistic, self-knowing matter coalesces into recognizable forms of life, and how disparate human thoughts similarly consolidate to become one theory or philosophy, one religion, or one political structure.²

Serious about natural philosophy, but ever playful in her disquisition, Cavendish appended her science-fiction romance, *The Blazing World*, to her science treatise, *Observations*, thereby turning the more serious meditations on world-making into a literary game. The novel begins with kidnapping and a storm at sea, propelling a ship from the pole of one world to the pole of another where the lone survivor, a bright, curious woman, encounters new persons in various intelligent forms. Elevated to “Empress” by an emperor happy to give her authority in that world, she energetically engages in projects for reorganizing society while pursuing the possibility of traveling to other worlds. When a new character, the Duchess of Newcastle, appears on the scene, the two women combine intellectual forces to attempt not only to encounter other realms of existence but also to create desirable new worlds of their own. Requiring discussions of the strengths and weaknesses regarding certain forms of government, the best kinds of social order, and questions on the necessity of religion, subsequent scenes all revolve around the pleasure of the game. When the novel concludes, the two lead characters recede as Cavendish-the-author addresses her readers, encouraging them to continue the game of world-craft: “And if any should like the World I have made, and be willing to be my Subjects, they may imagine themselves such, and they are such; I mean, in their Minds, Fancies, or Imaginations; but if they cannot endure to be subjects, they may create Worlds of their own, and Govern themselves as they please.”³ Cavendish’s body of work embraces the notion that the world is, as Eric Hayot puts it, “a ground, but it is always the ground of something. This something is inseparable from the world as world, and relates to it as content to form.”⁴ Hayot paraphrases Deleuze, whose work was deeply concerned with what he referred to as the “plane of immanence,” which Elizabeth Grosz summarizes as “the condition under which a concept, history, or idea can be addressed and disputed, added to and complicated, and misunderstood or redirected by other concepts.”⁵ Form is often part of the grounding condition that makes developing, altering, or expanding worlds possible. Thinking of worlds and their believability, Deleuze wrote, “It may be that believing in this world, this life, becomes

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our most difficult task, or the task of a mode of existence still to be discovered on our plane of immanence.”⁶ Cavendish’s poems, plays, epistolary fiction, science romance, and other literary experiments all attest to her commitment to this idea: that for world-making, content and form enjoy a profound reciprocity, and this entanglement invites further questions regarding believability and hope. Indeed, as she insisted throughout her career, the planet and the mind are reciprocal worlds, but are infinitely complex in their shifting, evolving, and permeable relations.

Cavendish helps to illustrate why the chapters included in this volume are circumscribed within the intersecting spheres of three simple questions. First, what would students and scholars of early modern English literature – say, a scholar of Shakespeare or a student of Milton – get wrong about the period and its authors were they to ignore women’s contributions to the world of letters? Second, what would they need in order to appreciate not only women’s influence in the history of literature and culture but also instances of pathbreaking mastery as well? Finally, with the latter question in mind, is it possible to see some women writers as world-makers, individuals whose intentions and craft cut into cultural practice so incisively that their shaping authority can be traced beyond their own moment?

The chapters in this volume pursue these questions through archival investigation, close reading, and careful literary–historical tracking, thus tracing in concrete terms sixteen women and their world-shaping activities.⁷ Each part balances a focus on several individual authors against at least one chapter that accounts for moments of pointedly collective efforts at world-making. Of course, a broad analysis of women writers in this regard would require a multi-volume series, which is why the aim of this collection is illustrative rather than encyclopedic, something like a lookout on a promontory, whose four-directional prospects correspond to the four-segment arrangement of the seventeen chapters gathered here. To these ends, the volume avoids rigid distinctions among the histories of philosophy, religion, science, society, and politics, even as it builds on recent advances in appreciating the complexity of gender in the period.⁸ The aim is not so much to delineate a new field for the study of women writers but to offer discrete, illustrative examples of female world-wrights who – in conversation with other male and female writers of the period – had substantial influence on the shape of things to come.⁹

World-making is a relatively well-trod avenue of inquiry for understanding many male Renaissance writers, and it gained considerable traction from the determined spade-work of Nelson Goodman’s *Ways of*

Worldmaking, a volume that cleared the underbrush to reveal the arbitrariness of the borders “between monism and pluralism,” an imagined line that “tends to evaporate under analysis.”¹⁰ As Goodman set the stage for subsequent critics, “If there is but one world, it embraces a multiplicity of contrasting aspects; if there are many worlds, the collection of them is all one. The one world may be taken as many, or the many worlds taken as one; whether one or many depends on the way of taking.”¹¹ This meant that scholars might consider the concept of “world” in relation to “making” on a grand scale (cartography’s expansion of the known world; colonialism’s expansion of the nation state; astronomy’s discovery of other planets previously unknown; and so on), as Mary Baine Campbell’s *Wonder and Science: Imagining Worlds in Early Modern Europe* and Ayesha Ramachandran’s *The Worldmakers: Global Imagining in Early Modern Europe* ably illustrate.

Campbell’s book, for instance, progresses from examples aimed at contemplating the remote New World, to those demonstrating the sense of ultimate inaccessibility of alternative worlds beyond the telescope and microscope, to the internationally inflected worlds of faith and fashion. In terms of an emphasis on worlds and world-making, Campbell’s remains one of the most sophisticated, engaging studies of the importance of genre considerations – a “stream of worldmaking texts,” as she puts it – for historical studies of literature, philosophy, and science.¹² Ramachandran’s more recent *The Worldmakers* pursues the role of imagination as early modern thinkers attempted to work “synthesis into a global whole,” something that required “an act of imagination A concept, a category, and a system of order; the world thus had to be self-consciously refashioned by individual human makers.”¹³ These concepts, categories, and systems were meant to coalesce cornucopia – especially, the swiftly burgeoning sets of new observations about the earth and cosmos – into manageable intellectual orbs; they were also used to superintend ideas about God, family life, human sexuality, political roles and commitments, and economic advantage. Categorical paradigms could create worlds of new order meant to connect the expanding realms of both scientific knowledge and social experience.

Scholars have been equally interested in the “small worlds” of early modern experience, a fruitful focus for those interested in how literary works and genres powerfully shaped thought in recognizable ways. In *Worldmaking Spenser*, for instance, Roland Greene explores the fact that works of art often are “prominent among the sites in which world-versions, as well as the conditions of world-making itself, are posited and

discussed” – a vantage point that allows analysis of the more subtle ways in which “the phenomenological and fictional idea of a world is elaborated out of what might otherwise be merely an attitude, an anecdote, or a convention.”¹⁴ In *Five Words*, Greene acknowledges that in many Renaissance works, “we witness a characteristic human attraction toward the inherent liabilities in the term itself, for world is a term and concept they (and we) cannot do without, but the dimensions of which can scarce be agreed on.”¹⁵ A term around which so much revolves, yet for which a sufficient definition is difficult to muster, is certainly an enticing, necessary avenue for further literary studies. Greene’s question about the impulse toward world-making, so clearly evident in the works of several Renaissance writers, is at the heart of this volume: “how do several kinds of knowledge – philosophy, legal theory, aesthetics – address the realization that this term [world] no longer names something everyone agrees on, let alone the stable horizon of reality itself?” Just as the integration and synthesis of new knowledge are significant forms of world-making, so, too, is the local mosaic-work artfully pieced together from the bits and shards of a shattered sense of stability – particularly in the aftermath of international efforts at religious reformation and the eventual political upheaval of civil war in England.

Goodman’s influence endures in these and other critical works, but further investigations into early modern modes of world-making often reveal problems with being too accommodating of generalizations that may not, in fact, fit the peculiarities of individual writers. As Elizabeth Spiller points out in *Science Reading and Renaissance Literature: The Art of Making Knowledge* (2004), writers such as Philip Sidney and William Gilbert “would deny that any general theory of worldmaking of the kind that Goodman proposes is possible: for them, knowledge is limited to the particular medium (poetry, magnets) in which they work.”¹⁶ World-making here is no abstraction, no mere imposition of arbitrary categories. Instead, “physical creation is best understood as the material expression of an intellectual motion,” an orientation that places thought squarely in the material world rather than hanging pendulously from what might otherwise be conceived of as a disembodied imagination. As with Sidney and Gilbert, so with the female world-wrights studied here, for whom, to borrow again from Spiller, “worldmaking was not an escape but a more powerful and more meaningful engagement with reality than can be found in the world at large.”¹⁷

The chapters collected here address women’s world-making in distinctly literary modes and represent contributions from political history, religion,

literature, manuscript studies, history of science, philosophy, and gender and sexuality studies. Each segment progresses from earlier works to later ones, thereby tracing in miniature both continuity and change. The chapters thus develop, in the aggregate, a clear sense of how and why early modern women were central to reshaping existing literary worlds or advancing new ones. More broadly, the volume tracks how several women developed forms of thought meant to replace or transform the epistemological girders sustaining philosophical, religious, political, or other cultural institutions of the day. In addition to addressing certain aspects of world-making as an avenue for literary studies, much of the new scholarship in the four parts also challenges aspects of even relatively recent characterizations of particular women writers.

Part I, “Early Modern Women Framing the Modern World,” invites readers to consider and appreciate how certain women of the English Renaissance cast enduring molds for our modern literary experience and addresses the evidence for how several of them established terms for modern literary endeavors that came to full fruition well after their own lifetimes. This part also illustrates the extent to which new social worlds are, practically speaking, formulated by inviting relationships of expanded intellectual, emotional, or professional engagement. The first segment demonstrates that how we compose women’s contributions to early modern literary culture necessarily modulates the gendered tones of history; it also illustrates why corrections to the literary record are especially meaningful for the present.

Erin Murphy’s chapter, “Erotic Origins: Genesis, the Passion, and Aemilia Lanyer’s Queer Temporality,” traces how *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* – which reflects Eve’s actions in Eden in the mirror of Christ’s Crucifixion – uses typology not only to reconfigure the book of Genesis for gender relations but also to challenge assumptions about linear heteronormative reproduction as analogous to – or even underpinning – the forward movement of history. With its own potent ability to connect the past, present, and future, typology serves Lanyer as a tool for providing alternatives to what may be termed a “reproductive temporality” that tethered a culture’s future to women’s reproductive capacities in the present. Lanyer uses typology to read history both diachronically and synchronically – reflecting desires for sameness and difference, proximity and distance, community and competition – thereby using the poem’s sturdy Christian moorings to assert time’s flexibility in relation to collective and individual identity. Interestingly, Lanyer’s preoccupation with the problem of time and history was shared by Aphra Behn, who was all too

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aware of the fragility of memory: her work would have to rely on agents of transmission for continued re-emergence into the new worlds of the future, even as she manifested for her own day the public powers of the female pen. In “Aphra Behn’s Fiction: Transmission, Editing, and Canonization,” Paul Salzman illustrates Behn’s profoundly shaping influence not only on the early professionalization of writing as craft but also on the trans-historical process of publication and continuous transmission by which authors become “canonical” in the first place. Salzman’s chapter traces how the evolution of the 1915 edition of Behn’s works – a defining moment for Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West – allows for a better understanding of Behn’s multifaceted influence on the modern world of literary arts and publishing.

While Lanyer and Behn energetically engaged with writing as a mode of world-making – and in doing so set up professional possibilities for later writers – other women would be recognized as political world-shapers deserving literary attention from poets and balladeers. Brandie R. Siegfried’s “From Aisling Vision to Irish Queen: The Re-emergence of Gráinne Ní Mháille in Europe’s Revolutionary Period,” takes up the case of Gráinne Ní Mháille, or Grace O’Malley, the acknowledged ruler of a significant portion of the west coast of Ireland during the latter half of the sixteenth century. Siegfried notes that the record of Gráinne’s exploits is especially useful for piecing together her figurative importance for the rhetoric of later Irish revolutionaries and for appreciating a significant development in the genre of Irish *aisling* poetry, a favored mode of literary resistance to oppressive regimes in need of radical change. The chapter concludes by describing Gráinne’s place in Irish propaganda supportive of the French revolution, where she re-emerges as a symbol of liberty at the dawn of modern democracy. In contrast to the depictions of eighteenth-century antiquarians and balladeers who revived Gráinne by recourse to the sixteenth-century historical record, many twentieth- and twenty-first-century representations of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century women pay little heed to the actual lives of the agents in question, as the final chapter of Part I concludes. In “Reframing the Picture: Screening Early Modern Women for Modern Audiences,” Lisa Walters and Naomi Miller take up the question of how our present cinematic narratives often obscure women’s earlier world-making efforts. The chapter demonstrates how overly narrow representations of Renaissance women – for instance, focusing only on the passions of Queen Elizabeth or the sexual lives of the wives of kings – skew our understanding not only of the past but also of the present. Historically grounded and narratively complex portrayals of early

modern women in novels and film are called for as the authors underscore the potential for shaping our present world by recourse to a fuller account of the past.

While Part I registers the deep influence of the lives and work of early modern women on later eras, the next, “Remaking the Literary World,” begins with the notion that works of art constitute mobilizing sites for promulgating new worlds and notes how the artistic production by or about certain women foregrounds the conditions and endeavors of world-making itself. Moreover, Part II clarifies the degree to which women were central to the refinement of “traditional” literary forms and development of new literary genres. Marion Wynne-Davies’s chapter, “Uncloseted: Geography and Early Modern Women’s Dramatic Writing,” critiques how, historically, plays written by early modern Englishwomen have been consigned to the small, domestic space of closet drama. The chapter explores how women envisaged an open playing-space that radically challenges our understanding of their supposedly gendered enclosure in closet drama and the dominance of city stage over domestic landscape. Special attention is given to Jane Lumley’s *Iphigeneia*, whose key features Wynne-Davies examines alongside the local landscapes to which they refer, suggesting a neglected early modern theater-world set in the heart of nature. Laura De Furio shares Wynne-Davies’s interest in moving away from simplistic notions of what a genre means or does in the hands of a woman writer. In “Lucy Hutchinson’s *Memoirs* as Autobiography,” De Furio explains that life writing is unquestionably a literary mode meant to reshape thoughts and attitudes in the public sphere: critics have long read *The Memoirs* as a partisan history composed to protect the Colonel’s legacy as a devout Calvinist and as a faithful parliamentarian officer after his death. However, as De Furio argues, Lucy Hutchinson centralizes herself in the narratives of war, politics, and religion typically assumed to be a world of male endeavor – and Hutchinson does so even at the expense of the stated aims of the biography to defend her husband. Indeed, Hutchinson’s complimentary self-presentation frequently prioritizes her personal legacy over her husband’s as she delineates her moral character, asserts her authority in their marriage, and records her political activism in the early years of the Restoration.

While De Furio’s chapter underscores the assertive use of a classical genre to socially advance and morally vindicate the female author, Victoria E. Burke’s “Commonplace Genres, Or Women’s Interventions in Non-Traditional Literary Forms: Madame de Sablé, Aphra Behn, and the Maxim” proposes that when we broaden the categories of what we consider

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worthy of literary study, we gain a more accurate picture of the past generally, and of genre more particularly. Burke argues that Madame de Sablé was key to the development of the maxim in mid-seventeenth-century France and that Aphra Behn was key to the importation of that genre to the British Isles. Scholarship and literary history have been slow to acknowledge the significance of their contributions, and both writers should be seen as innovators in a new genre. In fact, Aphra Behn, who translated La Rochefoucauld's *Maximes* for an English audience in 1685, made significant philosophical and formal departures from her source that mark her translation as a work of creation. As short literary forms such as the commonplace, maxim, or rhyming couplet aptly demonstrate, women in the seventeenth century read, engaged with, and sometimes fundamentally transformed genres.

Early modern women's attentiveness to their shaping powers – which included literary endeavors bearing on the genres of expression and exposition at the heart of culture – is equally on display in Lara Dodds's "Form, Formalism, and Literary Studies: The Case of Margaret Cavendish." Dodds addresses Cavendish's apparent rejection of form – as asserted in the paratexts of many of her works – to illustrate that, far from being inattentive to its effects, Cavendish's body of work is written in response to form as a gendered category of analysis. Moreover, her experiments with form become the means by which she exposes the gendered uses to which form had been put in various categories of thought. Cavendish's body of work tracks how form migrates across different registers – social, literary, philosophical, and material – and her theorization of this movement is particularly astute. Leaving Cavendish out of conversations about formalism, whether aesthetic, as in the New Criticism, or indexical, as in the so-called new formalism, makes for an awkward drape in the current fabric of literary thought.

The first two sections of this volume thus illustrate the world-making power of women who fashioned new relationships to literary genres, which in turn formed continuing influences on others that would – with subtle elegance in some instances, with brash assertiveness in others – thread their way through time. Following on the examples of the first two parts, Part III, "Connecting the Social Worlds of Religion, Politics, and Philosophy," explores what those literary refinements signified for how knowledge – in science, philosophy, politics, and religion – could be reimagined and advanced to achieve serious, immediate social goals. Indeed, this segment highlights what was at stake over world-making – especially the role of imagined representations as the backdrop for systems of order, including

the bases for three substantial categories: forms of religious commitment, individual and communal; the establishment of scientific truth; and the possibility of a social philosophy capacious enough for all.

Suzanne Trill's "Royalism and Resistance: Politics and the Personal in Anne, Lady Halkett's *Meditations*, 1660–1699" addresses the tension between the rival claims of religious and political authority, and how certain imagined reconciliations were set forth or refused in the writings of politically energized women. The subject of Trill's essay – Anne, Lady Halkett – dramatizes for readers how the "small worlds" of individual problem solving enter the larger world of political endeavor. As an Episcopalian Jacobite living in Fife from 1656 to 1699, Halkett provides unique insight into the "losers" side of history and creates an important record of resistance to William and Mary's regime. Indeed, Halkett's writing teaches much about the changing relationship between the "personal" and "political" over the course of the seventeenth century. Marshelle Woodward makes a similar case regarding the peculiar significance of personal religious commitments used to frame the world at large. In "Hester Pulter's Dissolving Worlds," Woodward traces how Pulter imagined not a new world emerging from her futuristic thoughts but the destruction of the present world as a means of clearing time. Pulter returns repeatedly to scenes of global destruction and, unlike early modern male poets who often view the specter of the world's mortality with anxiety or grief, she welcomes the anarchic freedom of dissolution. Her lyrics often turn on the dangerous tension between a longing for spiritual transcendence and a perverse desire to watch the world burn. Perhaps more than any other seventeenth-century writer, Pulter questions the theological, natural philosophical, and aesthetic limits of world-making in a universe in which all things – even the great globe itself – will be dissolved.

David Cunning's essay, "The Feminist Worlds of Margaret Cavendish," argues that Cavendish, unlike Pulter, is eager to model a better world for development in the immediate present, particularly in terms of gender equality. Cavendish does not fantasize a world destroyed, clearing the space for transcendence; she repeatedly imagines the shards of her old world (in the aftermath of civil war) brightly refashioned in new and better ways. Cavendish was a keen social philosopher who, when writing in her own voice, makes clear that she subscribes to the view that anticipates a fundamental feminist principle of critique: differences in ability between women and men are due to surrounding societal conditions that are much more favorable to men than to women. A new and different world ought to be made. Following