

PI: Dr Anne Thell (English Language & Literature)

Project Title: Changing Currents in Intellectual History: Cavendish and the Aesthetics of Mental Illness

Abstract:

This project consists of three, interrelated objectives. All of them have to do with the history of natural philosophy—or what we would now call “science”—as it relates to literature in the early modern period. Two of them have to do with the work of Margaret Cavendish, a seventeenth-century female philosopher and demagogue who has to date been sorely underrepresented in literature and philosophy curricula. The third objective, “The Disease of Imagination,” studies mental illness as it is represented in medical and literary discourse across the eighteenth century. I expect that work on these projects will be mutually productive, with each one fuelling and speeding the production of the others.

I. *Grounds of Natural Philosophy*

The first and most pressing objective has to do with the completion of my critical edition of Margaret Cavendish’s *Grounds of Natural Philosophy* (1668), which has never been printed in modern format and is therefore almost entirely unstudied in literature and history of philosophy courses. This edition is now under contract with Broadview Press, one of the most respected publishers of critical editions in literature and philosophy, which means that this important early modern female philosopher will finally find her way into university curricula and, in addition, find a more prominent place in scholarly conversations about seventeenth-century natural philosophy. While the bulk of research on this project has been completed, I need one final period in the British archives to complete final checks on the copy-text and the critical appendices, which aim to contextualize Cavendish’s work and align her thinking with that of her more famous male contemporaries. Once published, this edition will enable Cavendish’s inclusion in history of philosophy courses and cement her status as a crucial intellectual voice of the early modern period.

II. *Cavendish: Professional and Personal Correspondence*

The history of philosophy canon has remained surprisingly rigid for many years—but this is slowly changing, as scholars start to attend more closely the work of women who were reading and practising philosophy in the seventeenth century. My work on a previous Cavendish edition for Broadview Press made me realize that Cavendish scholars—and, more broadly, historians of philosophy, literary critics, and historians of science—are eager for more accessible, modern editions of her work that can be easily adopted into course curricula and consulted by researchers. To this end, I plan to compile an edition of all extant letters to and from Cavendish across her writing life, from the 1640s until 1670. These letters range from prolonged metaphysical debates with other philosophers—for instance, Joseph Glanvill, Walter Charleton, and Constantijn Huygens—to polite but often condescending notes from Henry More or illustrious university librarians who felt obligated to thank the Duchess for sending them copies of her work. There are also courtship letters between Cavendish and her husband, the Duke of Newcastle, and, I suspect, several other letters still undiscovered in the British archives and private collections. I would also like to include in this edition some selected published epistles that Cavendish wrote to readers and university libraries. Taken together, this edition will be the authoritative collection of Cavendish correspondence, printed in accessible, annotated format.

III. *The Disease of Imagination*

My final research objective has to do with the completion of primary research for my second monograph, “‘The Disease of Imagination’: Mental Illness and the Work of Fiction, 1660-1780.” This project is related to my work on Cavendish because it, too, engages the history of natural philosophy and, more specifically, investigates early modern theories of health, illness, and cognition (which Cavendish discusses at length in *Grounds*). However, this project also moves into significantly new territory: It brings together the history of medicine and the history of aesthetics to illuminate striking similarities between theories of madness, on one hand, and imagination, on the other. Specifically, I examine how seventeenth- and eighteenth-century authors theorize mental illness—or conditions like “hypochondria,” “vapours,” and “madness”—in medical and philosophical texts and compare these notions to early aesthetic theories that create new categories of truth and experience that exist beyond the realm of reason. All told, I hope this work illuminates the fundamental role that aberrant cognition plays in the history of English fiction, as well as its attendant body of criticism.