Catching « the Genius of the Age » :
Margaret Cavendish, Historian and Witness

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Over the past decades, most of Margaret Cavendish’s works have been rediscovered and extensively studied. Many pages have been devoted to her poetry, her drama and her natural philosophy1. These commentaries have mainly focused on Cavendish’s role in the introduction of atomism in England, her alleged « proto-feminism », and her relations to Thomas Hobbes. However, Cavendish’s history writing, especially her Life of William Cavendish, has received much less attention recently. Yet, this biography, first published in folio in 1667 and presented by the duchess herself as « a short History », was seen as Cavendish’s main work for a long time. It was translated into Latin by Walter Charleton in 1668, then republished in quarto in 1675. Two centuries later, just after he edited Lucy Hutchinson’s biography of her husband, Charles Firth brought out a new edition of Cavendish’s Life of William, to which he added the duchess’s autobiography2. Besides these « lives », Cavendish’s historical writings include essays on the history of England in The World’s Olio (1655), as well as a short history of philosophy in Observations upon Experimental Philosophy (1666) that follows the example of Thomas Stanley.

This article will focus mainly on The Life of William Cavendish, which illuminates Margaret Cavendish’s practice and conception of history writing. Although this work is a biography dealing with the very recent past – since it relates Newcastle’s role in the civil wars and his exile on the continent –, it may still be considered as history, as understood in early modern England. Indeed,

history was not yet a discipline *per se* and its writing could take different forms, such as auto/biography, letters, orations, diaries or closet drama. It must be underlined though that history was being redefined at that time, and especially in the Restoration, when historiographical debates, aroused mainly by the civil wars, multiplied in England.

The aim of this article is to show that Margaret Cavendish, who wrote her biography in the first years of the Restoration, participated in these debates, and maybe even contributed to the new developments in historiography that characterised early modern England. Her history writing tends to support the idea that there was no such thing as a «historical revolution» at the time, but it also shows that there were significant changes in public consciousness of the past and in the way history was then understood. Critical historical methods were being implemented and progressively, more importance was given to evidence and explanation. It seems however that continuity as well as confusion between traditional and modern practices characterised the advent of «modern history».

It could also be argued, however, that Cavendish’s historiographical method reveals not so much seventeenth-century changes in the conception of history writing, as a feminine point of view on history in a patriarchal society. Indeed, Cavendish’s work shows clear self-consciousness about her encroachment on male territory when dealing with events in the public domain. But her history writing and the «tactics» she used to bypass the limitations attached to her sex are all the more revealing of both the general practice of history writing in Restoration England and women’s relation to history and historiography. Indeed, working out «tactics» to access historical knowledge required a perfect understanding of the meaning of history and its role in English society. Therefore, one can wonder, like Megan Matchinske in her book *Women Writing History in Early Modern England*, if and «how early modern women writers employ specific notions of the past and particular models of expression to navigate peculiarly female concerns about the future».

This article will first try to show how Cavendish was able to write history in spite of her sex, why she did so and what were the strategies she resorted to.

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Then, it will focus on her contribution to historiographical debates and her own conception of historical discursive practice in her biography of Newcastle.

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As shown in her several books, Margaret Cavendish did manage to access some knowledge, probably thanks to personal reading and the practices of intellectual sociability. She was also encouraged by her husband in her philosophical pursuits. But with no formal education and a very limited access to historical documents, textual recovery of the past must have appeared particularly challenging to women. What is more, as Mary Astell underlined, reading or writing history was of no use to women, who took no part in political or military actions, and even less in governing the country: «Since the men being the historians, they seldom condescend to record the great and grand actions of women»⁷. History as a branch of scientia was thus masculine, «a classroom for political action or a field of knowledge to be conquered»⁸. According to Daniel R. Woolf, history got even more masculine in the violent seventeenth century, when it strongly contrasted with «the unreliability of tales and traditions associated with old wives»⁹. Yet, it was deemed acceptable for women to read history, which was then seen as «an easily understood and morally sound genre»¹⁰. It seems that some women took advantage of this ambiguity about their access to history in order to subvert their exclusion from this genre, as Cavendish did in her biography, thanks to prefatory strategies.

According to Sara Mendelson, Cavendish’s Life of William was «a last attempt to gain court favour» after the Newcastles retired into the country¹¹. The book is indeed dedicated to Charles II and expresses a clear Royalist stance. On the other hand, Douglas Grant, Margaret Cavendish’s biographer, held the book as «a memorial to Margaret’s love and gratitude», underlining her happiness with Newcastle¹². These interpretations of Cavendish’s Life of William may be true, but it appears that Cavendish had three main aims in writing a biography of her husband. First, she wanted to defend his reputation and show that he had no choice but to leave England after the defeat of Marston Moor in 1644. Second, the Restoration was characterised by an urgent need to explain the disaster of the previous twenty years. Margaret Cavendish’s own obsession with the civil wars is obvious throughout her works. As Anna Battigelli has shown in Margaret

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⁹ Ibid., p. 659.
¹⁰ Ibid., p. 664.
¹² Douglas Grant, Margaret the First: A Biography of Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, 1623-1673, London, Rupert Hart-Davis, 1957, p. 188.

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Cavendish’s « tactics » to have her history book accepted and herself ranked among serious historians are easily perceived in the preface to The Life of William. She emphasises the reliability of her sources : she explains that Newcastle and his secretary, John Rolleston, helped her recover the past. Cavendish herself was a witness of the history she recounts in her biography only from 1645, when she married Newcastle in Paris. She clearly implies that, because she got her information « straight from the horse’s mouth », her history is necessarily true, and in this regard, she presents herself as a serious historian. However, paradoxically, she also insists in the same preface on her ignorance of « the Rules of writing Histories », adding that she asked Newcastle for a historian to assist her, but he refused. She replied that her history would then be defective since she needed help with the rhetoric of her work. Newcastle answered « That Rhetorick was fitter for Falshoods then Truths »15. Cavendish concludes this reported conversation with : « Thus I was forced by his Graces Commands, to write this History in my own plain Style, without elegant Flourishings, or exquisit Method, relying intirely upon Truth, in the expressing whereof, I have been very circumspect »16. In feigning to issue an imperfect because unrhetorical book, Cavendish underlines even more strongly that her biography is actually real, truthful history, an idea which was further reinforced by the format of her book, a folio – many of the histories published at the time were indeed expensive folios or quartos.

In her preface, Cavendish also takes up the distinction between a « particular history » and a « general history » in order to show that her historical work is acceptable, although written by a woman17. She actually distinguishes between three sorts of history, the first being « a General History », which is « the History of the known parts and people of the World », the second « a National History », « the History of a particular Nation, Kingdom or Commonwealth », and

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16 Ibid.
17 D. R. Woolf, « A Feminine Past ? », art. cit., p. 649 : « […] the French also established gender lines within historical genres, identifying biographical texts authored by women as ‘particular history’, distinguishable from the ‘general history’ written by men, and thereby excluded ‘lives’ from the rubric of history proper. »
the third « a Particular History », defined as « the History of the life and actions of some particular Person ». The « particular history » she writes is also compared, by analogy, to monarchy, whereas « general history » is associated with democracy, and « national history » with aristocracy. According to Cavendish :

The first is profitable for Travellers, Navigators and Merchants; the second is pernicious, by reason it teaches subtil Policies, begets Factions, not onely between particular Families and Persons, but also between whole Nations, and great Princes, rubbing old sores, and renewing old Quarrels, that would otherwise have been forgotten […]

She then tries to convince her readers that « a particular history » is not only the best sort of history, but also the only one a woman is allowed to write, maybe because it does not imply dealing directly with the public domain : « [Particular history] is the most secure; because it goes not out of its own Circle, but turns on its own Axis, and for the most part, keeps within the Circumference of Truth ».

Whereas the first kind of history is written by travellers or navigators and the second kind by statesmen, « a particular history », which is immediate history, should be written by :

[…] the Prime Actors, or the Spectators of those Affairs and Actions of which they write, as Cesars Commentaries are, which no Pen but of such an Author, who was also an Actor in the particular Occurrences, private Intrigues, secret Counsels, close Designs, and rare Exploits of War he relates, could ever have brought to so high Perfection.

Cavendish is well aware that, as a woman, she is not supposed to write about wars, which is why she insists on the contemporaneity of the history she recounts – telling a « particular history », of which she herself was a witness, makes it more acceptable : first, she seems to imply that one does not need to be learned in order to write immediate history, and second, as actor or spectator she no doubt knows the truth of her history, which is then presented more as a story or a testimony. Indeed, still in the preface to her biography, she writes :

Nor is it inconsistent with my being a Woman, to write of Wars, that was neither between Medes and Persians, Greeks and Trojans, Christians and Turks; but among my own Countreymen, whose Customs and Inclinations, whose Customs and Inclinations, and most of the Persons that held any considerable Place in the Armies, was well known to me.
Sandrine Parageau

Cavendish thus wrote the only history that was available to a woman in the Restoration and the only one she was qualified to write: the «particular history» of a man she knew, a recollection of the immediate past.

Margaret Cavendish’s reflections on history writing certainly stemmed from the necessity for a woman to justify her historical works in early modern England, but they can also be seen as a contribution to the historiographical debates of the Restoration. Although theoretical literature on history was not much developed in England before the eighteenth century, history and history writing were already being discussed with the help of French manuals at the time Cavendish was writing her biography. The analysis of Cavendish’s historical discursive practice shows both rigour and looseness in the method she applied. The duchess’s history writing may have been influenced by her reading Plutarch’s Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans, a work she mentions twice in her book Sociable Letters. But if she probably drew from Plutarch’s Lives in writing her short essays about several historical and legendary characters in The World’s Olio, it seems that she did not take much from it when writing the biography of her husband.

As James Fitzmaurice has shown, The Life of William appears as an olio, mixing several genres. The biography is composed of four books: the first one is devoted to the narrative of Newcastle’s actions during the civil wars; the second deals with Newcastle’s exile on the continent and his losses; the third one describes his education and his daily life, and the last one consists in a series of observations made by Newcastle and by the author herself. According to Fitzmaurice, only the first book and part of the second are history, books three and four being described by him as «odds and ends mixed together in random fashion to create at best an ordinary, unrevealing family scrapbook». However, a comparison with Cavendish’s philosophical works is useful in order to interpret her method of history writing. First, Cavendish obviously conceived writing in general to be an olio, at least until 1664, when she published her first serious book of natural philosophy, Philosophical Letters, and even, to a lesser extent, after that year since she considered that writings should reflect the multiplicity and variety of nature. The works she published in the 1650s were all presented as mixed genres, which was made very clear in the titles themselves: for instance, in 1655, The World’s Olio gave reflections on science and medicine, but also on classical myth and English history; then in 1656, Natures Pictures Drawn by Fancies Pencil to the Life, Being Several Feigned Stories, Comical, Tragical, Tragi-Comical, Poetical.

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24 J. Fitzmaurice, art. cit., p. 80 and 93ff.
25 Ibid., p. 80.
Romancical... presented essays in prose and in verse, to which was added Cavendish’s autobiography. What is more, the last two books of *The Life of William*, in which Cavendish complements her historical narrative with details about Newcastle’s character, describing his person and quoting from him, reveal a conception of history as inventory since Cavendish obviously tries to give an exhaustive account of her husband’s life and actions. This conception of history may have been a consequence of her involvement in philosophical debates. In most of her books indeed, Cavendish deals with nature and natural history, as defined by Francis Bacon, who distinguished between natural and civil history. Natural history, which implied the detailed description of natural phenomena, consisted in an «inventory of factual knowledge», devoid of temporal dimension. Cavendish herself admits in the preface to her biography that she has «committed great Errors in taking no notice of Times as [she] should have done in many places of [her] History». Although events are recounted in their chronological order in books one and two, precise dates are indeed missing in Cavendish’s history. Therefore, the description of Newcastle’s character and daily life at the end of the biography is still history writing, but this passage reveals a conception of history as inventory that was influenced by Cavendish’s practice of natural philosophy.

As a consequence of this conception of history, Cavendish also tends to give priority to the narrative and the plot. The supremacy of the plot may be the reason why she added marginal notes to give the names of the secondary characters involved in her history; it seems that she was reluctant to interrupt the reader and the progress of the story with the names of secondary agents. She also announced in her preface that the «essays and discourse» by Newcastle were to be found in the last book because she did not want to «intermingle them with the Body of the History». Finally, Cavendish added several first-hand documents to her history, such as a copy of the preamble of Newcastle’s patents for Marquess and for Duke. Thus, although the presentation of her biography may appear rather unmethodical, there is also rigour in her history writing, as well as a reflection on the methods of historical research. What is more, to a certain degree, Cavendish conformed to the practices of history writing of the time since it was then not uncommon for histories to include personal comments or anecdotes, and mixing genres within a historical narrative was not perceived as a fault, history writing being then inspired by the revival of the eclectic tradition in the history of philosophy.

28 Ibid.
Far from being an idiosyncratic expression of history, Cavendish’s works reveal much of the understanding of history in the Restoration. They show the progress from the Renaissance historical tradition to the definition of a more « modern » way of writing history. Whereas *The Life of William* testifies to Cavendish’s awareness of the recent historiographical debates of the Restoration, the brief history she proposes in her earlier work *The World’s Olio* seems on the contrary to be a product of the Renaissance tradition of history writing. Indeed, book II, part III gives a series of very short essays about particular events or characters which recall the medieval and Renaissance chronicle tradition. The book presents models of historical action, accounts of famous men and women, and key-moments in history. Cavendish deals here with « The Britains » and the kings and queens of England in reverse chronology, starting with King James and ending with Henry VII. She also writes about Pompey, Caesar, Mark Anthony or « The Emperors ». Other more surprising paragraphs are devoted to « Women dying with their Husbands » for instance. There is obviously in this book no effort to present an objective and truthful account of these people and events. On the contrary, personal comments are made on each issue. Thus we learn for instance that Queen Elizabeth « had a Lions paw, and a Foxes head; she strokes the Cheeks of her Subjects with Flattery, whilst she picks their Purses; and though she seemed loth, yet she never failed to crush to death those that disturbed her waies »31. Like chronicles, these short essays are also the occasion to draw moral lessons or to make general observations about mankind. Moral edification was indeed one of the aims of chronicles; for instance, as a conclusion to the passage on the Emperors, Cavendish writes : « I obser v, Ill-born Natures cannot be bettered by Good Examples, nor warned by Ill Examples : for all the Cruel Emperors came to Untimely Deaths »32. These observations usually deliver a very pessimistic conception of mankind.

Interestingly enough, several paragraphs in this chronicle are devoted to women; besides Elizabeth I, Cavendish presents Cleopatra, Lucretia, Portia, Penelope and those « women dying with their husbands ». She defends Cleopatra against those who accused her of being a whore :

We must not judge Strangers according to our Laws, but according to the Laws of the Nations where they were Natives, for she had taken [Caesar and Anthony] as Husbands; if the Men had more Wives, than they should have, or put away good Wives for her sake, that was their Inconstancy, and we must not make their Faults, her Crimes.33

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Not only was Cleopatra innocent according to Cavendish, but the men were guilty of inconstancy. About Lucretia, Cavendish writes that she was not responsible for her « Ravishment », « for it was her Husbands Praises that kindled, and her Beauty that inflamed the Ravisher »34. But it would probably be wrong to see a feminist agenda in this « chronicle » because other women whom Cavendish mentions are on the contrary severely condemned: Penelope for instance is accused of encouraging men to court her; according to Cavendish, « it seemed she loved to have her Ears filled with her own Praises »35. Portia, who killed herself with hot burning coals, showed « more Impatiency, and Womanish Fear, than Love to her Husband »36.

Several aspects of The Life of William show that by the 1660s, Cavendish had radically changed her historiographical method. First, the biography reveals her concern with contemporaneity, and to a certain extent, it already manifests the present-mindedness that was then more clearly expressed in the journalism of the Augustan era37. In Before Novels, Paul Hunter underlines that « by the 1690s, English culture had become so intoxicated by the potential significance to the human consciousness of any single moment that an immediate written record was required »38. The civil wars may have been one of the causes of this concern with contemporaneity. But the wars also had other consequences on the discursive practice of history, which are shown in The Life of William. According to Daniel R. Woolf, that event broke up « the unified ideological perspective » of the early Stuart period: there was « an ideological fault line in the 1640s and 1650s »39; up to the 1640s, the history of England was indeed written from a monarchical point of view but after the civil wars, histories hostile to the king were also published. As a consequence, it became more obvious that history writing could only be a construction, which, although necessarily partial and incomplete, might easily be presented as absolute truth thanks to rhetoric. This ideological conflict of the Restoration is illustrated in Cavendish’s Life of William when she strongly condemns Parliamentarians, while claiming in the preface that she does not judge anyone. At the beginning of book one, she writes of « that Rebellious and unhappy Parliament, which was the cause of all the ruines and misfortunes that afterwards

34 Ibid., p. 132.  
35 Ibid., p. 133.  
36 Ibid., p. 133.  
befell this Kingdom […]»⁴⁰. In this context, pro-Royalist historians were of course encouraged by the king, and a Historiographer Royal was appointed by Charles II in 1662. This shows a new awareness of the uses and importance of history in the Restoration. What is more, most of the Historiographers Royal at the end of the seventeenth century were poets or playwrights (John Dryden or Thomas Shadwell for instance), not « professional historians », which shows again that history was not yet a discipline, although it was clearly being redefined.

Cavendish’s reflections on historiography are best illustrated in her opposition between two categories of historians in the preface to her biography. The first category, which she vehemently criticises, is composed of those who insist too much on method and rhetoric, which Cavendish considers as superficial aspects of history writing. She clearly denounces these historians and their readers:

« […] there is some Men of good Understandings, as I have heard, that applaud very much several Histories, meerly for their Elegant Style, and well-observ’d Method; setting a high value upon feigned Orations, mystical Designs, and fancied Policies, which are, at the best, but pleasant Romances »⁴¹. In this same category one can find those who describe the object of their history in too many details and give thus a wrong perception of the temporality of the event recounted. Cavendish’s criticism here is probably part of the reaction against erudite research in seventeenth-century England :⁴²

Others approve, in the Relations of Wars, and of Military Actions, such tedious Descriptions, that the Reader, tired with them, will imagine that there was more time spent in Assaulting, Defending, and taking of a Fort, or a petty Garison, then Alexander did employ in conquering the greatest part of the World.⁴³

The insistence in this passage on the necessity to give a precise idea of the duration of an event in the relation of it is also characteristic of the historiographical changes of the seventeenth century. The notion of temporality goes with those of anachronism and contingency that were then introduced in historical thought.

Finally, still in the same category are the historians who envy states-men and therefore write « national histories ». They are harshly criticised by Cavendish in her book *Orations of Divers Sorts* (1662)⁴⁴. Those historians are dangerous according to the Duchess because they recount mainly wars and evil; being more learned than wise, they write « not to teach Men what is Best to be done, but what

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⁴³ Margaret Cavendish, *The Life of the Thrice Noble, High and Puissant Prince William Cavendishe*, op. cit., « The Preface ».
Evil hath been done, which is a Relation of Past, not an Instruction to Future Actions »45. Cavendish seems here again to take up the common distinction between scholarship and narrative history; her reaction against erudite research is also characteristic of seventeenth-century England. She concludes in the following oration against historians that all books of « national history » should be burnt and their contents « continue[d] in Tradition, not in Print »46.

The second category of historians is composed of those who focus on truth only. In her preface to *The Life of William*, Cavendish writes that truth is « the main thing, wherein consists the hardest task, very few Historians knowing the Transactions they write of, and much less the Counsels, and secret Designs of many different Parties, which they confidently mention »47; according to Cavendish, most historians learn what they know of the civil wars « in the Gazets, which, for the most part, (out of Policy to amuse and deceive the People) contain nothing but Falshoods and Chimeraes »48. Whereas she evinced a probabilistic approach in natural philosophy, Cavendish believed in absolute truth when it came to recovering the past.

The Duchess adds in the preface to her biography that her impartiality cannot be doubted: « Being, so much as I am, above base Profit, or any Preferment whatsoever, I cannot fear to be suspected of Flattery »49. However, as Sara Mendelson has underlined, the Newcastles may have been looking for court favour. What cannot be denied on the other hand is that Cavendish might easily have been refuted, had she lied about the facts. Writing immediate history makes it impossible for the author to distort the truth and Cavendish was well aware of that: « I write [this History] whilst My Noble Lord is yet alive, and at such a time where Truth may be declared, and Falshood contradicted; and I challenge any one (although I be a Woman) to contradict any thing that I have set down, or prove it to be otherwise then Truth »50. The facts recounted by Cavendish in her biography were not questioned in the seventeenth century.

The supremacy of truth leads her to oppose history to poetry, although both have advantages according to her. In *The World’s Olio*, she underlines the didactic function of history, which « increaseth and strengthens mens courage », whereas poetry is presented as « a recreation for times present »51. History should instruct the readers about their past and inspire them for the future. Poetry is fiction,

46 Ibid., p. 64.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
whereas « History should be Truth »\textsuperscript{52}. Cavendish echoes here a very old struggle between the arts of poetry and of history, which, as Michel de Certeau underlined in « History : Science and Fiction », first appeared in the practice of Herodotus and then in the theory of Cicero, whose first rule in history writing was to tell the truth\textsuperscript{53}. As a consequence, Cavendish also distinguished memory and imagination, as opposed to Thomas Hobbes for instance, whom she criticised in Philosophical Letters for making no distinction between the two faculties\textsuperscript{54}.

All this tends to show that Cavendish’s historical discursive practice is indeed a mixture of genres, as James Fitzmaurice put it, but it is also a mixture of old and new historiographical methods. It appears that Cavendish’s works, from the chronicle in The World’s Olio to the biography of Newcastle, reflect the evolution of history in the seventeenth century, from didacticism to method and proof. As Megan Matchinske underlines, this evolution meant « attention to accuracy not effect, a move that downplayed both the chronicled past and its didactic relationship to contemporary events in order to seek out explicit evidence of its material survival »\textsuperscript{55}. Like other English historians, Cavendish progressively turned away from chronicle to focus on notions of truth, impartiality and accuracy, although classical and Renaissance models of history writing still remained influential.

In the preface to his 1906 edition of Cavendish’s biography, Charles Firth wrote that there is little in the book which could not be learned more accurately from the works of historians of the civil wars. He added : « The special interest of [The Life of William] lies rather in the picture of the exiled royalist, cheerfully sacrificing everything for the king’s cause […]. It lies in the portrait drawn of a great English nobleman of the seventeenth century »\textsuperscript{56}. If the portrait of Newcastle by his wife is indeed revealing, the special interest of Cavendish’s history lies rather in the discursive practices of a book written in the context of the emergence of a new historiography. It also lies in the fact that a woman wrote it and published it in the seventeenth

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., p. 7.
\textsuperscript{55} M. Matchinske, op. cit., p. 4-5.
\textsuperscript{56} Margaret Cavendish, The Life of William Cavendish, Duke of Newcastle : To which is added The True Relation of my Birth, Breeding and Life (1667), Charles H. Firth (ed.), London, George Routledge & Sons, 1906, p. viii-ix.
century, contrary to many other women historians of the same period whose works were not made public before the nineteenth century. Cavendish’s biography reflects the new understanding and practice of history in the Restoration, and it shows the crucial role of the civil wars in this evolution. But if the civil wars did give impetus to historiographical developments, the « revolution » that led from chronicle-based history to modern scholarship was a slow one that lay in social, cultural and political changes all along the early modern period.