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[00:00:00] **Jack Schneider:** Welcome to *HEQ&A*, the podcast of the *History of Education Quarterly*. I'm your host, *HEQ* co-editor Jack Schneider. Every few weeks, we'll dive into recent work from the journal, asking authors how their projects challenge or extend what we know about a topic, exploring what's interesting and surprising about it, and then taking a step back to consider broader implications. In the second half of the show, we turn our sights to teaching. So, if you're an educator, make sure to stick around until the end. And now let's hear from one of our authors.

[00:00:50] **E. Mariah Spencer:** So I'm E. Mariah Spencer. I'm an interdisciplinary scholar, educator, and doctoral candidate in English at the University of Iowa. And I'm the author of "A Duchess Given to Contemplation: The Education of Margaret Cavendish." So my article explores the humanist educational theories of the 17th century English author and natural philosopher Margaret Cavendish, the Duchess of Newcastle. She lived from 1623 to 1673. Cavendish was an unusually public figure in her lifetime. I often introduce her to students as the Lady Gaga of her day. She was a member of the aristocracy and she wore these elaborate self-designed costumes. Right? So she was openly, um, publishing and promoting herself, um, under her own name. Right. She's publishing under her own name at a time when women were still expected to be silent, obedient, and chaste. So she was a standout. As she published, she developed her own ideas related to women's place in society, especially in terms of educational access, which at the time that she was writing, was basically zero.

[00:01:54] So what I do in this article is, I outline Cavendish's biography to provide context for the ways that she thought and wrote about education. In doing so I align her experience with the theories that she later developed and having lived through the English civil wars, Cavendish's life can be divided into three discrete stages, which sort of makes up the structure of the article that I'm writing.

[00:02:16] So in the first stage of her life as a child, the then-Margaret Lucas grew up on a country estate with her widowed mother and several of her older siblings. She received a private indulgent education with private tutors and family members. And she describes this education as more for bet—or more for appearance than for benefit. Uh, this type of education—I might note—was fairly typical of, of women of the upper classes.

[00:02:39] During the second stage of her life as a young woman, Cavendish served as a waiting maid in the exiled court of Queen Henrietta Maria. It was during this time that she met and married the much older and higher ranking William Cavendish, who was the then-Marquee of Newcastle, um, after which they went on to spend another 15 years in exile in Europe. William and Margaret spent another 15 years in exile in Europe, during which time William, who was a renowned patron of the arts and sciences, served as an informal tutor to the young Margaret. And it was during this period that Cavendish went on to publish the first 5 of her 13 books. Then, as a mature woman during the third stage of her life, she and William returned to England with the restoration of the English monarchy.

[00:03:23] At this time, Cavendish embraced her auto didacticism, reading numerous contemporary authors and responding to them in her writing—most famously Thomas Hobbes, Henry Moore, and René Descartes, for example. Um, she also proceeded to publish an additional eight books, as well as several second and even third additions of earlier titles. Now, of course, she died fairly suddenly, um, it's in 1673 at only the age of 50 years old. So it's hard to say how many more additional texts she would have written, had she been able to live a few decades longer. Now for anyone who's interested in knowing a bit more about, uh, the books that Cavendish owned and responded to in her writing? Um, I recommend books by Laura Dodds and text by Julia Crawford. They're both excellent. What my article does is it shows that by drawing from these unique educational experiences, as well as her own preference for exploration and experimentation, Cavendish emphasized the importance of individualized instruction, intellectual and creative freedom, and access to a variety of texts, disciplines, and pedagogical methods.

[00:04:31] So Margaret Cavendish has enjoyed a bit of a renaissance in recent decades, and with her the study of early women writers in general. An increasing number of scholars in the fields of English literature, drama, philosophy, and history are beginning to take Cavendish and her contemporary seriously. Now, while Cavendish has been known since her lifetime as a significant figure in the history of women's writing, appearing in a number of anthologies over the 18th and 19th centuries, many scholars continue to overlook her as sort of an aristocratic anomaly because of the eccentric nature of her persona and her writing. Now, this was especially true in the 19th century, when male critics invented the myth that she was known as "Mad Madge," right? This myth has unfortunately been perpetuated by some modern liter—feminist, literary scholars, and other scholars as well.

[00:05:20] So what's changed, and what I do differently in this article, is that I take Cavendish seriously from the get-go. I see her uniqueness as a virtue or a strength rather than a liability. And in this way, I challenge some of the scholarship that has dismissed her in the past. Now I do this effectively by reading across and through the entire body of her writing, rather than trying to draw conclusions based on a single book or title. And this is important because Cavendish embraced an aesthetic of "copia," or variety, which means that she often explored topics for multiple, sometimes intentionally contradictory, perspectives. So my article also extends what we know about Cavendish by focusing in on her ideas on education and her advocacy of women's education, more generally, rather than her natural philosophy, her generic experimentation, or her political theories, which have received a bit more, uh, academic, uh, attention. So there are a few other scholars writing about these ideas, including Karen Detlefsen, Lisa Walters, and Marina Leslie, uh, of course all of whom I cite in my article.

[00:06:25] So what I do is that I connect the biographical experiences directly to Cavendish's educational theories. And the best part is that I do so by giving Margaret Cavendish a chance to speak in her own voice, by drawing on her texts repeatedly throughout my article.

[00:06:42] So the mere existence of a female author and natural philosopher as productive and outspoken as Margaret Cavendish is surprising for the 17th century. She really breaks the mold with her wide-ranging coverage and fearless self-promotion. I mean, Cavendish

was an informally-educated woman who was writing and publishing about atomic theory, early modern medicine, microscopy, humoral theory, gender norms, political theory, and she was making distinctions between science and magic well before the Royal Society did so. On top of all of this, she experimented with prose fiction, writing precursors to the early novel, and she demonstrated this prescient understanding for the way that the preface could be used to communicate and direct readers and how they should engage with her texts.

[00:07:31] And on top of all of this, she was repeatedly articulating her support of women's education. Now there's a robust, ongoing debate regarding Cavendish's role as a feminist. When reading across and through her entire corpus, I have found an authentic and surprisingly persistent advocacy for women's education, wellbeing, and freedom writ large.

[00:07:51] Cavendish was most, definitely a feminist of her time. And she was extraordinarily outspoken regarding the fact that women had rational souls, which, of course, was still up for debate at the time, and that they were capable of learning and benefiting from education. Now she extends the ideas of many of the humanist theories of the 16th century who had argued that education prepared men to be more effective, uh, citizens.

[00:08:13] Cavendish argued that educating women would benefit the whole of society since, as logic would suggest, they served as wives and mothers to the men of their country. And of course, women were often in charge of their children's earliest educational expenses. However, Cavendish wasn't just a blind advocate for women. She was also very critical of what she saw as the wastefulness of her aristocratic contemporaries who spent mindless hours, idly playing cards, gossiping about their neighbors, and fawning over their little dogs. And she writes a lot of, uh, fairly funny excerpts, especially in sociable letters about this very problem.

[00:08:49] Cavendish was a very, was very clear that despite being barred from schools and universities, women could and should still educate themselves. They could read, they can contemplate, and they could write on their own. She also believed that women had a great store of specialized, or domestic, knowledge that should be passed onto their children and posterity. So she was really encouraging women to engage intellectually centuries before society allowed them to attend university.

[00:09:16] So the broader implications for studying Cavendish and her role in advocating for women's education are innumerable. Cavendish literally rewrites our understanding of female authorship. She sets herself up as an example to be emulated, and she repeatedly insists that while she may be extraordinary, other women can and should be more intellectual, more creative, and more visible in society. And this idea of visibility is significant because aristocratic women, especially in 17th century England were increasingly limited to the domestic sphere.

[00:09:48] So because of this, Cavendish herself was unable to teach or discuss her ideas publicly. So what she did was that she taught through her texts. That is why in my article I examine a series of strong well-educated and competent heroines that Cavendish creates. For example, Lady Delicia attends lectures at university, like the Dutch pedagogue Ana Maria Von Sherman, um, before pleading and winning a case in court. The She-Anchoret disavows

marriage and goes on to provide instruction to a mem—to all members or walks of society, including philosophers, poets, doctors, and gentlemen. Lady Sanspareille, adores learning, and eventually presents her work in a series of public lectures. Lady Happy designs her own convent, where she and other noble virgins can study any secular subject that pleases them. The Ladies of the Female Academy develop skills and logic reason and public debate, and they're so impressive that the men become so incensed and desperate for their attention that they have to play trumpets to disrupt them.

[00:10:47] And of course, most famously, the Empress of the Blazing World designs her own religious system, she creates and dismantles series of learned societies, she engages in critical debate with her virtuosos, forms her own Kabbalah, and ultimately leads an army and a ruthless warfare to lend aid to a former sovereign. And here's the thing. This list—long as it may seem—is far from exhaustive. Cavendish wrote and published more than a million words, a million words—that's more than Shakespeare. And many of these words are about educated and competent women, so she was really setting the bar and trying to be an example. So, yeah, the broader implications of this study and the general increase in research related to Cabaniss and early women writers is immense.

[00:11:32] Musical interlude

[00:11:35] **Jack Schneider:** The second half of the show is dedicated to thinking about teaching. We ask authors to put on their guest lecturer hats and take students into the weeds. What should they pay attention to, methodologically speaking? What else should they be reading if they want to take a deep dive into the historiography? And where are there opportunities for further research?

[00:11:54] **E. Mariah Spencer:** One of the things that I do differently, as I've mentioned, is that I try to align Cavendish's, biographical experiences with her developing educational theories, and then I expand on these experiences to try to make an argument related to, um, the state of women's education more generally. Cavendish is a bit of a standout, and so we can compare her and contrast her to many of her contemporaries. This is important because as Marina Leslie has pointed out, Cavendish, unlike most women of the 17th century, had some sort of tangential access to just about every form of education than available. So yes, she was privately tutored at home, like most women of her class, but she also spent time at Oxford University as a handmaid to Queen Henrietta Maria.

[00:12:38] She then traveled to France and other parts of Europe on her own sort of Grand Tour, like many of the men of her class before continuing her education under the tutelage of her husband, and his much more learned brother, Sir Charles Cavendish, both of whom received training from the university. Now these two men also hosted a salon while living in Paris that brought together all sorts of luminaries, including Thomas Hobbes and René Descartes.

[00:13:01] In addition to all of this exposure, Cavendish also had access to an expansive library and was the first woman ever to visit the Royal Society. In fact, she predates other women by several centuries. This particular detail is worth providing a bit of historical

context on because Cavendish is fairly famous for criticizing, um, the experimental and mechanical philosophies of many of her contemporaries.

[00:13:24] So on May 30th of 1667, Cavendish appeared before the society, during which time she was presented with a series of demonstrations by Robert Boyle and Robert Hook, Robert Boyle being famous for chemistry's Boyle's law. Of these demonstrations, she was shown the use of the air pump, which measured the weight of air, and the microscope, which of course revealed microscopic worlds for the very first time.

[00:13:48] Now, both of these items were things that Cavendish had criticized in print the year before. Anyone who wants to know a little bit more about that can look at her philosophical treatise Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy, and of course its sister text, The Scientific Utopia: The Blazing World, which contains a fairly humorous satirization of these virtuosos.

[00:14:07] A second note in terms of methodology relates to the idea that I draw on nearly every word Cavendish published in order to provide a richer and more accurate depiction of how her educational theories developed over time. And, of course, I use her own words frequently throughout the article. And this is important because the evidence that we have for early women writers is still so very slim, right? It's been described as, as uh, "scant and anecdotal." Right. So she's a standout in which we can draw some important conclusions. Now, I also link these texts back to the idea that Cavendish was experimenting with and exploring a variety of ideas without ever settling on a single approach to educating women, right? Lots of different ideas that she's exploring. By examining her entire corpus, I avoid the pitfall of proclaiming one position or opinion over another, because that's not what Cavendish was about. Cavendish was about exploring the options and sharing these options with as broad of an audience as possible. And let me tell you, she would be thrilled here by our discussion here today.

[00:15:09] So anyone interested in learning more about the history of humanist educational reform in England, broadly speaking, should, of course, consider reading works by Desiderius Erasmus, Sir Thomas More, Roger Ashcombe, Francis Bacon, John Milton, and John Locke. But these men are all fairly well known. Of less familiarity to most listeners, there were also a number of women who like Cavendish, were exploring the ways in which a broad humanities-based education could and would benefit women. Now I've already noted Ana Maria Von Sherman, but she's worth mentioning again. Von Sherman really laid the groundwork for the argument that women should receive an education. And her treatise on the subject, translated into English in 1659, is “The Learned Maid, or Whether A Maid May Be A Scholar” very likely influenced Cavendish's own work on the subject. Now Martina Van Elk has written about the connections between Cavendish and Von Sherman, so anyone who's interested in this connection should take a look at her work.

[00:16:06] Later in the 17th century, Bathsua Makin laid out a long history of excellent and educated women in her essay “To Revive the Ancient Education of Gentlewomen,” which was published in 1673. Makin is almost always cited for comparing Cavendish favorably to university-trained men. When she writes that Cavendish, by her own genius, rather than any timely instruction, overtops many grave gown men, of course, gown men are men wearing

gowns who've attended university. Makin wrote this essay to advertise her own boarding school for young women, and it's important to note that these boarding schools were becoming increasingly popular at the time. So in the second half of the 17th century, suddenly women were allowed and able to attend school, though they were very strictly, uh, segregated from the men once they achieved the age of about seven.

[00:16:57] Near the end of the 17th century, Mary Astell continued the trend with "A Serious Proposal To The Ladies" published in 1694. In many ways, this text extends the ideas that Cavendish explored fictionally in her "Female Academy in The Convent Of Pleasure" by suggesting the establishment of secular convents for women who wish to become scholars. Astell's work has often been cited as a watershed for feminist history though, as we've discussed, Cavendish predates her by decades.

[00:17:25] Now for a bit more general study on the state of women in 17th century England, I also highly recommend the book *Women in Early Modern England, 1550 to 1720* by Sarah Mendelson and Patricia Crawford. This book has served as a foundational text for a number of more recent studies, um, and really gets into the, uh, archival research, um, and accessing some of those less frequently, uh, discussed texts that women were writing.

[00:17:52] I also recommend the more focused studies of Margaret Ezell, Paul Salzman, and Danielle Clark, among many others. Now, in terms of Cavendish's personal history, for those whose interests are piqued by this, uh, podcast, I recommend Katie Whitaker's excellent biography, *Mad Madge*, as well as Anna Battigelli's *Exiles of the Mind*, and basically anything written by James Fitzmorris.

[00:18:14] So one of the best things about Cavendish is that there's still so much more to learn—and she's one of the best-understood and best-studied of the early women writers. So the field is literally begging for scholars to join, um, join in the, in the effort. So my article barely scratches the surface on the breadth of her creative and intellectual accomplishments.

[00:18:35] Now I may have rattled off what seemed like a long list of strong and competent heroines, but there are literally dozens of other texts, prose, and drama in which Cavendish develops equally compelling female characters. Of course, Cavendish also wrote extensively on theories of the mind and personality. Her essays in *The World's Olio*, her sociable and her philosophical letters, as well as her natural philosophy texts, all contain a wealth of ideas and information that have yet to be adequately examined. For her philosophy of the mind, I especially appreciate the work of the philosopher David Cunning and the historian Lisa Sarason. In terms of the broader field of early women writers, Cavendish is, well, maybe the most extraordinary example, only one of many intelligent and creative women who were writing their ideas down for posterity.

[00:19:24] Thanks to digital resources, it has literally never been easier to study the writings of early modern women. For example, uh, the Early English Books Online [repository] provides facsimile images of nearly every printed book prior to 1700, including those written by women. Uh, The Women Writers Project, which is based out of Northeastern University, offers full transcriptions of printed texts by women prior to 1850. And almost all of those

texts are available online through their, uh, Women Writers Online Collection. The Perdita Project contains digital images of hundreds of early modern women's manuscripts, many of which have received almost no critical or scholarly attention.

[00:20:03] Um, so there's all kinds of opportunity to see, uh, the literacy levels of, uh, women, including women who weren't necessarily aristocratic. And that's where most of our evidence exists. And then if you're interested in, um, another of Cavendish's contemporaries, an individual named Hester Pulter. The Pulter Project based out of Northwestern University makes accessible for the first time a collection of her poems. Uh, and this project is unique because it offers multiple versions of each poem, commentary notes, as well as images of original manuscript pages. And specific to Cavendish studies, The Digital Cavendish is an amazing resource that provides a robust bibliography, links and access to a number of digitized texts, teaching resources, as well as bibliographic data and visualizations that will assist researchers in locating physical copies of Cavendish's books. And it's important to note, there are over 800 of these books surviving from the 17th century. And finally, Liza Blake has created this excellent digital critical edition of Cavendish's, first publication, Poems and Fancies, which collates and compares the substantial editorial changes made to the poems across the books' three editions. This project is significant because it has proven that Cavendish was much more active in the printing and presentation of her works than previously acknowledged. So again, Margaret Cavendish is rewriting our understanding of female authorship and the uses to which female education was being put.

[00:21:26] So I know there are probably a number of important resources and scholars that I haven't mentioned here. But I'll go ahead and leave it there for today

[00:23:34] Musical interlude

[00:23:36] **Jack Schneider:** Check out *History of Education Quarterly* online. The journal is published by Cambridge University Press and it's carried by most academic libraries. You should also be sure to follow *HEQ* Twitter handle: @histedquarterly, which regularly sends out free read-only versions of articles, and the show's Twitter handle @HEQandA. And don't forget, subscribe to the show so you don't miss forthcoming episodes. We're available on iTunes, Stitcher, and wherever you get your podcasts. HEQ&A is produced at the University of Massachusetts Lowell. Our producer is Jennifer Berkshire and our theme music is by Ryan Shaw. I'm Jack Schneider. Thanks for joining us.