Teaching Margaret Cavendish’s Philosophy: Early Modern Women and the Question of Biography

Peter West
Northeastern University London, westp@tcd.ie

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Abstract
In my contribution to this Concise Collection on Margaret Cavendish, I focus on teaching Cavendish's work in the context of philosophy (and, more specifically, Early Modern Philosophy). I have three aims. First, to explain why teaching women from philosophy's history is crucially important to the discipline. Second, to outline my own reflections on teaching Cavendish's philosophy. Third, to defend a specific claim about the benefits of teaching Cavendish to philosophy students; namely, that introducing biographical detail alongside philosophical ideas enriches the learning experience.

Keywords
Cavendish, philosophy, pedagogy, women in philosophy

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Cover Page Footnote
Thanks to participants and attendees at a roundtable event on Teaching Margaret Cavendish at the International Margaret Cavendish Society Conference 2021 for thoughtful comments, and to E Mariah Spencer for inviting me to contribute to this Concise Collection.

This pedagogy is available in ABO: Interactive Journal for Women in the Arts, 1640-1830: https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/abo/vol14/iss1/7
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While Cavendish has been an established figure in literary scholarship for some time, the body of philosophical scholarship on her work is considerably smaller. Secondary literature on Cavendish’s philosophy largely emerged in the 1990s, although there was a tendency in that literature to compare or connect Cavendish to more canonical philosophers like Hobbes, Descartes, or Leibniz. The 2000s saw a breakthrough of secondary literature examining Cavendish’s unique contributions to early modern philosophy, including two Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy editions of Cavendish’s work: Observations upon Experimental Philosophy (O’Neill) and a collection of political writings (“Introduction”). Both are fantastic teaching resources which made her work more accessible to new scholars. This trajectory towards greater coverage of Cavendish’s philosophy has been part of a wider attempt to recover the work of women in the history of philosophy, spurred on, most notably, by Eileen O’Neill’s paper “Disappearing Ink,” in which she documents the vast number of treatises written by women, as well as histories of women philosophers, across the early modern era. O’Neill’s paper emphasizes that the male-dominated canon of early modern philosophy is, if nothing else, historically inaccurate (see also Atherton; Gordon-Roth and Kendrick). Today, Cavendish is one of the most discussed early modern women philosophers, although the body of secondary literature on her work remains smaller than those focusing on the likes of Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Locke, Berkeley, or Hume (Shapiro 365).

Relative to her contemporaries, Cavendish’s philosophical system is unorthodox. She rejects many Cartesian principles that were a mainstay of seventeenth-century thought. For instance, in Observations, Cavendish argues against Descartes’ view that motion can be transferred between bodies (Cavendish 74). She argues that only physical “substances” can be transferred from one thing to another—water, for example, can be transferred from a bottle to a glass. But motion is not a substance and so cannot really be transferred between bodies. Consequently, Cavendish maintains that bodies must move themselves; they possess what she calls a principle of self-motion. Cavendish also sets herself against many of the positions held by Thomas Hobbes, whose philosophy, at first glance, looks to be closest to her worldview (see O’Neill xiii; Hutton 421-22). Both Cavendish and Hobbes are “materialists;” they believe that the only kinds of things that exist in nature are...
material. Yet, Hobbes, like Descartes, maintained that objects move one another mechanically, in roughly the same way that one domino moves another by bumping into it.

In what follows, I argue that there are several benefits, for learners and educators alike, of incorporating Cavendish’s work into philosophy syllabi. To begin, however, I explain why teaching women in the history of philosophy is crucial for philosophy as a discipline.

The importance of teaching women in the history of philosophy

As the discipline currently stands, there is a discrepancy between the number of men and women engaging with philosophy at an advanced level. There are various ways of explaining this discrepancy including implicit biases. However, one explanation is that it is philosophy’s self-image that is the problem. This explanation can go in one of two ways (although they are not mutually exclusive). First, preconceptions about who philosophy is for and what philosophers are like might discourage women from engaging with philosophy beyond a certain level. Second, the same preconceptions might also foster implicit bias against women (e.g., in hiring panels).

One issue that can hamper initiatives intended to show that many women are philosophers, and many philosophers are women, is that the traditional canon of the history of philosophy is stacked against them. Prior to any sustained engagement with philosophy, if asked to name a philosopher, people typically pick out figures like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, and perhaps Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, and Russell (Gordon-Roth and Kendrick 366; “Recovering” 268). If any philosophers are household names, it is likely to be these. The “canon” of philosophy’s history is almost entirely composed of men.

Testimonies from educators in philosophy indicate that teaching women in the history of philosophy can re-shape this image of philosophy (Gordon-Roth and Kendrick 364). It may well take a lot more than just a reshaping of the canon to keep women in philosophy, but scholarship and teaching that focuses on women in philosophy’s history can make it clear to learners—by showing, and not just telling—that women are an equally important part of the discipline as men. Teaching focused on Cavendish’s philosophy is part of this endeavor. Her work challenges preconceptions about the trajectory of early modern philosophy and about the kinds of positions that were defended by thinkers in the period.

Teaching Cavendish

I have taught Cavendish at four institutions, although the student demographics across these institutions do not significantly differ. All four institutions engage in undergraduate and postgraduate teaching as well as
research. The students I have taught have typically been from middle- to upper-income households in Britain and Ireland. Students in survey courses typically take these courses to meet degree requirements (e.g., students studying for philosophy, politics, and economics degrees), while students in advanced courses typically take them as part of a philosophy-specific degree track.

I outline three specific ways that I have taught Cavendish’s philosophy. The first incorporates Cavendish into survey courses of early modern philosophy. The second is as part of a course dedicated to women in early modern philosophy. The third approach is a text-specific course that is almost exclusively dedicated to a piece (or pieces) of Cavendish’s philosophical writing.

In my own early modern survey courses, I introduce Cavendish’s argument for the view that all parts of nature have life and knowledge (Cavendish 39) and her more specific arguments against the primary-secondary quality distinction (Cavendish 89). Both exemplify Cavendish’s break with typical narratives of early modern philosophy after Descartes. Cavendish’s criticisms of the experimental method in Observations (Cavendish 48–53) also provide an opportunity to show learners how the now-familiar divisions between philosophy and the sciences did not exist in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

In my current institution, Northeastern University London, I am afforded two 90-minute sessions a week for this course. Each week, the first section takes the form of what would be best characterized as an interactive lecture or a content-heavy seminar. The second session is largely focused on philosophy writing skills (for institutional purposes, this course is marked as a “Writing Intensive” course), with a particular focus on skills appropriate to the history of philosophy, such as reconstructing arguments (a set of premises and a conclusion) from historical texts and evaluating those arguments in the context of assumptions and worldviews contemporary to their publication. In my “lecture” or seminar, I begin with a whole class discussion (class size is approximately 25-30 students) prompted by a broad, general question that does not require any engagement with set readings. I use open questions to get students thinking critically about the topic at hand, without worrying (for the time being) about whether they have understood the essential readings correctly. So, for example, I might begin a session on Cavendish’s philosophy of color with a question like, “Do you think that colors really exist out there in the world?” or “What reasons might there be for thinking that colors exist only in our minds? Does that view make any sense to you?” I will then usually run through some lecture content, introducing early modern debates about colors and primary versus secondary qualities of objects, before finally drawing on Cavendish’s own arguments, which students have been assigned to read.
Following the lecture content, I then split students into smaller groups and give them a specific assessment-orientated task, such as developing an objection to one of the premises of Cavendish’s argument. By the end of this first session, students have (a) thought critically about the philosophical topic at hand, (b) demonstrated their understanding of the essential readings, and (c) developed, in groups, ideas that could then be put to use in a summative assessment.

Beyond the survey, Cavendish can be central to a course on women in Early modern philosophy, situated among other thinkers such as Anne Conway (1631-1679) and Mary Shepherd (1777-1847). I taught such a course at University College Dublin, titled “Early modern Women on Knowledge and Nature.” This course sought to do more than give learners an overview of a historical era or chart the development of philosophical ideas over time. Instead, it aimed at enacting the kind of change section one pointed towards in terms of the “image” of philosophy. For a start, the mere fact that one can design a course on early modern women philosophers, and that there are already suitable textbooks available, is an effective way of showing, and not just telling, that there were early modern women doing philosophy.

I designed this course to be more in-depth than a survey course, allowing for more time to consider Cavendish’s wider aims and motivations, to explore the development of her ideas across time, and to situate her work alongside her contemporaries. I wanted to avoid presenting Cavendish as a mere respondent to more canonical figures. This presented something of a challenge, as I was (like many course leaders) used to framing early modern courses around familiar debates (Gordon-Roth and Kendrick 370-371). This leaves educators with two options: develop a new narrative around which to center the work of women philosophers or take a less narrative-centric approach. I chose to adopt a topic-centric approach centered around questions like, “What can we know about the external world?” and “To what degree can we know about the external world?” I also made sure that learners paid attention to the similarities and differences between different thinkers’ views. In my experience (based on my own course evaluations), learners appreciate being presented with ideas and arguments that are, in some sense, in “dialogue” with one another. Assignments for this kind of course could even ask learners to imagine how different thinkers would respond to one another’s ideas. For the year ahead, as I write this, I plan to assess students by asking them to put early modern thinkers in dialogue (see Appendix I for sample assessments). Finally, it is worth noting that sometimes—if only for historical accuracy—some recourse to the views of canonical men may be necessary. Very few philosophical ideas arise from a vacuum; this is true of the ideas of both men and women. Nonetheless, it is possible to introduce such canonical figures as motivating factors or catalysts for women like Cavendish, Conway, and Shepherd to develop their own theories, without presenting these women as mere critics.
In the context of a course dedicated to a single author and text, I chose to focus on Cavendish’s *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* (1666) because there is an accessible *Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy* edition with a helpful editor’s introduction (O’Neill). This edition also modernizes spelling and punctuation, thus removing what can often be an obstacle for learners who are not used to engaging with historical texts. One of the advantages of this approach is that learners can get a real sense of Cavendish’s writing style, her priorities, as well as the implicit lines of reasoning, or methodological assumptions, that lie behind many of her commitments.

To reinforce the originality of Cavendish’s thought, and her contributions to the history of philosophy, I dedicate one two-hour session to Cavendish’s novel, *The Blazing World* (1666), which was sometimes published alongside her *Observations*. While it is a fascinating text, *The Blazing World* is an anachronistic piece of writing and can be a little difficult for students to digest. In order to provide some scaffolding for students, I offer several questions to consider as they read. These questions include, “What message does *The Blazing World* send about the role of women in society?” and “Why might Cavendish have included herself as a character in *The Blazing World*?”

Typically, I find that students are well-attuned to the possible feminist (or proto-feminist) messages of the novel. Given the context of women’s writing in the early modern period, students pick up on the significance of the fact that the Empress is able to structure the society of the Blazing World as she sees fit. On the other hand, it usually doesn’t go unnoticed by students that the Empress is only able to do so at the discretion of her husband, the Emperor. It isn’t always obvious to students why—beyond the simple fact of it being an entertaining plot twist—Cavendish includes herself in the novel. But some context can help. For example, I remind students that Cavendish’s *Philosophical Letters* (1664) are a correspondence between herself and an imagined lady, and that Cavendish hoped to be a famous writer but failed (at least in her lifetime). Students are then relatively quick to consider that Cavendish’s aim appears to be to make a point about the attention that was (or wasn’t) paid to women by their male contemporaries (the Empress is told that Hobbes and Descartes would not be interested in helping her write philosophy, but that Margaret Cavendish would be). Secondary literature, such as David Cunning’s “Margaret Cavendish on the metaphysics of imagination and the dramatic force of the imaginary world” or my own article “Margaret Cavendish on the Power of Debating with Yourself” also helps students see what is going on in the background of the novel.

Asking learners to read what is ostensibly a piece of literature alongside a more formal philosophical treatise encourages learners to reflect on what
counts as philosophy. Can a fantasy story count as philosophy? Why or why not? Typically, courses in the history of philosophy rarely stray beyond formal philosophical treatises. But I have found that asking learners to read literature as philosophy can provoke meta-philosophical reflections on where the boundaries of philosophy lie. One benefit of this kind of insight is that the more we widen the scope of what counts as philosophy, the more likely we are to take seriously the contributions of those thinkers who lie outside the traditional canon. Thus, there is a kind of feedback loop in place: the more non-canonical work we read, the more we widen the canon.

The question of biography

When it comes to teaching and scholarship on women in the history of philosophy, a question arises about how much biographical detail to include, alongside their philosophical ideas. One reason why it’s tempting to include some biographical detail is that, unlike canonical figures such as Plato, Aristotle, Hume, or Wittgenstein, women philosophers are less likely to be familiar to a general audience (by virtue of having been excluded from the traditional canon). In other words, since their inclusion in research and teaching is part of an attempt to make them better-known, it seems like we should provide information on who these thinkers were. One might also argue that, since the aim is to emphasize that women are philosophers, it is important to make it clear that such thinkers were women – as well as draw attention to the challenges they surmounted to become philosophers. However, Jessica Gordon-Roth and Nancy Kendrick, in “Recovering Early modern Writers: Some Tensions,” have argued that introducing women philosophers along with biographical details about their lives is in fact detrimental to the wider project of recovery work in the history of philosophy. It is worth noting at this point that Gordon-Roth and Kendrick’s argument is targeted at scholarship rather than teaching. But I take it that some of the same concerns could also be levelled at teaching that does the same thing. In both cases, the concern lies in an imbalance between the amount of airtime that women’s lives receive compared to the amount of time spent introducing the biographical details of canonical men.

Gordon-Roth and Kendrick’s case is made against the backdrop of pre-existing implicit biases against women in philosophy. As it stands, women face the challenge of not being seen as philosophers simply by virtue of their being women – and the same kinds of implicit biases hold in philosophy’s history, meaning that women are to some extent prima facie excluded from the canon of history. That means we ought to be especially sensitive to the influence of such biases when engaging in scholarship and teaching that focuses on women in the history of philosophy. However, Gordon-Roth and Kendrick argue that by introducing women philosophers along with biographical details about their lives, we are in danger of doing the opposite.
As they put it, “[i]n so doing, we may be triggering our audiences to reject these women as philosophers, and their texts as philosophical” (“Recovering” 270). The problem, as Gordon-Roth and Kendrick see it, is that this does not occur when it comes to those figures who are already part of the canon. Scholarly audiences, and even learners, are more likely to know Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, or Russell, and thus there is less of a need to introduce them. But the imbalance that emerges as a result means that the extra biographical detail that often accompanies introductions to women philosophers can act as a signal that these figures are different; perhaps they are not really philosophers, or they are less important philosophers or exceptions to the canon.

I think Gordon-Roth and Kendrick are right that avoiding this imbalance is crucial. To show that philosophy is as much for women as it is for men, the history of philosophy ought to demonstrate that women are philosophers as much as and in the same way that men are. The authors note that one way to address this balance is to include more biographical details on men (“Recovering” 281). Gordon-Roth and Kendrick point out some problems with taking this approach in scholarship – for example, there is a risk of scholarship becoming repetitive. However, such problems do not arise when one adopts a more biographical approach to teaching. For a start, consider that, unlike those working in historical scholarship, the problem of repetition is unlikely to arise for learners. Consider the three approaches to teaching Cavendish I outlined in section two. In each case, it is likely that learners either have not encountered Cavendish before (e.g., those in a survey course) or have not had the opportunity to get to know her in detail. Furthermore, in my experience, including biographical details on the figures covered in history of philosophy courses can enrich the student experience and, more specifically, enable learners to think critically about the ideas and theories with which they are being presented. For instance, several learners have told me that they find it difficult to think critically about philosophical arguments that feel very remote (i.e., those from several hundred years ago). It can be difficult enough to comprehend the arguments in historical texts, let alone make a pronouncement about whether they are successful. However, I have found that letting learners in on which aspects of thinkers’ lives might have sparked their interest in a certain topic can inspire students to draw on aspects of their own lives or experiences to critically respond to them. For example, Gordon-Roth and Kendrick pick up on the fact that Anne Conway’s chronic headaches are often presented as an explanation of why she rejects Descartes’ sharp mind-body distinction and worry that doing so might give the impression that her response is unphilosophical (“Recovering” 275). I agree that it would be a mistake to oversimplify Conway’s argument in this way: there is a sophisticated philosophical argument behind her opposition to Descartes. However, several learners have told me that Conway’s use of this example, which does seem to have (at the very least) been connected by her personal
experiences, gave them an insight into how they might use their own experiences to think critically about the philosophical arguments they were being presented with.

I think there is similarly a benefit to considering Cavendish’s philosophy within the wider context of her own life. For instance, throughout her work, Cavendish plays with form. She writes philosophical “letters” between herself and an imagined lady, presents philosophical dialogues between two “parts of her own mind,” and includes herself as a character in *The Blazing World*. One explanation for why she adopts these different forms of writing – all of which involve some kind of “talking to oneself” – is that she received very little critical engagement from her own contemporaries. In other words, she was not taken seriously as a philosopher in her own right. Consequently, Cavendish can be seen as having taken things into her own hands by responding and critically engaging with herself.¹⁴ This aligns with the idea, present throughout Cavendish’s writing, such as in “The She-Anchoret” published in *Nature’s Pictures* (1656), that part of what it is to be an intellectual is to have an audience that takes one seriously.

To my mind, drawing on a thinker’s own personal experiences and biographical details can help learners to engage in critical thinking and find alternative ways in to a philosophical system. To that extent, it seems clear to me that, when teaching women in the history of philosophy, biographical detail, if it is employed in an appropriate way, can enrich the learning experience. Within my own teaching, that means drawing attention to relevant biographical details when it can help students to understand what is motivating a philosopher’s ideas, and even using the details of philosopher’s life to help emphasize the significance of their philosophical work. For instance, given the educational inequalities faced by women in comparison to men in early modern Britain, that Cavendish was able to produce such an expansive body of philosophical work is even more impressive. On the other hand, I am careful not to fall into the kind of malpractice described by Gordon-Roth and Kendrick; that would involve focusing only on women’s biographical details. In other words, if a biographical approach is taken when it comes to women, it must also be taken with regard to men. There is a historical pattern of regarding men as more rational, which it is important to overcome.¹⁵

**Conclusion**

I have argued that by making the decision to teach Cavendish’s philosophy (along with the work of other historical women philosophers) in early modern philosophy courses, educators can contribute to the ongoing and much-needed project of reshaping the image of philosophy. I outlined three ways of teaching Cavendish in the context of early modern philosophy (although this list is not exhaustive): by including her in a survey course, by designing a course on

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early modern women, or by teaching a course focused specifically on Cavendish’s philosophy. Finally, I argued that while Gordon-Roth and Kendrick are right to raise concerns about how biographical detail about women philosophers is treated in historical scholarship, it can enrich the learning experience if employed in the right way while teaching. This applies to Cavendish as well as many of her contemporaries. After all, in the words of Susan Stebbing (another woman philosopher who is typically neglected by the canon), it is “persons who think, not purely rational spirits” (Stebbing 21).

Notes

1 This essay contributes to Part I of the “Concise Collection on Teaching the Works of Margaret Cavendish,” guest edited by E Mariah Spencer, Aphra Behn Online, vol. 14, no. 1, 2024. To read the essays in this collection, follow this link: https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/abo/vol14/iss1/. Part II will be published in Fall 2024.

2 See for example, Clucas, Jolley, and Hutton; an exception is James. For a general overview of Cavendish’s parallel reception in literary studies, see James Fitzmaurice’s contribution to this collection.

3 See for example, James, Cunning, Michaelian, and Detlefsen.

4 For statistics on gender imbalance in the UK, see Beebee and Saul. For the US, see Gordon-Roth and Kendrick.

5 See for example Gordon-Roth and Kendrick, and Warnock and Baggini. Beebee and Saul’s advice for educators is: “do anything you can to make learners aware that there are women philosophers” (15).

6 For an overview, see Bolton.

7 This course focused on metaphysics and epistemology. One may wish to focus such a course on other themes, such as politics, feminism, or society. Doing so would allow one to incorporate other early modern women like Mary Astell (1666-1731) or Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797).

8 See for example, Thomas.

9 I am aware that some educators set this kind of assignment already, but it is conceivable that putting two or more women in dialogue might enforce the point that there is no necessary connection between men and philosophy.

10 These assessments are designed for the early modern philosophy survey course which I am teaching this year (2023/24) at Northeastern University London. Its theme is “philosophy in dialogue.”

11 A traditional approach to teaching early modern philosophy (one that remains popular, even if its popularity is declining) is by dividing the key figures of the period into “empiricists” and “rationalists.” However, as I have noted elsewhere (“Some Thoughts”) figures like Cavendish, Conway, and Shepherd do not easily fall into either of these categories. Thus, the rationalist-empiricist narrative is unavailable when designing a course on early modern women. If nothing else, this reveals that this traditional “narrative” is clearly designed to emphasize the contributions of those who fit into it and will inevitably minimize the contributions of those who do not.
12 By describing the Blazing World as “anachronistic” here, I simply mean that the writing style and prose is not always an easy read for the twenty-first-century reader. The conventions of seventeenth-century prose are not the same as they are today. I have often found that when I describe to friends – let alone students – the central plot points of the Blazing World, they find it fascinating. In many ways, it is an extremely modern novel; Cavendish’s inclusion of herself pre-empts postmodern “meta” turns in fiction (such as Alasdair Grey’s Lanark or Paul Auster’s New York Trilogy, where the authors include themselves as characters), and the “Platonic” relationship between the Empress, Cavendish, and the Duke of Newcastle comes across as very modern. Yet, the actual experience of reading the book can be somewhat arduous. For that reason, I have found it is important to provide learners with guidance on which parts of the text they ought to pay attention to and which parts can, for practical purposes, be “skimmed.”

13 Helpful secondary literature on philosophical themes in the Blazing World include Cunning’s “Margaret Cavendish on the metaphysics of imagination and the dramatic force of the imaginary world” and Susan James’ “Hermaphroditical Mixtures: Margaret Cavendish on Nature and Art.”

14 See also Cavendish’s remark in Worlds Olio (1655): “I have not tied my self to any one Opinion, for sometimes one Opinion crosses another; and in so doing, I do as most several Writers do; onely they contradict one and another, and I contradict, or rather please my self, with the varieties of Opinions whatsoever” (sig. T3r).

15 Thanks to David Cunning for pressing me on this point.

Works Cited


Appendix: Sample Assessment Tasks

These assessment tasks are designed to fit the requirements of my institution (Northeastern University London). Other institutions/contexts may allow for greater flexibility in terms of, for example, the size of student groups or word counts.

Assessment Task 1: Dialogue Presentation

In groups of two, students must decide on two philosophers in this course to put in dialogue. Students must then write a dialogue or correspondence between these two philosophers.

Each group will then read out both dialogues in class with one member of the group taking on the role of one of the philosophers in the dialogue or correspondence.

The dialogues will be assessed in terms of:

- How charitably and fairly both sides of the argument are presented.
- The attention paid to the premises of each philosopher’s arguments.
- Creativity (e.g., in terms of content covered or philosophers chosen).
- Whether the dialogue shows familiarity with the language and terminology of early modern philosophy.
- The use of original examples.

Dialogues will be read out in class time. A script for the dialogue must be submitted in advance. If a student does not show up, then the course leader or another class member will read out the other half of the dialogue.

Presentations will not be assessed based on how confidently they are read, but the language employed should be as clear as possible.

Assessment Task 2: Written Essay

Students must write a 2000-word essay that critically evaluates an argument by putting two philosophers covered in this course in dialogue with one another.

The essay must do two things:

1. Outline an argument from one of the philosophers covered in this course.
2. Critically evaluate that argument by appealing to the views of another philosopher covered in this course.

Students must identify the premises of the argument they are critically evaluating and argue for their own conclusion about whether that argument is convincing.