

Chapter 11

EPICURUS AND GENDER IN THE BRITISH NEWCASTLE CIRCLE: CHARLETON, HOBBES AND MARGARET CAVENDISH

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reCENT sCholar shIP has increasingly been investigating the important role of Epicurean philosophy within the Renaissance intellectual milieu. While Reid Barbour demonstrates how Epicureanism was an influence in Stuart England,¹ Adam Rzepka points out that “Lucretius’s dissemination in England was remarkably fragmentary” and it was not until the 1650s that atomism, inspired by Epicurus, “became a pervasive public factor in the development of the English sciences.”² The Newcastle circle was particularly instrumental in rekindling Epicurean philosophy throughout Europe during the mid-seventeenth century. Catherine Wilson explains that the “Cavendish salon in Paris in the mid-1640s, overseen by Margaret, her husband William, and his brother, the mathematician Charles Cavendish, was the center of a revival of Epicureanism led by Hobbes and Gassendi.”³ Richard Kroll notes that Pierre Gassendi was “the age’s single most important catalyst in the neo-Epicurean revival.”⁴ However, less attention is given to how British members of the Newcastle circle such as Walter Charleton, Thomas Hobbes, and Margaret Cavendish assimilated and modified Epicurean ideas, thereby contributing to significant changes in the intellectual landscape of seventeenth-century Britain.⁵ This included an increased interest by women in natural philosophy. Wilson notes that women such as Margaret Cavendish, Lucy Hutchinson, and Aphra Behn were particularly drawn to Epicurean philosophy, but the “attraction of women to Epicureanism is a topic that has been little explored and even less explained.”⁶ Indeed, scholarship, to date, has neglected the significant role that women had in introducing Epicurean atomism to Britain. This chapter aims to address this neglected issue, as it investigates the ways

1 Reid Barbour, *English Epicures and Stoics: Ancient Legacies in Early Stuart Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998).

2 Adam Rzepka, “Discourse Ex Nihilo,” in *Dynamic Reading: Studies in the Reception of Epicureanism*, ed. Brooke Holmes and W. H. Shearin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 113–32, 113–14.

3 Catherine Wilson, *Epicureanism at the Origins of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 27.

4 Richard Kroll, *The Material Word: Literate Culture in The Restoration and Early Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 15.

5 Charleton was a friend and correspondent of both Hobbes and Margaret Cavendish.

6 Wilson, *Epicureanism at the Origins of Modernity*, 262.

that Charleton, Hobbes, and Margaret Cavendish explore a central element of Epicurean philosophy: pleasure. In doing so, these thinkers reconsider the meaning of justice, marriage, and sexuality in ways that opened up different avenues for conceptualizing gender, which may have been appealing to women intellectuals. Hence this article will argue not only that the Newcastle circle was influential in paving the way for women's broader participation in philosophy but also that their exploration of Epicurean ethics held significant implications for gender.

Walter Charleton was the first person to publish English translations of Epicurean philosophy when he published *The Darknes of Atheism Dispelled* (1652) and *Physiologia Epicuro-Gassendo-Charletoniana* (1654), which were selective translations from Gassendi's *Animadversiones*, published in 1648.⁷ Around the same time, in 1653, Margaret Cavendish published a philosophical treatise titled *Philosophical Fancies* as well as *Poems, and Fancies* (1653), the latter being a literary text modelled after Lucretius's *De rerum natura* as it explored atomism, science, and nature mostly in poetic form. Nonetheless, Cavendish receives little recognition for being the first person to put forward an original theory of Epicurean atomism in Britain.⁸ Although Cavendish, despite her prolific writings, is generally not regarded as a figure that was influential in the seventeenth-century intellectual milieu, the evidence suggests otherwise. To overlook her influence is to obstruct a broader view of the Newcastle circle's influence upon seventeenth-century science, literature, and culture. Her Epicurean texts clearly created a stir and inspired a number of her contemporaries. While discussing her "Incomparable POEMS," based upon Epicurean ideas, George Etherege wrote in a poem that Cavendish's "Fame" in her own "Countrey has no Bounds!"⁹ In 1653, the very year her atomic philosophy and poetry was first published, Robert Creyghtone enthusiastically initiated a correspondence with Cavendish, asserting that if "those Antients [were] now alive, who first discoursed of Atomes, Matter, Form, and other Ingredients of the Worlds Fabrick, they would hang their Heads, confounded to see a Lady of most Honourable Extraction, in Prime of youth, amidst a thousand fasheries of greatness, say more of their own Mysteries."¹⁰ During the same year, Dorothy Osborne also explained that she had not read Cavendish yet but was aware that her books were being discussed and was desperate for a copy: "let me ask you if you have seen a book of poems newly come out, made by my Lady Newcastle? For God's sake if you meet with it send it me; they say 'tis ten times more extravagant than her dress. Sure, the poor woman is a little distracted, she

⁷ Lisa Sarasohn, *Gassendi's Ethics: Freedom in a Mechanistic Universe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 173.

⁸ For an account of Cavendish's atomism, see chap. 2 of Lisa T. Sarasohn, *The Natural Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish: Reason and Fancy during the Scientific Revolution* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 34–53.

⁹ George Etherege, "To the most Illustrious and most Excellent Princess," in *Letters and Poems in Honour of the Incomparable Princess, Margaret, Dutchess of Newcastle*, ed. William Cavendish (London, 1676), 153.

¹⁰ Robert Creyghtone, "Utrecht, Dec. 2. 1653," in *Letters and Poems*, ed. William Cavendish, 87.

could never be so ridiculous as to venture at writing books, and in verse too.”¹¹ Although Osborne was incredulous about a woman having the audacity to publish philosophical ideas about atoms in verse, Cavendish later would be the first woman invited to attend a session of the Royal Society, an event that drew large crowds of people.

It is important to recognize, as Lisa Sarasohn points out, that women “did not write natural philosophy in the seventeenth century. To do so was not only revolutionary but even unnatural, a complete blurring of the gendered characteristic considered inherent in the male and female.”¹² While it is true that women contributed to the Republic of Letters and figured prominently in salons,¹³ before Cavendish, British women did not publish philosophical treatises about natural philosophy. Nonetheless, a number of men in the Newcastle circle broke convention by encouraging Cavendish’s intellectual pursuits. Her husband William and her brother-in-law Charles mentored and educated her.¹⁴ Hence Cavendish thanked Charles in a preface to her first publication, *Philosophical Fancies* (1653), and dedicated *Poems, and Fancies* to him, referring to Charles as her “patron” who provided the work with “Protection.”¹⁵ In addition, her husband endorsed both publications on the frontpieces. Thus both Cavendish brothers publicly endorsed the first treatises of natural philosophy published by a woman in Britain. Charleton, who encouraged Cavendish’s work in his correspondences with her,¹⁶ also publicly endorsed Cavendish’s work to the Royal Society when he explained to his male peers that Cavendish has “Convinced the world, by her own heroic example, that no studies are too hard for her softer sex, and that ladies are capable of our admiration as well for their science as for their beauty.”¹⁷ Anna Battigelli argues that Cavendish herself suggests in *The Worlds Olio* (1655) that the Newcastle salon was a crucial influence upon her writings.¹⁸ Sadly for us, Hobbes and Descartes did not correspond directly about philosophy with Cavendish, but John Evelyn, another associate of the Newcastle circle, who in

11 Dorothy Osborne, “Letter 17,” in *Letters from Dorothy Osborne to Sir William Temple, 1652–54*, ed. Edward Abbott Parry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 96, 97.

12 Sarasohn, *Natural Philosophy*, 15.

13 See Carol Pal, *Republic of Women: Rethinking the Republic of Letters in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). For details about women’s involvement in Parisian salons, see Londa Schiebinger, *The Mind Has No Sex? Women in the Origins of Modern Science* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 30–32.

14 Anna Battigelli, *Margaret Cavendish and the Exiles of the Mind* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998), 46.

15 Margaret Cavendish, “To Sir Charles Cavendish,” in *Philosophical Fancies* (London, 1653) and Margaret Cavendish, “The Epistle Dedicatory: To Sir Charles Cavendish,” in *Poems, and Fancies* (London, 1653).

16 Charleton’s letters to Cavendish can be found in *Letters and Poems*, ed. William Cavendish, 1676.

17 Katie Whitaker, *Mad Madge: The Extraordinary Life of Margaret Cavendish* (New York: Basic, 2002), 315.

18 Battigelli, *Margaret Cavendish*, 46. Cavendish discusses how if it were not for the conversations she was exposed to, “I should never have writ of so many things.” Margaret Cavendish, “The Epistle,” in *The World’s Olio* (London, 1655).

1656 translated the first book of Lucretius, asserted that Cavendish demonstrates that "There is no sex in the mind."¹⁹

With the encouragement of men in the Newcastle circle, Cavendish became a pioneer in changing women's relation to philosophy. For example, Lucy Hutchinson was the first person to translate the entire *De rerum natura* by Lucretius into English. Although Hutchinson was translating *De rerum natura* in the 1650s, she was most probably directly influenced by Cavendish's atomist texts published in 1653. Wilson suggests that "it is conceivable that Hutchinson herself showed Cavendish some passages from her secret Lucretius translation, or that Cavendish encouraged Hutchinson's interests, for the two women knew each other."²⁰ However, Dmitri Levitin argues that Hutchinson began her translation by as late as 1658,²¹ so it is more likely that Cavendish was the figure that influenced Hutchinson, particularly since Cavendish was the first English woman to publish a philosophical treatise in 1653.²² Another man from the Newcastle circle who encouraged women's interest in Epicureanism was John Evelyn, whose wife, Mary, designed the frontpiece of his translation of Lucretius in 1656, thereby participating in the introduction of Epicurean ideas to a mass readership.²³

Following Lucy Hutchinson's translation of Lucretius, in 1682 Thomas Creech published another translation, which was immediately reprinted the following year. Aphra Behn not only wrote a poem for Creech's second edition, she also translated Bernard de Fontenelle's *A Discovery of New Worlds* (1688), which explored the Epicurean theory of multiple worlds. Epicurus (341–270 bCe) argued that atoms can produce infinite worlds that resemble our own or that can be entirely unlike our own, so that "there is no obstacle to the unlimitedness of worlds."²⁴ The numerous translations of Lucretius that were emerging during this period, as well as the interest in the possibility of multiple worlds, demonstrate that Epicurean ideas were increasingly gaining popularity in Britain for both men and women, in part due to the influence of the Newcastle circle, including Margaret Cavendish.

While it is true that women were important correspondents in the Republic of Letters, and the Cambridge Platonist Henry More encouraged and mentored Ann Conway as early as 1650 (her philosophical treatise was published posthumously in 1690), nonetheless, the Newcastle men were unusually open and encouraging of women's

¹⁹ Quoted in Whitaker, *Mad Madge*, 315.

²⁰ Wilson, *Epicureanism at the Origins of Modernity*, 28.

²¹ Dmitri Levitin, *Ancient Wisdom in the Age of the New Science: Histories of Philosophy in England, c. 1640–1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 335.

²² Cavendish also published the first English biography written by a woman, a trend then followed by Hutchinson, who later wrote a biography of her husband.

²³ It is significant that Charleton, a prominent member of the Royal Society, later translated Cavendish's biography into Latin, thereby showing his public support not only for William but also for Cavendish's other intellectual endeavours.

²⁴ Epicurus, "Letter to Herodotus," in *The Epicurus Reader: Selected Writing and Testimonials*, trans. and ed. Brand Inwood and L. P. Gerson (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), 8.

pursuit of philosophy. Hence it is important to recognize their contribution not only to Epicurean thought and modernity but also to women's involvement in philosophy. Most of Margaret Cavendish's publications include a flattering approval of her writing by William in the front matter, and he contributed passages to one of the most feminist texts of the early modern period, *The Convent of Pleasure*, which will be discussed hereafter in this chapter. Cavendish, Hutchinson, Behn, and Mary Evelyn, as well as eighteenth-century women such as Delarivier Manley, Eliza Haywood, and Frances Burney, were all influenced and drawn to Epicurean philosophy.²⁵ Yet scholarship has paid little attention to the relations between Epicurean philosophy and women. Epicurus himself allowed women and slaves into his philosophical school, later drawing contempt from Cicero, who, according to a 1683 English translation, referred to an Epicurean woman, Leontium, as a "little Strumpet" and "Slut," who "dar'd to Write against Wise Theophrastus" even though he admitted she had "a neat, Attique stile" of writing.²⁶ As Barbour notes, the "tendency of Epicureanism to challenge or ignore established cultural boundaries was familiar to anyone who had read Cicero's disgust with the presence of philosophizing women in the Garden."²⁷ Like Epicurus and other men in the Newcastle circle, Pierre Gassendi advocated women's ability to pursue philosophy. Anne R. Larsen explains Gassendi's belief that "that women are equal in nature to men, hold the same gifts, and surpass in intelligence many of the best philosophers."²⁸ The origins of such attitudes can perhaps be traced back to Epicurus himself, who, according to Kroll, "proposed the bonding of all, even women and slaves, by a friendship carried out within the confines of Epicurus's famous garden."²⁹ Perhaps this is one of the reasons, as Line Cottagnies argues in [Chapter 19](#) of this volume, that through Cavendish's "confrontation with Epicureanism" she "was able to forge empowering intellectual tools and gain the authority she sought."³⁰

Epicurean philosophy itself was conducive to rethinking gender relations, even though it was associated with atheism and debauchery. As Wilson argues, the "atomist recognizes no natural rulers or natural subject; there are only particles constantly in motion, some of which have coalesced into living bodies moved by appetite and

25 G. Gabrielle Starr, "Cavendish, Aesthetics, and the Anti-Platonic Line," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 39 (2006): 295–308 at 301.

26 Cicero, *Three Books Touching the Nature of the Gods, Done Into English* (London, 1683), 52. Leontium may have been a leader in the Epicurean community. See Joan E. Taylor, *Jewish Women Philosophers of First-Century Alexandria: Philo's "Therapeutae" Reconsidered* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 203.

27 Barbour, *English Epicures and Stoics*, 60.

28 Anne R. Larsen, *Anna Maria Van Schurman, "The Star of Utrecht": The Education Vision and Reception of a Savante* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 96.

29 Kroll, *Material Word*, 9.

30 In [Chapter 19](#) of this volume, Line Cottagnies compares Cavendish's *Poems, and Fancies* with *The Convent of Pleasure*, discussing how both texts engage with Epicureanism in different ways.

aversion.”³¹ Without a premise justifying natural rulers, men are not natural rulers over women. Hence Epicureanism, according to Barbour, “threaten[ed] to undermine the theology, cosmology, and morality so dear to Christian culture” in early modernity.³² Epicurus had argued that the world was composed of material atoms that were in a constant state of motion moving through a void where “atoms move continuously for all time.”³³ Epicurean philosophy was particularly controversial on account of the argument that it was best for people to avoid mental pain by removing the fear of death and punishment from gods.³⁴ Epicurus, who further held that the soul was material, argued against the likelihood of the soul’s survival after death and punishment in the afterlife, which he believed provoked great anxiety among humanity.³⁵ Hence, as Francis Bacon asserted, the ancient atomism was the “Schoole which is most accused of Atheisme.”³⁶ Nonetheless, Gassendi, who was a French priest, was instrumental in reworking Epicurus’s ideas so that they were acceptable to Christian sentiments. For example, David Norbrook explains that Gassendi “challenged stereotypes of the debauched pleasure-seeker with a sustained defence of Epicurean moral philosophy, which he integrated with a Christian pursuit of blessedness.”³⁷ In his translation of Gassendi, Charleton claims to convert “the poisonous part of Epicurus” into a Christian philosophy.³⁸ In doing so, he claims that “Atoms were ... created by God.”³⁹ Charleton, according to Robert Kargon, tried to demonstrate that atomism was “purged” of heresies.⁴⁰ In doing so, he influenced Robert Boyle, one of the founders of modern chemistry, who admitted that the “antient Corpuscularian philosophers ... doctrine in most other points, though not in all, we are most inclinable to.”⁴¹ Kargon argues that Boyle’s “basic approach, both in content and style, is that of the Epicureans,” further noting that the “Royal Society, which Boyle participated in founding, provided a willing and interested public for the essays which he published.”⁴² Hence the

31 Wilson, *Epicureanism at the Origins of Modernity*, 185.

32 Barbour, *English Epicures and Stoics*, 2.

33 Epicurus, “Letter to Herodotus,” 7.

34 D. S. Hutchinson, “Introduction,” in *The Epicurus Reader*, trans. and ed. Inwood and Gerson, vi–x; see also Epicurus, “Letter to Menoeceus,” *The Epicurus Reader*, trans. and ed. Inwood and Gerson, 29.

35 Hutchinson, ix; see also Epicurus, “Letter to Herodotus,” 13–18.

36 Francis Bacon, “Of Atheism,” in *The Essaies of Sr. Francis Bacon* (London, 1613).

37 David Norbrook, “Atheists and Republicans: Interpreting Lucretius in Revolutionary England,” in *Lucretius and the Early Modern*, ed. David Norbrook, Stephen Harrison, and Philip Hardie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 223–58, 225.

38 Walter Charleton, *Physiologia Epicuro-Gassendo-Charletoniana* (London, 1654), 126.

39 Charleton, *Physiologia*, 126.

40 Robert Kargon, “Walter Charleton, Robert Boyle, and the Acceptance of Epicurean Atomism in England,” *Isis* 55 (1964): 184–92 at 185.

41 Robert Boyle, *The Origine of Formes and Qualities* (Oxford, 1666), 4.

42 Kargon, “Walter Charleton,” 190, 192.

Newcastle circle's facilitation of Epicureanism was an important influence upon the Royal Society and for the foundations of chemistry.

While the Newcastle circle might not receive the full attention that it deserves for its influence upon seventeenth-century science, its influence is also significant because atomism itself held many ethical implications. An examination of the ethics of Charleton, Hobbes, and Cavendish shows how an understanding of how ideas that were influenced by Epicureanism could facilitate different understandings of gender. Pleasure and pain are the crux of Epicurean philosophy insofar as obtaining pleasure and eliminating pain are deemed the highest good.⁴³ For Epicureans, some pleasures and desires, such as eating and sleeping, are natural and necessary, and some are natural but unnecessary. Hence it is a philosophy of moderation, since removing pain often indicates removing many unnecessary desires and short-term pleasures. As Barbour explains, for Epicureans, "the happiest life is a physically painless one of mental tranquility in the garden among friends. Far from the violent extremities of gluttony or lechery, then, this painless tranquility is what the Epicureans mean by elevating natural and necessary pleasure to the status of the greatest good."⁴⁴ Indeed, Lucretius contends that humans do not require wealth, since "our bodies profit nothing / From riches or noble birth or glory of kingdom, / We must believe our minds also gain nothing."⁴⁵ He further explains that our "needs / Are small indeed: things that take the pain away, / And ... simple pleasures."⁴⁶ Consequently, Epicureans recommended a life of retreat away from power, politics, and wealth. Such a philosophy may have been appealing to Royalists in the Newcastle circle who had been exiled from power and their estates during the civil war. In *Epicurus's Morals* (1656), Charleton advised people to "live not only privately, but even obscurely and concealed in some secure corner" in order to avoid "Greatnesse, or Power, or Honours."⁴⁷ He further explains that "Pleasure," which is the "Highest of Goods,"⁴⁸ can lead the Christian individual into a more virtuous and peaceful life:

we esteem all pleasures to be a reall good, and all pain to be a reall evil; yet we do not therefore affirm, that we ought, at all times, to pursue that, and avoid this. For, it is good for us, to sustain some pains, that we may afterward enjoy more abundant pleasures; and expedient to abstain from some pleasures, that we may not by them incurre more grievous pains.⁴⁹

43 Epicurus explains that the "removal of all feeling of pain is the limit of the magnitude of pleasures." Epicurus, "The Principal Doctrines," in *The Epicurus Reader: Selected Writing and Testimonials*, trans. and ed. Brand Inwood and L. P. Gerson (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), 32.

44 Barbour, *English Epicures and Stoics*, 14.

45 Lucretius, *On the Nature of the Universe*, trans. Ronald Melville, ed. Don Fowler and Peta Fowler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), bk. 2, lines 37–39.

46 Lucretius, *On the Nature of the Universe*, bk. 2, lines 20–22.

47 Walter Charleton, *Epicurus's Morals* (London, 1656), 92.

48 Charleton, *Epicurus's Morals*, 19.

49 Charleton, *Epicurus's Morals*, 15.

The Epicurean focus upon pleasure does not mean that individuals are to openly embrace all pleasures and selfishly avoid all pain, but it instead encourages individuals to consider and calculate which pleasures are harmless insofar as they do not induce pain. According to Charleton, the result is quite a moderate and even ascetic lifestyle, since “it is not perpetuall Feastings and Drinkings; it is not the love of, and Familiarity with beautifull boyes and women ... that can make a Happy life: But, it is Reason, with Sobriety, and consequently a serene Mind; investigating the Causes, why this Object is to be Elected, and that to be Rejected.”⁵⁰ Charleton contends that pleasure lies in a sober and “serene Mind” insofar as gluttony and debauchery often lead to pain or discomfort.

While Gassendi and Charleton worked to demonstrate that Epicurus was compatible with Christianity, Thomas Hobbes, who is considered the founder of modern political philosophy, drew considerably from Epicureanism to formulate his theory regarding the origins of political authority. David Norbrook argues that “Hobbes cast his own work as self-consciously modern and innovative and made it very hard to trace his debts to earlier thinkers.”⁵¹ However, there are many signs that the hedonistic and utilitarian sides of Epicureanism were important to him.⁵² Hobbes, for example, is not generally understood as an Epicurean, yet his political philosophy argues that human passions such as “Appetite, Desire, Love, Aversion, Hate, Joy, and Griefe” are merely manifestations of pleasure or pain.⁵³ For Hobbes, “Pleasure ... is the apparence, or sense of Good; and Molestation or Displeasure, the apparence, or sense of Evill.”⁵⁴ Like Charleton, Hobbes argues that virtue or what is deemed “good” ultimately is derived from pleasure, while that which is painful is interpreted as “evill,” ultimately providing a foundation of ethics that shares a similar view of pleasure and pain with Epicureanism. Hobbes also articulates Charleton’s position that gluttony “and other pleasures of Sense” detract from true pleasure, as it “take[s] away the care of knowing causes; which is a Lust of the mind, that ... exceedeth the short vehemence of any carnall Pleasure.”⁵⁵ Yet Hobbes starkly contrasts his philosophy with Epicureanism in his contention that humans will always experience fear as well as desire, which situates people in a constant state of anxiety.⁵⁶ While Epicureans cautioned against joining society and the public world, Hobbes maintains that the origin of society itself is fear: a painful emotional state. The

⁵⁰ Charleton, *Epicurus’s Morals*, 23.

⁵¹ Norbrook, “Atheists and Republicans,” 225.

⁵² Norbrook further explains that “Hobbes probably borrowed from Gassendi’s work in progress in the 1640s, which had shown knowledge of Hobbes’s *De Cive* and ... a letter from Gassendi was prefaced to a subsequent edition. Samuel Sorbière, who brought this edition to press, praised Hobbes in words directly borrowed from Lucretius’s praise of Epicurus,” 225.

⁵³ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 2nd ed., ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 40–41.

⁵⁴ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 40.

⁵⁵ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 42.

⁵⁶ Hobbes argues that there is “a perpetuall and restless desire of Power after power, that ceaseth onely in Death.” *Leviathan*, 70.

state of nature necessitates a social contract otherwise there is “continuell feare, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short.”⁵⁷ While Epicureans encouraged people to retreat from the public world with friends, for Hobbes, humans, in their natural state, are not social creatures, but their “continuell feare” drives them to create social bonds. So for Hobbes “there is no such thing as perpetual Tranquillity of mind ... because Life ... can never be without Desire, nor without Feare.”⁵⁸ People nonetheless create contracts in order to lessen their fear and suffering, providing a secular view of the origins of society. Wilson maintains that “the central premises of the Epicurean system were its denial that any supernatural agents engage in the design, generation, maintenance, or moral regulation of the world.”⁵⁹ Social order, morality, and justice do not derive from God or a metaphysical hierarchy but are contingent upon reciprocal agreements or pacts based upon self-preservation: Epicurus claims “there was no justice or injustice” for “nations which were unable or unwilling to make pacts about neither harming one another nor being harmed.”⁶⁰ Hence Hobbes builds his contract theory upon Epicurus’s claim that justice derives from “pacts,” in a world without natural moral order. Social contracts, justice, and hence human society are a covenant or a form of “Art,” an artificial construct, which could provide justification for different ways for humans to organize themselves. Hence Hobbes reconceptualizes traditional understandings of the origin of authority and society, which held implications for early modern understandings of gender. For example, Hobbes’s understanding of authority contradicts traditional patriarchalism, which held that monarchical authority was not only derived from God but was fatherly in origin.⁶¹ Breaking political convention that held that power originated from fathers, Hobbes more radically contends that authority originally derived from mothers in the state of nature.⁶²

While Hobbes contends that power originally derives from women, Cavendish also reworks Epicurus’s understanding of justice to rethink the nature of authority. Epicurus claims there has never been an absolute justice, since the “justice of nature is a pledge of reciprocal usefulness, [i.e.,] neither to harm one another nor be harmed.”⁶³ Justice is relative insofar as it involves an agreement between two parties and should provide against harm. The notion that justice is simply an agreement not to cause harm potentially allows for a critique of structural injustice. For example, the plays-within-plays within Cavendish’s play *The Convent of Pleasure* (1668) suggest that for women, English laws were not made to be “reciprocal” to avoid “harm” to all parties. Indeed, the plays

⁵⁷ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 89.

⁵⁸ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 46.

⁵⁹ Wilson, *Epicureanism at the Origins of Modernity*, 37.

⁶⁰ Epicurus, “Principal Doctrines,” 35.

⁶¹ Robert Filmer, for example, explains that the first kings were simply fathers of families. Robert Filmer, “Patriarcha,” *Patriarcha and Other Writings*, ed. Johann P. Sommerville (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 10.

⁶² Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 140.

⁶³ Epicurus, “Principal Doctrines,” 35.

depict multiple ways in which women can be harmed under marital law, including domestic abuse, neglect, and irresponsible husbands spending wives' personal finances while their families starve.⁶⁴ These plays-within-plays portray one of the most negative assessments of marriage in the early modern England. Tim Stretton has explained how Renaissance law indeed permitted husbands to beat their wives.⁶⁵ Besides this, when a woman married, she in theory lost all of her personal property to her husband, though daily practice was not always consistent with juridical theory.⁶⁶ Hence the plays-within-plays portray socioeconomic problems that wives could potentially face, but do not assume that patriarchal authority is just or natural, since the protagonist, Lady Happy, structures her convent to achieve pleasure—thereby eliminating men from her life:

she hath avoided the company of Men, by retirement, meerly, because she would enjoy the variety of Pleasures, which are in Nature; of which, she says, Men are Obstructors; for, instead of increasing Pleasure, they produce Pain; and, instead of giving Content, they increase Trouble; instead of making the Femal-Sex Happy, they make them Miserable.⁶⁷

For Lady Happy, women must separate from men in order to experience Epicurean tranquility. To emphasize this point, a character named Monsieur Take-Pleasure is one of Lady Happy's most vocal suitors. The miserable depiction of marriage in the play indicates that wives cannot experience Epicurean notions of justice due to oppressive laws that disadvantage women. According to Hobbes, justice is subjective, since what "one man calleth Wisdome, what another calleth feare; and one cruelty, what another justice."⁶⁸ Yet Cavendish, more so than Hobbes, draws attention to the social implications of Epicurean notions of justice. Wilson argues that the "philosophically and morally attractive features of Epicureanism were its integration of human beings into the natural world, the postulate of human equality that it implied, and the notion that pain and pleasure, both psychological and physical, mattered, regardless of who was experiencing them and what that person's status or merits might be."⁶⁹ Indeed, the women performing the plays-within-plays assume their pleasure matters as they critique marital laws hindering women's ability to experience justice as well as Epicurean pleasure and tranquility.

Cavendish explores how Epicurean ethics opens up possibilities for rethinking gender throughout *The Convent of Pleasure*. In view of Cavendish's significant contribution to English atomism, it is odd that scholarship has not explored in detail how the adherents of Cavendish's convent worship Epicurean principles rather than a Christian

⁶⁴ Margaret Cavendish, "The Convent of Pleasure (1668)," in *Paper Bodies: A Margaret Cavendish Reader*, ed. Sylvia Bowerbank and Sara Mendelson (Peterborough, Canada: Broadview, 2000), 97–135, 111–17.

⁶⁵ Tim Stretton, *Women Waging Law in Elizabethan England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 198.

⁶⁶ Stretton, *Women Waging Law*, 129–35.

⁶⁷ Cavendish, *Convent of Pleasure*, 104.

⁶⁸ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 31.

⁶⁹ Wilson, *Epicureanism at the Origins of Modernity*, 37.

deity. The aptly named Lady Happy declares she would prefer to “serve Nature” over gods.⁷⁰ The devotees in the Convent retreat from the public world, since “none can enjoy those Pleasures They have, unless they live such a retired or retreated life free from the Worlds vexations.”⁷¹ Although Lady Happy claims to live moderately by Nature’s cycles, as her feasts are “not luxurious mak[ing] a wast,”⁷² the women nonetheless eat “savory Sauces” and embrace luxurious items such as “Beds of Velvet” and “Gilt Plate” as well as fine clothes made of fine materials such as “Silk.”⁷³ Considering Lady Happy’s assertions that she is not concerned with power or politics, perhaps the play suggests that individuals can still participate in Epicurean pleasure while enjoying the aesthetics of beautiful objects (even if they are costly). While Charleton held that “to be content with little, is the highest preferment,” since “great riches without moderation, are but great poverty,”⁷⁴ Lady Happy suggests that Epicurean pleasure can be sensual insofar as the purpose of these expensive items is to help the senses experience pleasure.

Cavendish’s view of wealth is more in line with Hobbes’s philosophy. While Hobbes bases his political philosophy on Epicurean concerns about pleasure/pain, he challenges the foundational ethics of Epicureanism in his assertion that “Felicity of this life” is “Continual successe in obtaining those things which a man from time to time desireth, that is to say, continuall prospering,” though an individual can never fully experience tranquility.⁷⁵ Hobbes takes an opposite position from Epicureanism regarding which lifestyles induce happiness and peace. For example, Charleton contends that wealthy men with “fair” wives often “live full of Anxiety and Complainings, having their minds perpetually on the rack of cares, sollicitude, and fears: so as they cannot but confesse, that they lead lives truly miserable.”⁷⁶ Lady Happy takes up a position closer to Hobbes in her assertion that only the wealthy can experience Epicurean tranquility. When discussing “Women that are poor,” she claims that they “have not means to buy delights, and maintain pleasures.”⁷⁷ Pleasure, for Lady Happy, derives not only from a separation from men but from purchasing delightful objects that please the senses. For example, the poor would be unable to please their senses with delicious food and soft clothing. Since Lady Happy’s view of pleasure is one that embraces sensual pleasure, she further contends that poor women “having not means to please themselves, they must serve only to please others” and “are only fit for Men.”⁷⁸ Like Hobbes, who held that happiness derives from “continuall prospering,” Lady Happy critiques Epicurean definitions of

70 Cavendish, *Convent of Pleasure*, 100.

71 Cavendish, *Convent of Pleasure*, 107.

72 Cavendish, *Convent of Pleasure*, 101.

73 Cavendish, *Convent of Pleasure*, 105.

74 Charleton, *Epicurus’s Morals*, 98.

75 Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 46.

76 Charleton, *Epicurus’s Morals*, 3.

77 Cavendish, *Convent of Pleasure*, 101.

78 Cavendish, *Convent of Pleasure*, 101.

pleasure as she asserts that pleasure is a site of class privilege that only the wealthy can experience.

The upheaval of the Civil War probably inspired thinkers such as Hobbes and Cavendish to reconsider society and the origins of justice. Indeed, Charleton argues that the Civil War caused a widespread disillusionment insofar that he claimed “our late Warrs and Schisms ... brought the Civil Law into contempt.”⁷⁹ As traditional ways of thinking and organizing society were questioned in the wake of the temporary abolishment of the monarchy, perhaps the unpredictability of atomic motion was appealing to those who had experienced the chaos of civil war. Yet Epicurean atomism also supported the belief in free will. For example, Lucretius, like other Epicureans, believed that “atoms must / Swerve slightly.”⁸⁰ The unpredictable swerve of atomic particles causes physical change, which in turn provides a philosophical basis for free will. For example, following Epicurus, Lucretius contends that atomic swerves “break the bonds of fate.”⁸¹ Stephen Greenblatt explains that “[e]verything comes into being as a result of a swerve,” for there is no divine scheme or an “end or purpose to existence, only ceaseless creation and destruction, governed entirely by chance.”⁸² Since the universe is not based upon or structured by a hierarchical ontology such as an Aristotelian Great Chain of Being, societies can be constructed in diverse ways. Barbour explains that “in theological and ethical terms, the Epicurean argument for freedom declares that since the gods are minding themselves, it is left to human beings to shape their own destinies.”⁸³ Hence, as Hobbes suggests, justice is subjective. Similarly, Cavendish reworks Epicurean notions of justice, applying them to women’s socioeconomic circumstances as she portrays women creating their own female separatist utopian society in which women occupy positions they generally could not experience in the early modern world. The convent has “Women-Physicians, Surgeons and Apothecaries, and [Lady Happy] is the chief Confessor her self, and gives what Indulgences or Absolutions she pleaseth.”⁸⁴ In this Epicurean convent, that worships Nature rather than God, Lady Happy serves as a priest for her community; a role that women today still cannot occupy in many religions. Erin Bonin contends that the play can be seen as utopian, but “[i]n contrast to Thomas More and his seventeenth-century imitators,” Cavendish’s play does not “depend upon carefully controlled heterosexual reproductive economies. Because such utopian narratives valorize natural law and depend upon patriarchal paradigms for marriage, family, and the state, they seldom question women’s nature and place.”⁸⁵ Similarly, while Charleton may have encouraged

⁷⁹ Walter Charleton, *The Immortality of the Human Soul* (London, 1659), 50.

⁸⁰ Lucretius, *On the Nature of the Universe*, bk. 2, lines 242–43.

⁸¹ Lucretius, *On the Nature of the Universe*, bk. 2, line 254.

⁸² Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve: How the Renaissance Began* (London: Vintage, 2012), 188.

⁸³ Barbour, *English Epicures and Stoics*, 94.

⁸⁴ Cavendish, *Convent of Pleasure*, 103.

⁸⁵ Erin Bonin, “Margaret Cavendish’s Dramatic Utopias and the Politics of Gender,” *Studies in English Literature 1500–1900* 40 (2000): 339–54 at 339.

Cavendish as a philosopher, he assumes a male readership of his Epicurean texts, as he advises his male readers that if they must have a wife, “then are you so to dispose your Wife, as that she may be loving and complacent to you, and a partner in your Cares: and to take such care for your Children.”⁸⁶ Charleton’s advice indicates a belief that a wife would focus foremost upon childrearing and being “complacent” to their husbands rather than seeking Epicurean pleasure themselves.

In contrast, Cavendish’s plays-within-the-play serve as fragmented windows into the social conditions that allowed wives to suffer. Charleton had recommended that a wise man should not be ignorant of the tumults of the world but should, “as from a Watch-Tower,” look from a distance at those who do not follow the Epicurean pursuit of pleasure; “Not that it is delightful, to see others afflicted with Evils; but, to see our selves not to be involved in those Evills.”⁸⁷ As if heeding Charleton’s advice, Lady Happy and her women create plays-within-plays in order to create such a tower from which to observe what happens to married women outside the convent who cannot live a life structured according to Epicurean ethics.

In placing Cavendish in dialogue with Charleton and Hobbes, we gain a better view of the play’s complex engagement with the Epicurean revival as well as the revival’s implications for women. Indeed, Cavendish’s critique of marriage is in line with traditional Epicurean views upon marriage and sexuality. Paul W. Ludwig argues that “[l]ove ... was a profound disturbance: hence the Epicureans recommended that people partake of a limited amount of sex to prevent their desire from being sublimated into love.”⁸⁸ Although there is some scholarly debate concerning to what extent Epicurus discouraged sex and marriage among his followers, Tad Brennan explains how many of his translators, including Gassendi, believed Epicurus “to be sounding a cautious note about sex. The desire for sex is natural.”⁸⁹ However, “it is not necessary; no pain ensues on its non-satisfaction. And sexual activity frequently has harmful consequences,” so that “the Epicurean calculator will seldom, perhaps never, judge it prudent to pursue sexual pleasures.”⁹⁰ Epicurus explains that “[n]o one was ever the better for sexual indulgence ... Nor, again, will the wise man marry and rear a family ... Occasionally he may marry owing to special circumstances in his life.”⁹¹ Charleton takes up a similar position in his assertion that pleasure “is not the love of, and Familiarity with beautiful boyes and women.”⁹²

86 Charleton, *Epicurus’s Morals*, 56.

87 Charleton, *Epicurus’s Morals*, 5–6.

88 Paul W. Ludwig, *Eros and Polis: Desire and Community in Greek Political Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 225.

89 Tad Brennan, “Epicurus on Sex, Marriage, and Children,” *Classical Philology* 91 (1996): 346–52 at 349, 346.

90 Brennan, “Epicurus on Sex,” 346.

91 Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. R. D. Hicks, vol. 2 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 645.

92 Charleton, *Epicurus’s Morals*, 23.

Although Cavendish by all accounts was happily married herself and her husband contributed verses of his own to the play,⁹³ Lady Happy's rejection of marriage and men builds upon Epicureanism, which was traditionally sceptical of love and marriage. While discussing Lucretius's views of love, William Fitzgerald contends that his "discussion of love brings up two of the most important themes in Epicurean moral philosophy, namely pleasure and freedom. What makes love problematical for Lucretius is that it relates these two entities in a mutually exclusive way: pleasure and desire frequently deprive the lover of his freedom; and, finally, this deprivation of freedom destroys his pleasure too."⁹⁴ Nonetheless, Charleton explains that although Epicurean men should avoid marriage, if they do marry, they still might experience pleasure, since "there is no reason why ... a man ought to abstain from the legitimate and moderate pleasures of the marriage bed."⁹⁵ In contrast, Lady Happy applies the "Epicurean calculator" to marriage and concludes that it would not lead to a woman's pleasure: "Put the case I should Marry the best of Men, if any best there be; yet would a Marry'd life have more crosses and sorrows then pleasure, freedom, or happiness."⁹⁶

As the play explores Epicureanism in relation to women, it provides a sophisticated commentary upon gender. If it were performed, the Prince would be a male actor, pretending to be a woman, who pretends to be a man during the convent's entertainments, creating significant layers of gender confusion. Unlike Shakespeare's cross-dressed heroines who announce their intentions to disguise themselves, the audience or reader of *The Convent of Pleasure* is left unaware of the Princess's true identity until the conclusion, when Madam Mediator announces to the women in alarm, "you're all betrayed, undone, undone; for there is a man disguised in the Convent, search and you'll find it."⁹⁷ As a result, the women "all skip from each other, as afraid of each other."⁹⁸ Cavendish's text points to the constructed and performative nature of gender, since the Princess's disguise was successful insofar as the women as well as the audience were unaware of his true gender throughout his performance. It is significant that Cavendish's text represents gender as fluid and performative while investigating Epicurean philosophy in relation to women, as it assumes that women's pleasures are not inherently different from men's, nor are women's pleasures based upon marriage or childrearing. For example, the plays-within-plays demonstrate an Epicurean scepticism of marriage, sex, and childrearing. Indeed, Lady Happy, who begins as a loquacious character, becomes increasingly silent as she develops a relationship with the "Princess." Once the Prince has declared his true identity, he requests that "the Councillors of this State" allow him

⁹³ Whitaker, *Mad Madge*, 86.

⁹⁴ William Fitzgerald, "Lucretius' Cure for Love in the 'De Rerum Natura,'" *The Classical World* 78 (1984): 73–86 at 73.

⁹⁵ Charleton, *Epicurus's Morals*, 83.

⁹⁶ Cavendish, *Convent of Pleasure*, 98.

⁹⁷ Cavendish, *Convent of Pleasure*, 128.

⁹⁸ Cavendish, *Convent of Pleasure*, 128.

to “marry this Lady; otherwise, tell them I will have her by force of Arms.”⁹⁹ Worryingly, he does not ask for her input or consent. Even more troubling, as soon as they marry, the Prince assumes ownership over her convent, flippantly giving the convent away without asking permission or advice from Lady Happy. Although the play is a comedy, the most sinister aspects of the plays-within-plays have manifested in the conclusion, as Lady Happy is left without property rights, autonomy, or a voice. Earlier she had proclaimed that women would be “mad to live with Men, who make the Female sex their slaves; but I will not be so inslaved, but will live retired from their Company.”¹⁰⁰ However, by the conclusion, she has literally lost her name (and happiness) as she assumes her husband’s and loses her Epicurean utopia.

While many commentators have explored *The Convent of Pleasure’s* critique of marriage and patriarchy as well as its allusions to same-sex desire, it is surprising that these ideas have not been situated in the context of Epicurean philosophy. A closer look at Cavendish’s engagement with Epicureanism demonstrates how she was responding to and thus in conversation with the wider Newcastle intellectual circle and their interest in Epicurean ideas. In particular, situating the play in the context of Charleton and Hobbes sheds light on how Epicurean ideas were being used to rethink the nature and origins of authority and justice, which held significant implications for the status of women. Perhaps the social upheaval of the English Civil War and the temporary abolition of the monarchy helped pave the way for members of the Newcastle circle to explore Epicurean notions of pleasure, justice, and marriage. As Cavendish demonstrates in her play, such ideas open up new avenues for thinking about gender and how society could be organized. Perhaps these are some of the reasons why a number of seventeenth-century English women such as Cavendish, Hutchinson, Evelyn, Behn, and later eighteenth-century women authors were attracted to this philosophy and helped disseminate its principles. Hence Epicurean ideas concerning pleasure, justice, and authority, as well as some members of the Newcastle circle’s unusual support of Margaret Cavendish as a philosopher, were a major influence upon English women’s entrance into natural philosophy.

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⁹⁹ Cavendish, *Convent of Pleasure*, 129.

¹⁰⁰ Cavendish, *Convent of Pleasure*, 101.

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