Chapter 18

MARGARET CAVENDISH AND JULIUS CAESAR

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Margaret Cavendish's lively interest in ancient Rome may have been partly stirred up by her having been born in St. John's Abbey, just outside Colchester's town walls.[1] Known by the Romans as Camulodunum, Colchester was possibly the first recorded town in Britain—being mentioned in Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* (77 CE)—as well as the first capital of the Roman province. As the ruins of a Roman town wall are still visible today, it is conceivable that Roman ruins were an even more tangible presence in Colchester in Margaret's times. In addition, Colchester Castle, where Margaret's brother Charles was executed in 1648, was built on the foundations of the Temple of Claudius, which had been burnt down by Boudica in 60/61 CE. Finally, the town charter, issued by King Henry V—in whom Margaret also had a passionate interest—also mentions the Roman past of Colchester. Such a local context pervasively filled with Roman ruins, memories, and impressions makes the abundance of allusions to ancient Rome in Margaret's writings quite unsurprising.

Yet Margaret's engagement with Roman history and personalities has not been subjected to as wide a range of critical takes as other topics of interest in her oeuvre, possibly by dint of her lack of formal classical training, coupled with her unceasing (and rather eccentric in the golden age of *imitatio*) effort to foreground the originality and idiosyncrasy of her own fancy and writings, which resulted in a (perhaps programmatic) lack of interest in seeking legitimization from ancient authorities: among her favourite images of herself was that of a spider spinning a web from its own insides.[2] Moreover, one ought not to forget that, as Lara Dodds poignantly suggests, "The painful experience of war and exile [led Margaret] to doubt classical models of virtue as well as the authority of the classical *auctor*."[3]

Only a handful of scholars have significantly explored Margaret's appropriation of Roman antiquity. Emma L. E. Rees has investigated Margaret's relationship with Lucretius, especially as regards her debt to Epicurean atomism and the structural influence of *De rerum natura* throughout her first printed work, *Poems, and Fancies* (1653).[4] In Rees's view, "Lucretius's use of verse to convey his philosophy suggested to [Margaret] a

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1 Katie Whitaker, *Mad Madge: Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, Royalist, Writer and Romantic* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2003), 4.

2 Sylvia Bowerbank, "The Spider's Delight: Margaret Cavendish and the 'Female' Imagination," *English Literary Renaissance* 14 (1984): 392–408.

3 Lara Dodds, "Reading and Writing in 'Sociable Letters'; Or, How Margaret Cavendish Read Her Plutarch," *English Literary Renaissance* 41 (2011): 189–218 at 210.

4 Emma L. E. Rees, *Margaret Cavendish: Gender, Genre, Exile* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 54–79.

genre which she adopted, carefully and deliberately constructing the rendering of scientific theory in poetry as a culturally acceptable literary activity for a woman."[5] For James Fitzmaurice, in spite of Margaret's inability to read Latin and Greek, it is evident that she "both read and gave considerable thought to what she found in translation."[6] Then, in what is to my mind one of the most illuminating contributions on Margaret's work, Dodds examines Margaret's relationship with Plutarch as "a case study in the relationship between female reading practices and the classical literary heritage" and "as a critical examination of the afterlife of humanist models of reading in seventeenth-century England," concluding that, "Conditioned by political circumstance, familial and marital commitments, and, of course, the constraints of gender, Cavendish's Plutarch reveals a trenchant commentary on the subject positions available to the female reader and writer."[7] Finally, Katherine Romack has explored the self-identification of Margaret with Cleopatra that lies at the core of her defence of the Egyptian queen in *The Worlds Olio* (1655), finding that Margaret "not only applauded Cleopatra's whorish performativity, but engaged in it herself, promoting a kind of soft-core erotica for married couples" as a way "to make companionate marriage sexy to the public, thus serving an important social imperative" at a time when traditional conjugal obligations had been destabilized in the wake of the Civil War and "the dissolution of familial unity resulting from the decay of patriarchal authority."[8]

As for Margaret's views on specific personalities from Roman history, it is not a mystery that she was virtually obsessed with Gaius Julius Caesar, the renowned Roman military and political leader who had conquered an incredibly wide range of territories for the Roman Republic and had paved the way for the rise of the Roman Empire. The Cavendishes' admiration for Caesar (and the Caesars) was reflected in the paintings of ten Roman emperors and two empresses that were displayed at Bolsover Castle.[9] As Karen Hearn explains, "The emperors were copied after the paintings that Federico Gonzaga had commissioned from Titian in 1536 and which had been sold, as part of the Mantuan Gonzaga collection, to Charles I. The King displayed them in a gallery at St.

5 Rees, *Margaret Cavendish*, 56.

6 James Fitzmaurice, "Introduction," in *Sociable Letters*, by Margaret Cavendish (Peterborough, Canada: Broadview, 2004), 11–28, 18. See also James Fitzmaurice, "Margaret Cavendish's 'Life of William,' Plutarch, and Mixed Genre," in *Authorial Conquests: Essays on Genre in the Writings of Margaret Cavendish*, ed. Line Cottegnies and Nancy Weitz (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003), 80–102.

7 Dodds, "Reading and Writing," 190, 193.

8 Katherine Romack, "'I Wonder She Should Be So Infamous for a Whore?': Cleopatra Restored," in *Cavendish and Shakespeare, Interconnections*, ed. Katherine Romack and James Fitzmaurice (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 193–211, 211, 207.

9 As Whitaker, *Mad Madge*, 273, points out, at Bolsover Castle William also "constructed a garden to the east and south of the Little Castle enclosed by a high wall on whose top ran a broad walk. The centrepiece was a fountain … Surrounding this, below ground level, stone beasts and satyrs and the heads of the Roman emperors were visible from the wall-top walk, but not from the surrounding gardens."

James's Palace, where [William] is likely to have seen them. In an age that valued classical example, [William] may well have commissioned or purchased these copies."[10]

Julius Caesar is a ubiquitous presence throughout Margaret's canon as unsurpassable *exemplum aemulandum*, so much so that it would not be an overstatement to argue that Margaret was head over heels in love with him. This is not only declared by Margaret herself in the oft-quoted passage from the CLXII of her *Sociable Letters* (1664)—"I only was in Love with three Dead men, which were Dead long before my time, the one was *Caesar*, for his Valour, the second *Ovid*, for his Wit, and the third was our Countryman *Shakespear*, for his Comical and Tragical Humour"—but also slightly more obliquely expressed in *The First Part of the Lady Contemplation* (1662), whose title character constantly provides the reader with significant insights into Margaret's own dreams: "I did imagine my self such a Beauty, as Nature never made the like … And then that a great powerful Monarch, such a one as *Alexander*, or *Caesar*, fell desperately in love with me, seeing but my Picture, which was sent all about the world."[11]

Even though the idea conveyed by these passages of an adamantine admiration for Caesar on Margaret's part is accurate and indisputable, a wider and more detailed investigation of Margaret's appropriation of Caesar may enable readers to appreciate such an admiring contemplation of Caesar's heroic traits and deeds as a more complex, nuanced, and versatile feature of her production. More specifically, I would like to suggest that Caesar as imagined by Margaret can be interpreted, to varying degrees, as a sort of discursive tool through which she negotiates her stances on the most disparate matters in a way that ends up complicating more straightforward (though not entirely illegitimate) readings of Margaret as a mere Julius Caesar obsessive.

Fame

A flaunted effort to emulate Caesar is by all means the prevalent note throughout Margaret's allusions to him. And while it is true that Margaret occasionally presents faux debates aimed at determining whether Caesar had been good or evil, these ought to be more accurately seen in light of Margaret's fascination with arguments *in utramque partem* and her interest more in "understanding how an effective case could be made both pro and con than in actually settling on a fixed opinion."[12] Caesar is an object of

10 Karen Hearn, "William Cavendish and the Fine Arts: Patronage before the Exile," in *Royalist Refugees: William and Margaret Cavendish in the Rubens House 1648–1660*, ed. Ben Van Beneden and Nora De Poorter (Antwerp: Rubenshuis & Rubenianum, 2006), 90–94, 93.

11 Margaret Cavendish, *CCXI Sociable Letters* (London, 1664), 338; Margaret Cavendish, *The First Part of the Lady Contemplation*, 1.1, in *Playes* (London, 1662), 182.

12 Margaret Cavendish, *Natures Picture* (London, 1671), 167–69; Margaret Cavendish, *The Worlds Olio* (London, 1655), 129–31; Whitaker, *Mad Madge*, 19. On arguments *in utramque partem*, see Joel B. Altman, *The Tudor Play of Mind: Rhetorical Inquiry and the Development of Elizabethan Drama* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 31–53.

emulation to whom Margaret turns repeatedly in her works. As she declares in her poem "Of *Ambition*":

> TEN *Thousand Pounds* a *yeare* will make me live:
> A *Kingdome*, *Fortune* then to me must give.
> I'le conquer all, like *Alexander Great,*
> And, like to *Caesar,* my *Opposers* beat,
> Give me a *Fame,* that with the *World* may last,
> Let all *Tongues* tell of my great *Actions* past.
> Let every *Child,* when first tis taught to speak,
> Repeat my *Name,* my *Memory* for to keep.
> And then great *Fortune* give to me thy power,
> To ruine *Man,* and raise him in an *Houre.*
> Let me command the *Fates,* and spin their *thread;*
> And *Death* to stay his *Sithe*, when *I* forbid.
> And, *Destiny,* give me your *Chaines* to tye,
> *Effects* from *Causes* to produce thereby.
> And let me like the *Gods* on high become,
> That nothing can but by my *will* be done.[13]

The stress Margaret places not only on fame but also on the importance of the repetition of one's own name and on the crucial role of fortune in the careers of successful men creates a clearly discernible network of allusions to Caesar, the darling of Fortune for so many sixteenth- and seventeenth-century commentators, with her focus on the realization of her own *will* (besides the obvious religious connotations) potentially hinting at William Shakespeare's Caesar's famous line "The cause is in my will, I will not come."[14] Besides, Margaret's poem conspicuously mentions Julius Caesar side by side with Alexander the Great. This pairing recurs very frequently in Margaret's references to the heroes of the classical past. Margaret's model is likely to have been Plutarch, who had juxtaposed the biographies of Alexander and Caesar in his *Lives*. Specifically, Margaret would have probably been aware that in "The Life of Julius Caesar" Plutarch narrates that

> when he [i.e., Caesar] was in spayne, reading the history of *Alexanders* actes, when he had red it, he was sorowfull a good while after, & then burst out in weeping. His frends seeing that, marueled what should be the cause of his sorow. He aunswered them, doe ye not thinke sayd he, that I haue good cause to be heauie, when king *Alexander* being no older than my selfe is now, had in old time wonne so many nations and contries, and that I hithervnto haue done nothing worthy of my selfe?"[15]

From Plutarch onwards, the pairing of Caesar and Alexander became commonplace, and Margaret exploits it multiple times in her writings by coupling the two leaders as often

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13 Margaret Cavendish, *Poems, and Fancies* (London, 1653), 93–94.

14 William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, ed. David Daniell (Walton-on-Thames: Nelson, 1998), 2.2.71.

15 Plutarch, *The lives of the noble Grecians and Romanes compared together by that graue learned philosopher and historiographer, Plutarke of Chæronea; translated out of Greeke into French by Iames Amyot …; and out of French into Englishe, by Thomas North* (London, 1579), 768.

as possible on the grounds of their being equally possessed of extraordinary drive, ambition, and charisma.

That Margaret indisputably upholds Caesar as a model towards which to strive is also clear in *The Publick Wooing* (1662), when the reader is informed that an Englishman is the leader of the great Mogul's army, "and the Merchants do cry him up like to another Iulius Caesar."[16] In any event, no other passage can possibly epitomize Margaret's lifelong fondness for Caesar as effectively as her candid confession in the XXVII of her *Sociable Letters*:

> [O]f all the Men I read of, I Emulate *Iulius Caesar* most, because he was a man that had all these Excellencies, as Courage, Prudence, Wit and Eloquence, in great Perfection, insomuch as when I read of *Iulius Caesar*, I cannot but wish that Nature and Fate had made me such a one as he was; and sometimes I have that Courage, as to think I should not be afraid of his Destiny, so I might have as great a Fame.[17]

Margaret describes Caesar as the quintessential general, statesman, writer, and orator. As this excerpt makes apparent, he was possibly everything Margaret wished she could have been, the supreme embodiment of her fantasies of glory; in other words, he functioned as a sort of proxy through which Margaret could vicariously experience those kinds of glorious achievements that were firmly out of women's reach. What she particularly yearned for, however, was fame, which for Margaret, as Susan James argues, "was the opposite of oblivion, and consists in being remembered as an honourable person"; in Margaret's usage, adds Jean Gagen, fame was generally deployed "as a synonym for honor, in the sense of recognition and reward of actual merit."[18]

The character of Lady Sanspareille, who spends her time "contemplating" and writing verse in *Youths Glory, and Deaths Banquet. The First Part* (1662) but by the end of the play sinks to an untimely grave after winning a glorious fame, should probably be read as a literary realization of Margaret. This especially emerges when she discloses to her father that

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16 Margaret Cavendish, *The Publick Wooing*, 1.1, in *Playes*, 369. Although here Margaret seems optimistic about the possibility of emulating Caesar successfully, *The Sociable Companions* (1668) tells a different story. Here, as Dodds demonstrates, the scepticism displayed by the friends of Will Fullwit, a student of the classics, suggests "that the distance between past and present circumstances is too great for the classics to be fruitfully 'studied for action,' and, more pointedly, one of Will's companions warns that should Will try to 'make *Caesar* your Pattern, it were a thousand to one but you would shew your self rather a Fool than a *Caesar*' " (Margaret Cavendish, *The Sociable Companions*, 2.1, in *Plays, Never Before Printed* (London, 1668), 17; Dodds, "Reading and Writing," 208.)

17 Cavendish, *Sociable Letters*, 52.

18 Susan James, "Introduction," in Margaret Cavendish, *Political Writings*, ed. Susan James (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), ix–xxix, xviii; Jean Gagen, "Honor and Fame in the Works of the Duchess of Newcastle," *Studies in Philology* 56 (1959): 519–38 at 525.

> it is fame I covet, for which were the ambitions of *Alexander* and *Caesar* joyned into one mind, mine doth exceed them, as far as theirs exceeded humble spirits, my mind being restless to get the highest place in Fames high Tower; and I had rather fall in the adventure, than never try to climb; wherefore, it is not titled Honour, nor Wealth, nor Bravery, nor Beauty, nor Wit that I covet, but as they do contribute to adorn merit, which merit is the only foundation whereon is built a glorious fame, where noble actions is the architectour thereof, which makes me despairingly melancholly, having not a sufficient stock of merit, or if I had, yet no waies to advance it; but I must dye like beasts, forgotten of mankind, and be buried in Oblivions grave.[19]

The absence of proper outlets for a woman's ambition for fame tinges Lady Sanspareille's words with a depressing bitterness that betrays Margaret's own lifelong inner torment. For a woman like Margaret—inevitably excluded from heroic actions, public employments, or eloquent pleadings—fame could exclusively be achieved through authorship. As Margaret makes clear in another oft-quoted extract from the preface "To the Reader" in *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy to Which Is Added the Description of a New Blazing World* (1666),

> I am not Covetous, but as Ambitious as ever any of my Sex was, is, or can be; which makes, that though I cannot be *Henry* the Fifth, or *Charles* the Second, yet I endeavour to be *Margaret* the *First*; and although I have neither power, time nor occasion to conquer the world as *Alexander* and *Caesar* did; yet rather then not to be Mistress of one, since Fortune and the Fates would give me none, I have made a World of my own: for which no body, I hope, will blame me, since it is in every ones power to do the like.[20]

It would be neither mistaken nor an exaggeration to state that no other words ever written by Margaret manage more effectively to exemplify the ambition for fame that motivated her throughout her life. As Dolores Paloma points out, "The ideals and ambitions [Margaret] sought to realize in her own life were appropriated from and expressed in terms borrowed from the heroic ethic of the masculine world," a world from which, however, Margaret was irremediably excluded.[21] As a matter of fact, in one of the two designs Abraham van Diepenbeeck had prepared for Margaret's *Poems, and Fancies*, she appeared as a classical heroine between the busts of Minerva and Apollo, with a confident and masculine posture. In addition, her "hand resting on her hip is a common pose in the portraits of kings, aristocrats and great men, not normally seen in the portraits of women."[22] Moreover, several of Margaret's plays tell "the stories of exceptional women who entered the traditional male domains of war, politics and academia,

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19 Margaret Cavendish, *Youths Glory, and Deaths Banquet. The First Part*, 2.5, in *Playes*, 130.

20 Margaret Cavendish, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy to Which Is Added the Description of a New Blazing World* (London, 1666), sig. b**r.

21 Dolores Paloma, "Margaret Cavendish: Defining the Female Self," *Women's Studies* 7 (1980): 55–66 at 55–56.

22 Whitaker, *Mad Madge*, 179.

where they displayed a 'masculine' courage and ability, fulfilling Margaret's own frustrated ambitions for a 'heroic' life."[23]

Margaret's decision to achieve fame through writing set her apart from all other women in that, as Gagen observes, Margaret "alone of all the women writers of her day espoused writing as a career with the avowed intent of winning fame," fully aware "that in making her bid for fame by her venture into print she was arrogating to herself a goal for which, traditionally, only men had presumed to strive."[24] As James remarks, Margaret "began to publish her work and advertise her ambition for fame during the 1650s, at a time when the lives of exiled Royalists were in danger of being forgotten. In her own case, the fact that she had no children after several years of marriage may have increased her anxiety that she would disappear without a trace."[25] In doing so, Margaret was also advertising, as Katie Whitaker puts it, "an alternative model of feminine behaviour, based on the French fashion for heroic women" by presenting "the publication of her poetry not as a violation of the feminine virtues of modesty, silence and chastity, but as an honourable act, even a moral or religious duty."[26] After all, in Paloma's phrasing, she "didn't think much of the feminine world: it bred triviality, pettiness, and fearfulness"—even though such a position did change over time, as she eventually came to argue that "women shared men's rational souls, and were inferior only by nurture, not nature."[27]

Valour

Among the qualities that enabled Caesar to achieve fame, Margaret seems to have been especially fascinated by his valour. In one of her not-so-common forays into the interpretation of ancient history, Margaret even puts Caesar forward as indisputable proof of the ancient Britons' valour and courage:

> THE Britains of *England* were a Valiant People, but that they had not skill of Arms answerable to their Courage, as the Romans had; yet *Caesar,* and all the Emperours, could not conquer that Island in so short a time as *Alexander* had conquered most part of the World; therefore it seems their Courage was great, since their Skill was less, and could make it to the Romans so difficult a Work.[28]

Unsurprisingly, Caesar is here once more conceived as an unsurpassable model. His military prowess and martial attributes are so huge and resplendent that they even make his opponents bask in reflected glory. Quite inevitably, then, Caesar's greatness reverberates with yet stronger reason on his own soldiers, who emerge in *Orations of*

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23 Whitaker, *Mad Madge*, 214.

24 Gagen, "Honor and Fame," 520–21.

25 James, "Introduction," xviii.

26 Whitaker, *Mad Madge*, 157.

27 Paloma, "Defining the Female Self," 59; Whitaker, *Mad Madge*, 192.

28 Cavendish, *The Worlds Olio*, 125.

Divers Sorts Accommodated to Divers Places (1662) as models of masculinity and bravery, the instruments that decisively enabled Caesar to subdue the world:

> Wherefore give me leave to remember you of *Caesar'* Souldiers, for surely you could not choose but hear of them, their Fame being so great, and sounding so loud, for their Patience, Sufferance, Hardiness, Industry, Carefulness, Watchfulness, Valours and Victories, yet were they no more than men, and I hope you are not less than men; But there are two sorts of Courages, and they, as the Story says, had them both, as Fortitude in Suffering, and Valour in Acting, which made them so fortunate in overcoming, as to Conquer the most part of the World; and though I cannot hope you will Conquer All the World, yet I hope you will have Victory over your Enemies, so shall you be Masters and not Slaves.[29]

Caesar's glory is here synecdochically extended to his army, and their example is used by Margaret to fire the blood of ordinary men in necessity. Margaret's frequent stress on Caesar's warlike *virtus* is not only dependent on her ill-concealed envy for masculine courage and ability but also on the fact that Caesar reminded her of the martial ethos that had been a staple for the men of her family of origin, the Lucases: Thomas Lucas, her grandfather, had been captain in the Essex militia; John Lucas, her father, was "a noted duellist of his day, and [her] three brothers [John, Thomas, and Charles] and a nephew were to spend part or all of their adult lives as professional soldiers."[30] Margaret hugely admired each one of them, as she did her husband William, whose military valour and martial ideal of nobility had fascinated her since she first met him.

In Margaret's opinion, as James points out, "the supreme values of a healthy commonwealth are wisdom and above all honour. Communities dedicated to this end are by no means pacific, since military glory and the fame that accompanies it are essential aspects of the honour code."[31] As a consequence, Caesar and his army were also deployed to lament upon the lack of real heroes among the men of the modern world, as occurs, for example, in an exchange between two merchants in *Loves Adventures* (1662):

> 2. *Merchant.*
> For my part, I cannot think they are so good Souldiers as they were in *Caesars* time.
> 1. *Merchant.*
> That may be, for there is no such souldiers as *Caesars* souldiers were, no not in the world; that is, there are no men so patient, obedienz, carefull, industrious, laborious, daring, adventurous, resolute, and active, in these Warrs, in this age, as the *Romans* were in *Caesars* time; and of all the souldiers, *Caesars* souldiers were the best, and of all commanders *Caesar* himself.[32]

Here, Caesar and his soldiers are used as a means to compare a glorious past with a corrupt present, as they feature all those traits—which Margaret makes a point of listing

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29 Margaret Cavendish, *Orations of Divers Sorts Accommodated to Divers Places* (London, 1662), 29–30.

30 Whitaker, *Mad Madge*, 6.

31 James, "Introduction," xxiv.

32 Margaret Cavendish, *Loves Adventures*, 2.6, in *Playes*, 12.

in painstaking detail—that were regularly attached to traditional representations of masculine martial virtue and especially associated with Roman *virtus*, such as *dignitas*, *integritas*, *constantia*, *fides*, *pietas*, *gravitas*, and *sobrietas*.[33]

Marriage and Gender

Caesar, however, populates Margaret's imagination—or, as she would have had it, fancy—not only as a touchstone for military enterprises of great pith and moment but also as a historical personality that is quite unexpectedly susceptible of entering other, more unusually domestic realms for a Roman general. One example is cuckoldry. As the Adviser tells Lord Court in *The First Part of the Lady Contemplation*, "it is a hundred to one but a man when he is maryed shall be Cuckolded, were he as wise as Solomon, as valiant as David, as fortunate as Caesar, as witty as Homer, or as handsome as Absalom; for Women are of the same Nature as men, for not one man amongst a thousand makes a good Husband, nor one woman amongst a thousand makes an honest Wife."[34] In an odd anticipation of the notion of gender equality simultaneously channelling the familiar early modern anxiety that a man should prove a cuckold and his wife turn whore, Margaret puts Caesar forward as an example of outstanding fortune that would not—in hypothetical terms—preclude cuckoldry.

Yet Caesar is also upheld as *exemplum* of the proper behaviour men ought to keep with women in *The Worlds Olio*: "But he that strives with his Wife, to win the Breeches, would have never had the wit to have fought the Battels of *Caesar*. … It is more honour for a Man to be led Captive by a Woman, than to contend by resistance; for a Man can receive no dishonour to be taken Prisoner by the Effeminat Sex."[35] Here, in clarifying that men ought not to strive for superiority with women, Margaret apparently debunks the widespread early modern stereotype of feminization as the most terrible danger men might be exposed to. *Apparently*, however, is the key word here, inasmuch as captivity under a woman is seen as a positive prospect for men exclusively within wedlock. Margaret was a strong advocate of the institution of marriage and made a conscious and sustained effort to make it look more appealing than, for early modern women, it otherwise would.

Wives were very important to husbands in many respects, Margaret believed, and this was an absolute staple of her matrimonial propaganda. As she forcefully argues in *The Worlds Olio*,

> *Caesar* shewed himself a Fool in nothing but in quitting his Guard, and not hearkning to his Wife, which was to shew his Courage, and to let the World see he durst go unarmed, singly alone as it were, and his freedom from the chains of fond Affection; thus quitting Prudence and Love, he dyed too violent a Death. And *Seianus* quitting the Affection towards his Wife, and placing it upon *Julian*, raised such a Jealousie in *Tyberius,* as it

33 Clifford J. Ronan, *"Antike Roman": Power Symbology and the Roman Play in Early Modern England: 1585–1635* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 151–54.

34 Cavendish, *The First Part of the Lady Contemplation*, 2.7, in *Playes*, 190–91.

35 Cavendish, *Worlds Olio*, 71.

> cost him his Life, otherwise he might have ruled the Empire, and so the most part of the World. Thus *Anthony's* leaving his Wife for the love of *Cleopatra*, lost him the third part of the World. … And if Caesar had condescended to his Wives Perswasion, he had not gone to the Senate that day; and who knows but the next might have discovered the Conspiracy?[36]

There is a single thing Caesar's, Sejanus's, and Antony's falls have in common: they can all be traced back to their not heeding their own wives' advice. Despite what Margaret used to write about women's weakness and ignorance, here she suggests that a wise man ought to take his wife's counsel very seriously. This complicates more traditional readings of Margaret's views on marriage, which sometimes stress the extent to which she tended to follow conventions in accepting powerless wives as inferior and subservient to husbands. In the passage quoted above, Margaret seems to imply that wives (rather than women in general) are repositories of a particular kind of wisdom that husbands are not always ready to take in and understand, to their own detriment. In other words, husbands should "strive to please, and yield to" their wives "in all things but what will do them harm."[37]

Margaret's attempt to advertise marriage as an appealing institution can be read together with her own defence "*Of* Cleopatra," again in *The Worlds Olio*. Here, as Romack insightfully argues, Margaret "unequivocally aligns Cleopatra with matrimonial virtue," and, by "upholding Cleopatra's 'constancy,' [she] transforms Cleopatra's libidinous play into a strategy to be emulated by wives to ensure successful and happy marriages."[38] This way, continues Romack, Margaret portrays Cleopatra as a paradigmatic woman able to reconcile "sexual desire and chastity," thus "promoting, in effect, female desire for domesticity by lending a certain realism and attractiveness to marriage," so that "the wifely Cleopatra" becomes "both interesting and sexy—buttressing the affective and sexual ties of companionate marriage in ways that her masculine contemporaries could never have hoped to accomplish."[39]

Leaving marriage aside, Margaret also offers a somewhat unusual reading of Caesar's relationships with women in *Wits Cabal, The Second Part* (1662) in a conversation between Ambition, Faction, Pleasure, Superbe, and Portrait. To Ambition's statement that "Women are the greatest Conquerors, because they conquer conquering men, and make them become slaves"—including "the power-fullest men, as *Alexander* and *Caesar*"—Faction retorts that in fact

> Women never made a Conquest of the two latter, and therefore cannot be said to be absolute Conquerors: for none are absolute Conquerors but those that conquer power, that is, those that get absolute dominion over all the World, which *Alexander* and *Caesar* are said to have done by their Valour and Conduct; and never any Woman or Women conquer'd

36 Cavendish, *Worlds Olio*, 83.

37 Cavendish, *Worlds Olio*, 71.

38 Romack, "Cleopatra Restored," 194.

39 Romack, "Cleopatra Restored," 195.

> those men, as to get them to yield up their power for a womans sake, which shews they were not rul'd by women, although they lov'd women.[40]

To Faction's convoluted explanation, Portrait replies that "*Alexander* nor *Caesar* lived not so long a time, as to be Conquer'd by women: for women must have time and opportunity for to gain the Conquest in, as well as men have."[41] This is again countered by Faction, who remarks that "If *Alexander* and *Caesar* must have been old before they possibly could have been conquer'd, it proves that women do rather conquer Age, than power weakens the strength; and the truth is, women conquer nothing but the vices, weaknesses, and defects of men," and "they cannot conquer mens fix'd Resolutions, their heroick Valours, their high Ambitions, their magnificent Generosities, their glorious Honours, or their conquering or over-ruling Powers: Nor can women conquer their moral Vertues, as their Prudence, Fortitude, Justice, and Temperance."[42] Here Caesar (again considered side by side with Alexander the Great) is therefore taken as litmus test for the seductive power of women; the debate is whether Caesar—who was never thoroughly dominated by a woman—would have been conquered had he lived long enough. In other words, Margaret deploys Caesar here as an extreme of manliness whose hypothetical conquest by women would have been outstandingly impressive.

Outcaesaring Caesar

In light of the references to Caesar that have thus far been surveyed in this chapter, it may come as a bit of a surprise that in the moralistic, proto-psychological review "Of the Emperors" in *The Worlds Olio*—which seems to suggest that Margaret had been reading Suetonius's *Twelve Caesars*—an innuendo on Caesar possibly hints at a not completely unqualified admiration: "*Caesar* might have proved a good Emperor, but he had not time to be an ill one."[43] This perspective contradicts the feeling of lamentable incompleteness that Margaret conveys in "Of Caesar," also in *The Worlds Olio*: "Half *Caesar's* Deeds dyed when he dyed: for though his Fortunes were to shew himself a Valiant Man, a Good Souldier, and a Carefull Commander, yet he lived not to shew Justice in the Publick, as what Laws he would make, or what Government he would form; so that *Caesar* onely lived to shew his Conduct in Wars, but not his Magistracy in Peace."[44] The difference is apparent in the fact that in the former passage Caesar's death is conceived as timely for his reputation, while in the second instance it is construed as an event that prevented him from leaving to posterity an even more glorious image to worship. With this contradiction, Margaret therefore inscribes herself in that long line of commentators from

40 Margaret Cavendish, *Wits Cabal, The Second Part*, 1.3, in *Playes*, 295.

41 Cavendish, *Wits Cabal*, 1.3, in *Playes*, 295.

42 Cavendish, *Wits Cabal*, 1.3, in *Playes*, 296.

43 Cavendish, *Worlds Olio*, 128.

44 Cavendish, *Worlds Olio*, 132.

the first century BCE down to the early modern era that had expressed mixed views on virtually every aspect of Caesar's biography.

Even more interestingly, however, Margaret sometimes turns out to be bold enough to depict herself (and her husband) as *superior* to Caesar, as occurs in "The Epilogue to the Reader" to *The New Blazing World*, where she claims that her

> Creation was more easily and suddenly effected, then the Conquests of the two famous Monarchs of the World, *Alexander* and *Caesar*: Neither have I made such disturbances, and caused so many … deaths, as they did … And in the formation of those Worlds, I take more delight and glory, then ever *Alexander* or *Caesar* did in conquering this terrestrial world.[45]

Albeit with her unmistakable touch of irony and wit, Margaret advertises her own accomplishment as obtained even more quickly than the conquests of Caesar, who had been repeatedly praised by historians for his swiftness of action; she also points out that she has been gentler and more courteous than him in provoking considerably less trouble and strife while carrying out her deeds. Moreover, she underlines the fact that she has *created* worlds rather than simply *conquered* one. And as a creator, she seems to imply, she has attained an even higher standing than Caesar, since only deities have the power to create, not mere mortals. On these worlds of her own creation she can exercise absolute dominion and obliquely concretize her more covert aspirations to being not just a writer but a ruler, the self-fashioned Margaret the First.[46]

Such a sense of superiority also surfaces in the *Life of William*, where Margaret's effort to belittle Caesar is part of a strategy aimed at aggrandizing her beloved husband. Here Margaret mentions fortune again but to a different end, namely contending that "had *Caesar* not been fortunate, his Valour and Prudence would never have gained him so much applause."[47] She further elaborates that

> many by flattering Poets, have been compared to *Caesar*, without desert; but this I dare freely and without flattery say of my Lord, That though he had not *Caesars* Fortune, yet he wanted not *Caesars* Courage, nor his Prudence, nor his good Nature, nor his Wit; Nay, in some particulars he did more then *Caesar* ever did; for though *Caesar* had a great Army, yet he was first set out by the State or Senators of *Rome*, who were Masters almost of all the World; when as my Lord raised his Army … most upon his own Interest … at such a time when his Gracious King and Soveraign was then not Master of his own Kingdoms, He being over-power'd by his rebellious Subjects.[48]

In this passage, as Fitzmaurice sums up, Margaret "reminds her reader that her husband's army was funded by himself, his friends, and his kin, not by the king. The

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45 Cavendish, *Observations*, sig. Iir.

46 In the late 1650s Margaret would indeed be hailed at Cambridge as "Margareta I, Philosophorum Princeps," an incomparable consummation of a life's work—if somewhat overblown and exaggeratedly hyperbolic to our twenty-first-century eyes.

47 Margaret Cavendish, *The Life of the Thrice Noble, High and Puissant Prince William Cavendishe, Duke, Marquess and Earl of Newcastle* (London, 1667), 177.

48 Cavendish, *Life*, 192.

implication here is that when Newcastle's money was gone, he had no choice but to retire into exile."[49] Margaret, adds Fitzmaurice, "also slips in a few particulars of her understanding of her subject's character: Caesar was likeable, as was the case with Newcastle. Caesar and Newcastle were both prudent; both were gifted with wit."[50] Yet Margaret's love for her husband is far too important for her to put anyone else above him. And this includes Caesar.

The disproportionate role of fortune in Caesar's ascending parable comes up again in *Natures Picture*, where Margaret can be seen to go as far as to make Caesar's greatness appear somewhat questionable as depending more on extrinsic than intrinsic factors. She does so while discussing her own take on the theory of reincarnation, which entails forgetfulness of one's previous life and identity, so that any given creature, once reborn, might

> come to envy his own Renown, which was kept alive by Records from Age to Age; as if … *Alexander* and *Caesar* should be created again, and should envy their own Actions, Victories, and Powers, or (at least) grieve and repine they cannot do the like: for if they were created again, they might miss of the same Occasions, Opportunities or Powers, Birth or Fortunes: for though the Body and Soul may be the same, as also the Appetites and the Desires; yet the outward concurrence may not be the same that was in the former Being.[51]

As Whitaker argues, Margaret maintained that fame "could come without rhyme or reason, without worth or virtue, the result merely of fickle Fortune," and if Margaret could not get fame by desert, she was willing to obtain it by chance, as long as she attained it.[52] In this specific passage, however, what Margaret seems to imply is that Caesar's (and Alexander's) more positive qualities would have been utterly meaningless without the right "Occasions, Opportunities or Powers, Birth or Fortunes," which appear to have a much higher relevance than inner qualities. The afflicting first-hand experience of the sufferings that came along with the Civil War made the overwhelming force of history and fate all too apparent and palpable to Margaret, so that it is rather unsurprising that in the *Life of William* she ended up placing such considerable relevance on the role of external forces, the workings of fortune, and their capacity to influence and even determine human lives.

Nonetheless, Margaret also seems to have thought that fortune had been somehow bestowed on Caesar because he did deserve it by virtue of his liberality. This is, at least, the idea expressed by the Second Virgin in *The Unnatural Tragedie* (1662): "there is no Prince that hath had the like good fortune as *Alexander* and *Caesar*, so none have had the like Generosities as they had, which shews, as if Fortune … measur'd her gifts by the largeness of the Heart, and the liberality of the hand of those she gave to."[53] The

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49 Fitzmaurice, "Margaret Cavendish's 'Life of William,' " 85.

50 Fitzmaurice, "Margaret Cavendish's 'Life of William,' " 85.

51 Cavendish, *Natures Picture*, 603.

52 Whitaker, *Mad Madge*, 170–71.

53 Margaret Cavendish, *The Unnatural Tragedie*, 2.10, in *Playes*, 332.

Third Virgin approves of this statement, arguing that it was not "the glory of Victory, and conquering the most part of the World, which made *Alexander* and *Caesar* to be so much reverenc'd, admir'd, and renown'd by those following Ages; but that their Heroick Actions were seconded with their generous deeds, distributing their good fortune to the most deserving and meritorious persons in their Parties."[54] All things considered, it seems quite likely that Margaret felt exactly the same.

Conclusion

Mapping out and taking a closer look at the allusions and references to Julius Caesar in Margaret Cavendish's plays, poems, and prose works has exposed the complexities and nuances that characterize her appropriation of the most popular personality of the Roman past and will hopefully be helpful to future explorations of Margaret's engagement with Roman history at large. More than a mere model to emulate (or even to exceed), more than just a proxy through which vicariously to experience fantasies of glory unattainable for women, Caesar emerges as a discursive tool of choice that Margaret deploys in very different contexts such as discussions of cuckoldry and marriage, or even using him as a litmus test for women's seductive power, thus embedding the ancient within the contemporary while simultaneously capitalizing on Caesar's status as an immediately recognizable figure for learned and unlearned readers alike. All in all, this chapter therefore opens a fresh window on Margaret's active participation in seventeenth-century intellectual life, while at the same time providing further insights into how uneducated readers of the vernacular more generally, and women in particular, engaged with classical heritage.[55]

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54 Cavendish, *Unnatural Tragedie*, 2.13, in *Playes*, 338.

55 Dodds, "Reading and Writing," 193.

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