



WRITING, GENDER  
AND STATE IN  
EARLY MODERN  
ENGLAND

IDENTITY FORMATION  
AND THE FEMALE  
SUBJECT

MEGAN MATCHINSKE

# Writing, gender and state in early modern England

*Identity formation and the female subject*

Megan Matchinske

*Assistant Professor of English  
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*



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## Introduction

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Margaret Cavendish, first Duchess of Newcastle, opens her memoir by recounting a crisis of conscience she faced in her courtly duties at Oxford in the early years of the English Civil War. She writes:

My brothers and sisters seemed not very well pleased [with my mother's decision to allow me to wait upon the Queen at Oxford], by reason I had never been from home . . . for though they knew I would not behave myself to their . . . dishonour, yet they thought I might to my disadvantage, being very unexperienced in the world . . . [As a result of their warnings and because] I had heard the world was apt to lay aspersions even on the innocent . . . I durst neither look up with my eyes, nor speak, nor be any way sociable: insomuch as I was thought a natural fool . . . And indeed I was so afraid to dishonour my friends and family by my indiscreet actions, that I rather chose to be accounted a fool, than to be thought rude or wanton. In truth, my bashfulness and fears made me repent my going from home to see the world abroad.<sup>1</sup>

In these lines, Cavendish reminds her readers that her demeanor at court depends on several things. In order to accommodate cultural imperatives that demand the absolute innocence of women and aware that even a flawless performance on her part will not guarantee success, she over-plays her role. She bows her head and shuts her mouth, withdrawing from social contact of any kind. At the same time, Cavendish realizes the repercussions of her actions. In carrying them out she will be thought "a natural fool."

Cavendish's anecdote illustrates the historical contingencies of Englishwomen's social negotiations in the middle years of the seventeenth century. In her account, Cavendish recognizes the effect of her conduct – the way that her behavior will make her appear to others – yet she reminds her readers that her actions are her own. Hers is a conscious decision to play the fool. Cavendish apparently chooses this tactic in order to avoid charges of rude or wanton behavior: "I was so afraid to dishonour my friends and family by my indiscreet actions, that I rather chose to be accounted a fool." That Cavendish makes a choice, albeit a choice circumscribed by a clearly defined and narrow set of options, is



key to the construction of identity – of feminine identity – in her work. Her rhetorical frame presents the subject of this narrative as both active, in determining the shape and course of her life, and reactive, in making her decisions on the basis of a set of cultural directives external to her.

Cavendish's decision to demur, dependent as it is on factors outside of her control, and politically troubling as it may appear to modern readers, nevertheless empowers her. Later in her account, she tells her readers that it is her fool's act that secures her a high-status marriage: "for my lord the Marquis of Newcastle did approve of those bashful fears which many condemned and would choose such a wife as he might bring to his own humours." Cavendish's choice, perhaps much like her husband's own, offers her leverage within a culture that is materially different from our own. Her account and the actions she describes within it are based on seventeenth-century assumptions about women's cultural status – about what is permissible and what is not, in 1641, in *Oxford*, for *maids of honour*. Accordingly, for modern readers to talk of closed lips and bowed heads as evidence of Cavendish's surrender to normative culture would be inaccurate and unhelpful. The logistics of her eventual title bear this out. As a married duchess, Cavendish will be able to speak her mind more openly than many of her social and economic inferiors, both women and men, despite and because of that earlier silence. Of this, the sheer volume of her published poetry and prose offers substantial proof. Within *her* cultural context, playing the court fool makes sense – strategic sense. What I want to stress here is the material specificity of Cavendish's negotiation and our critical responsibility in attending to it. Reading Cavendish's text within a frame that considers both the range of her options and the kinds of relationships she is able to forge within them complicates and enriches what we are able to say about her. It allows us to talk about how identity, here aristocratic feminine identity, accommodates cultural imperatives at one and the same time that it actively sets about sabotaging them.

Within the above anecdote, Cavendish recognizes the differences for women between a life at court and a life at home.<sup>2</sup> She understands home as a place of retreat, separate from and safer than "the world abroad." When Cavendish publishes her account in 1656, home is where she belongs, a place she "repent[s]" ever having left. At the same time, she understands that her own best interests may be in conflict with those of her supporters. While her narrative recognizes "friends and family" as the recipients of any dishonor that may accrue should she conduct herself improperly, Cavendish claims responsibility for maintaining that honor herself. *Her* discreet behavior will secure their reputation; *her* wantonness, their disgrace. "Friends and family" would feel the effects of her

“dishonour” – a dishonor that is here explicitly feminized – in lost privilege, lack of preferment, and aristocratic scandal. In contrast, the “disadvantage” that she describes is all her own. Her social inexperience may secure for her an advantageous match; the duke wants a wife whom he can “bring to his own humours.” But her inexperience will also render her foolish. The criteria for appropriate behavior, the ways that various readings of that behavior both impinge on others and determine the self, are multiply inflected. They have different repercussions in different social situations. Privileging one set of options – in this case, home/family/husband – creates dislocations in another. Cavendish’s actions are unacceptable at court and in the world abroad.

Between the English Reformation and the Civil War, the space dividing private identity from public persona, personal history from state archive, is widening. So too, the cultural markers that separate women from men and status from status are becoming more discrete. Writing her memoir in the aftermath of civil upheaval, Cavendish understands her place within these categories in a markedly different manner from her Reformation and Counter-Reformation predecessors. Not only would earlier women of similar status have been incapable of drawing the sorts of distinctions between home and court, between self and society, that Cavendish does in her memoir (largely because those categories did not exist in quite so discrete a form), but the literal forum for those pronouncements – the personal memoir – also would likely have been unavailable. Indeed, writing a “life” for purposes other than religious exposition was largely unthinkable in Henrician England.<sup>3</sup> Early sixteenth-century writers and readers knew their place in terms rather different from those used by Cavendish.

In the pages that follow I would like to exaggerate the dislocations – historic, political, economic, and religious – that eventually shaped Cavendish’s notions of the permissible within the early modern English state. In order to do so I will attend to two interrelated and historically unstable terms: “gender” and “state.” During the hundred years following Henry VIII’s break with the Roman Catholic Church, England was in the process of constructing its national identity by recasting current sites of authority into new and more diverse forms. Where people in early sixteenth-century England had depended for moral guidance (and its attendant behavioral coercion) on church and monarchy, the increasingly diverse economic, political, and religious circumstances of the Reformation required additional and more disparate forms of social regulation. Printing presses, changes in market and land use, revisions in church policy and practice, redistribution of property and title, a bureaucratization of royal government and civil service, all of these allowed for and

insisted on a multitude of differing registers within the “state” to monitor behavior and determine acceptable codes of conduct for the English people.<sup>4</sup>

Where earlier versions of private identity and selfhood had been almost uniformly associated with the spiritual, with conversations between priests and penitents,<sup>5</sup> those spaces too change in shape and form during the Tudor and Stuart periods. They become broader and more secular in scope.<sup>6</sup> It is my contention that the domain of the private is, by 1640, concrete, defined, and invasive. Spiritual interiority and religious conscience have been joined by a variety of other private spaces. In addition to singular relationships between private sinners and their God, between secret thoughts and their public ramifications, notions of a secularized civic conscience also begin to gain cultural weight. Accordingly, we can document during this later period an increase in personal litigation;<sup>7</sup> a privatization of political, economic, and familial responsibility;<sup>8</sup> a specialization in business and government skills;<sup>9</sup> as well as a more overtly consumer-based notion of goods and services.<sup>10</sup> As the domestic acquires authority, its purveyors become more carefully defined as well. Women begin to replace priests as regulators of conscience and bearers of secular *and* spiritual morality. Indeed, this transformation marks one of the most significant, powerful, and disturbing cultural upheavals to occur for early modern women like Cavendish.

Where the roles distinguishing women from men were less carefully articulated (if equally restrictive) in the years preceding the English Reformation, by the beginning of the seventeenth century<sup>11</sup> legislation has been set in place, suggesting both a more general anxiety about gender difference and a need to document its various permutations. In the 1520s, both middling-rank and aristocratic wives might work beside their husbands as shop keepers, candle makers, and estate owners; by mid-century, laws that restrict and segregate such employment have been enacted. Some of the most telling legislation to suggest this dis-ease over gender categories can be found in the regulation of labor. The Statute of Artificers of 1563 included, amongst its other provisions for servants, compulsory and gender-specific employment – men in husbandry, women in domestic service.<sup>12</sup> Guild regulations limiting membership and eligibility for women also came into play, though to a far lesser degree than on the continent. Property law, marriage licensing, and inheritance regulation prove sites of intense redefinition as well, in both protecting and undermining women’s rights.<sup>13</sup> These qualifications have the joint effect of both specifying and gendering appropriate identity for English men and women by the 1640s.

In this book, I juxtapose the construction of a private and always

gendered self to another construction, that of the emerging English state.<sup>14</sup> Tracing the intersections between subject and state across several textually and historically discrete moments, I chart a discursive shift from early sixteenth-century understandings of private conscience as individually generated and spiritually motivated, to civil-war perceptions of interiority as state-inscribed and gender-inflected – a site of civil and sexual invigilation and control. Mapping the proliferation of competing cultural arenas within early modern England as well as the increasingly restrictive nature of each, my analyses not only illustrate the relationships between state and local identities, but also, and perhaps more evocatively, reveal what happens when gender determines those developing identities differently for women and men. The narrative frame that Cavendish employs in scripting her own identity suggests to what extent those refigurings have taken place by mid century. It situates the points of contest – her ability to articulate competing identities – within a carefully prescribed, gender-specific opposition between home and the world abroad, between private disadvantage and public dishonor for women. It is the connection between gender and statehood, largely unexplored by critics of social and cultural formation, that the following chapters will foreground.<sup>15</sup>

### **Material contexts: theirs, mine, and ours**

There is, or should be, a sense of community-building at the beginning of academic pursuits – an acknowledgment of others who grapple with the same questions and concerns, exploring the all-too-familiar terrain of one's own enthusiasms. Since the 1980s, a number of scholars sharing an engagement with and investment in the study of women's history have come together in a collaborative effort to understand England's past in terms of its impact on women. In recent years, this community of scholars has grown enormously. So too has the range and sophistication of critical strategies used in investigating its myriad questions. Less than a generation ago, the task before critics of women's literary history was largely one of recovery. Scholars like Katherine Usher Henderson, Elaine Hobby, Elspeth Graham, Germaine Greer, and Betty Travitsky, began the difficult task of compilation, gathering together manuscripts and out-of-print texts by women poets, diarists, playwrights, and pamphleteers.<sup>16</sup> Their efforts to make sixteenth- and seventeenth-century women's writings accessible to a wider audience were in large part responsible for the almost geometric increase in critical studies that focus on these texts today.<sup>17</sup> Several essay collections bring together a vast range of methodological and interdisciplinary frames from which to consider early modern

women's writings.<sup>18</sup> Other book-length studies investigate the cultural dynamics of gender construction across economic, generic, and religious lines.<sup>19</sup>

Where early critical works necessarily focus on introductions, supplying biography and historical context, recent studies have begun to diverge from that model. As more and more scholars have become actively involved in reinterpreting the early modern period in terms of a wider reading of its various voices, the direction of critical research is beginning to change as well. No longer content to see women's voices either subsumed by established texts and histories or kept in isolation from them, recent scholars are more likely to rethink Elizabethan and Stuart institutions and ideologies in light of these works than to insert them into existing categories of masculinist thought or to essentialize them as a separate study altogether.

Before the recent rediscovery of women's writings, much of the standard literature of the early modern period offered little critical legitimacy for making claims to feminine authority. This problem was compounded by the fact that critics were largely dependent on that literature to write female identity.<sup>20</sup> Early analyses that took as their focus male writers such as Shakespeare and Jonson were frequently framed in one of two ways. They opted either to promote some sort of proto-feminist bias that had little connection to the material circumstances of early modern women, or conversely to disallow agency altogether in a reiteration of women's absence of choice and restricted domain. Less "canonical" texts, many of them authored by women, can offer insights into early modern women's cultural roles and obligations, especially when critics attempt to consider them within a wider range of textual traditions. Extending the boundaries of study, however, is not, in itself, sufficient.

"Paramount to a more informed cultural project is a willingness to interrogate these writings within their material contexts, to forestall our own critical (sometimes feminist-inspired) impulses to label them as either successful or failed as a result of their negotiations."<sup>21</sup> Margaret J. M. Ezell explains that the problem with much women's literary history results from "certain models of historiography which have been imported into women's studies without [adequate] scrutiny of the assumptions they contain about the nature of authorship and the generation of literary history."<sup>22</sup> This problem is compounded when we bring to bear on these texts aesthetic perspectives (our own as well as those of early modern readers) that are not sufficiently interrogated. In the analyses that follow I want to explore the ways in which early modern women's individual articulations and negotiations collide with, negate, and support more

pervasive, frequently masculine-based, cultural directives. I also want to imagine how those intersections might create multiple narratives that evolve over time. Most women writers of the early modern period did not question dominant masculinist literary modes of production. They did not defy generic expectation. Nor did they altogether reject the assumptions on which those ideas depended. Such acts were untenable. There were, nevertheless, an increasing number of women writers who were inserting themselves into established dialogues, negotiating positions from which to claim authority or define self, and changing the very forms that identity would take (Matchinske, "Credible Consorts," 435).

All of the writers whom I consider here claim affiliations very different from my own.<sup>23</sup> Most of their writings imagine women to be inferior to men and accept as given women's secondary cultural status as wives, mothers, and daughters, dependent for financial, intellectual, and physical support on others. The majority of the works that I consider espouse religious and political beliefs that deny or limit women's public voice and know a woman's place in society according to standards that have little in common with current feminisms or the positions from which they speak. The prophetic Lady Eleanor Davies, writing in the throes of civil war, advocates a program of religious intolerance and militancy that many find unnerving, particularly given its similarities to recent fundamentalist agendas in the United States. While there is little about her value system that modern feminists might admire, it is precisely Davies's distance that I think merits further study.

"How do the often restrictive and seemingly self-deprecatory rhetorical stances that early modern women assert serve the authors who write them? What sorts of prompts encourage them?" (Matchinske, "Credible Consorts," 435). How do they come to represent legitimate and powerful sites for female authority and voice for women in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England? In each of the following explorations I will attempt to decipher the particular modes of legitimacy and/or articulation available to early modern women writers, always bearing in mind that their articulations, however successful, frequently serve contradictory agendas and policies.<sup>24</sup> Finally, given that the majority of English narratives that remain for us as modern readers and critics are predominantly masculinist in make-up – that the bulk of cultural directives charted to date are "woman-blind" – how can we account for women's voices and choices in surviving these conditions?

While women have been denied standing in politics and government throughout English history (with several rather notable exceptions),<sup>25</sup> many less well-placed sixteenth- and seventeenth-century women entered into debates on political rights, on religious freedoms, and on women's



investment in each. "These were women who, in responding to and rewriting current directives and available ideologies, *did* make choices, many of them astonishing in light of their insights and courage" (Matchinske, "Credible Consorts," 436). What I am interested in charting is how these various choices have been historically-coded, how they fit into wider social norms and policies. "In a culture that . . . [was] announcing subject definition (both masculine and feminine) in ever narrowing and specific spheres of influence," these women continued to articulate identity, defining their own lives in that process (Matchinske, "Credible Consorts," 436).

In the studies that follow, I consider the construction of state and gender formulations chronologically, around temporally discrete sets of historical variables and constraints. I take, as the centerpiece to each micro-discussion, the writings of early modern women – women who as a result of their social, religious, political, and chronological positions navigate place in strikingly different ways. Each of the women I have chosen illustrates an effective program of self-definition and authorization. Each negotiates problems central to her own cultural environment. And all four of the women who make up the narratives within this book share their concerns with scores of writers, both female and male, writing contemporaneously with them. As authors and subjects of the various discourses I consider, these women actively recast as well as react to boundaries imposed by those in positions of power. Anne Askew, religious reformer writing in 1546, is tried for heresy; Margaret Clitherow, 1580s recusant butcher's wife, for treachery. Ester Sowernam, women's legal advocate in the early years of the seventeenth century, demands marriage security; and Eleanor Davies, high-born civil-war prophet, active defiance of England's monarch. Yet all four do more than simply counter the opposition. Each rewrites the criteria of her confinement.

In the early years of the Reformation, Anne Askew questions the interpretive and doctrinal boundaries of England's changing religion. And in doing so, she realigns many of the social strictures imposed on her as a woman. Forty years later, in the midst of an intense English nationalism, Margaret Clitherow redefines her allegiance to country and to queen. Deploying religious and domestic obligations in opposition to state policy, Clitherow establishes for herself a forum for voice and choice. Ester Sowernam, in turn, attends to concerns over women's marital opportunities at a moment when those opportunities are being directly challenged and constrained. She neutralizes anxieties inherent within her culture about changing notions of marriage and status by embracing those changes in full. Finally, like those who precede her,

Lady Eleanor Davies enters into one of the principal discursive debates of her time. In writing the apocalypse and charting the downfall of the king, Davies engages in state-making; she navigates a multiply-inflected field of social allegiances only to find that despite notoriety, priorities do matter, especially when one is a woman. These women's material engagements – religious, national, domestic, and political – touch nerves central to the English state and to definitions of the self as gendered. In each case they carry within them the dynamic for social change.

### Theorizing the terms

While early modern state practices are both contradictory and mutually reinforcing in the way that they gender subjects, it is nevertheless possible to construct from them a theory of gender- and state-formation that implies both direction and intent. This theoretical construct, incomplete and heuristic though it must be, can allow us to consider the connections – culturally realized in such varied events as the successes of ruling bodies or the stability of local economies – between individual desire and social law, between an understanding of the self as gendered and a belief in the inviolability of nation or national cause.

Before I map such a theory, however, I want to remind my readers that the following explorations are always textually bound, in terms both of the narratives I encounter and the framings I impose on them. In my discussion I will necessarily look to language, to the words and voices that these and other writers have left behind. The only access I have to the histories of these women is textual. Accordingly, genre and style must provide the matter for discussion. As my task is explicitly rhetorical, I will be interested in attending to the discursive questions that such narratives introduce. How was each writing received? In what contexts were individual texts legitimate or open to attack? How were they transmitted and in what forms were they made available? Certainly, my own training as literary critic requires me to engage these writings intimately – in a way that reveals their strategies and illustrates their literariness. As a close reader I intend to encounter them, then, in terms of their particulars and look to the slight shadings of tone that direct our attention and engage us as readers. I hope in addition to read as closely in social formation as in textual nuance, exploring the rhetoric of contexts as well as the intonation of words. Such a redirection insists that I pay equally close attention to the cultural discourses within which these women and their writings circulated.

When I speak about early modern women's writings, I am locating that point of reference materially – in the lives of the individuals who

wrote them, as well as the discursive trail they have left behind. The lived politics of Askew's, Clitherow's, Sowernam's, and Davies's material experiences do matter, and they are evident in the texts that survive them. Accordingly, while over 300 years separate the historical moment of these women from my own, I hope to describe an agency that extended beyond the writings I discuss (no matter how elusive) and a repressive environment (no matter how distant) that affected what could and what could not be said within them. That one of the women whom I will consider, Margaret Clitherow, was a recusant butcher's wife from Lincoln with two children and a house in town does matter; it does have consequence, both for the choices she was able to make and the choices that were made for her. That she left no written account of her experiences (her life is recorded by her confessor, Father John Mush) necessarily and absolutely limits what can be said about her and the way such speakings must be framed. But it cannot and should not preclude discussion entirely. Theories of discourse that occlude that material experience are historically incomplete and politically irresponsible.

Probably one of the most freighted and troubling sets of variables that I consider centers on questions of subjectivity and the formation of a gendered social identity. The social construction of gender categories results from material policies and practices that privilege certain behaviors, carry certain expectations, and demand specific obligations on the part of their participants. Accordingly, to talk about a particular writing as qualitatively different in voice or intent from another, simply by virtue of the supposed gender of its author, appears to make little sense. Despite this apparent determinism, I will discuss the following texts as revealing a woman's perspective or negotiating women's concerns in their handling of materials and issues. While I would be loathe to assert direct correlations, I do, nevertheless, want to argue for a textually announced gendering. Laying claim to female identity can be rhetorically powerful – both as policy and as strategy. Linda Alcoff reminds us that “women can take up a [gendered] position, a point of perspective, from which to interpret or (re)construct values and meanings.”<sup>26</sup> “Gender is not natural, biological, universal, ahistorical, or essential,” she writes, “and yet . . . gender is relevant because we are taking gender as a position from which to act politically” (“Cultural Feminism,” 433). Women make choices throughout their lives that announce gender as a category of self-definition and of action. Acknowledging themselves textually as wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters, the women that I write about take up this politics of gender in order to articulate relationships to both self and state. In identifying themselves as women, they locate their textual authority; they gender their authority and authorize