Fictions of a Feminine Philosophical Persona
(or Philosophia Lost)

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i. Introduction

Twentieth-century analytic philosophy has tended to gloss over historical research into the late medieval period and to accept with little criticism an enlightenment account of the history of ideas. According to the standard histories, there has been an uninterrupted progress in ideas from the medieval dark ages to the present, each step representing an advancement in the ongoing search for truth. Analytic feminist philosophers have not been immune to this worldview. In the 1970s, feminism was at first represented as a completely new progressive phenomenon. Soon, however, research into the nineteenth-century women’s movement led to it being called ‘second wave feminism’. Further research by women pushed our knowledge of women’s engagement with issues such as women’s rights, and women’s exclusion from education, back to before the French revolution. But the assumption has remained that feminism had its intellectual origins in the progress of men’s ideas – in liberalism or socialism or at least in enlightenment thought.¹ After Descartes – a common story goes – the doors of our minds were opened to a new critical spirit that spelled the death of Aristotelianism. Aristotle’s dictum that women were ‘monsters in nature’ — defective men who could never attain the level of rational excellence necessary to be philosophers — thus fell before the advance of reason, like belief in witchcraft, crystalline spheres, and Ptolemaic astronomy. It has been argued that, with the decline of the old worldview, the way was open for women to cultivate a philosophical persona of their own. In this paper, we maintain that there are important connections between changes in philosophical personae, on the one hand, and women’s participation in early modern philosophy on the other. But we are sceptical about the

¹ See for example Alison M. Jaggar's influential Feminist Politics and Human Nature (Brighton, Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1983). This work is, however, critical of many streams of feminist thought because of their adoption of male ideas.
‘liberating’ potential of the new philosophical personae in the early modern period. The rise of science and the new style of philosopher were not as unequivocally positive for women thinkers as is generally assumed.

To demonstrate this point, we present a comparative study of two imaginary self-constructions, Christine de Pizan’s *L’Advision Christine* (1405/6) and Margaret Cavendish’s *Description of a New World, Called The Blazing World* (1666). Although these works are separated by more than two centuries, they share a remarkable number of similarities. First, both are works in which a female writer attempts to construct an image of herself as a philosopher. *Christine’s Vision* is an allegorical tale of the misfortunes that have plagued both France and Christine. In her allegory, de Pizan uses the popular device of a ‘dream vision’ to offer advice to rulers and to console the afflicted. Cavendish’s *Blazing World* is the story of a young woman who becomes the powerful Empress of an imaginary world. Like *Christine’s Vision*, this fictional tale also serves a partly political purpose: Cavendish uses her utopian fantasy to present a defence of monarchy as the best form of government, while de Pizan exploits a Boethian allegory to urge French princes to pursue virtue. In both works, the author appears as herself in a semi-fictional guise: in her allegory, ‘Christine’ is the philosopher who, like Boethius, receives spiritual encouragement from Philosophy herself; whereas ‘Margaret Cavendish’ is employed by the Empress as her personal scribe and counsellor. In their fictions, de Pizan and Cavendish position themselves among the philosophers, while at the same time demonstrating an ambivalent attitude toward ancient and modern philosophy in general. They present their heroines as solitary figures on the margins of traditional philosophy, whose pursuit of knowledge is nevertheless legitimised by a sympathetic female authority figure: Philosophia in the case of de Pizan, the Empress in the case of Cavendish.

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2 There is a slight awkwardness in calling Christine ‘de Pizan’ which arises from the differing conventions of the various disciplines. Philosophers are inclined to refer to other philosophers by their surnames, whereas medievalists prefer to call Christine by her first name. Those who are working largely in the French language might prefer ‘Pizan’ to ‘de Pizan’ on the model of ‘Beauvoir’ who is variously referred to as ‘de Beauvoir’ by Anglophones and ‘Beauvoir’ by Francophones. It seems odd to us to refer to our pair as Christine and Cavendish, or Christine and Margaret, and de Pizan sounds more natural to our Anglophone ears than Pizan, so we have opted to refer to their real selves as de Pizan and Cavendish, while reserving ‘Christine’ for the character who appears in de Pizan’s works, and ‘the Duchess’ for Cavendish’s fictional persona.
But there are also several key differences between the texts. In particular, each author has a different conception of the philosopher’s role. In her texts, de Pizan incorporates excerpts from Aquinas’ *Commentary on Aristotle’s Metaphysics*, and she follows his characterisation of metaphysics as the study of being and hence as encompassed by the study of the highest being, God. Cavendish, however, thinks of philosophy as natural philosophy, the study of nature, which is independent of theology. ‘Faith and reason’, she says, ‘are two contrary things, and cannot consist together.’ There are also marked differences in the contemporary receptions of each author. While Christine de Pizan ultimately managed to achieve considerable respect, Margaret Cavendish’s philosophical ambitions were severely ridiculed. These differences, we maintain, can be plausibly attributed to developments in the more general persona of the philosopher from the late medieval period to the seventeenth century.

### ii. Background

Some scholars argue that changes in the popular conception of philosophy had profound implications for women’s participation in seventeenth-century intellectual discourse. Ruth Perry, Katharine Rogers, Hilda Smith, and Margaret Atherton all suggest that the Cartesian conception of reason, in particular, was tremendously inspirational for women thinkers. On their account of the history of women’s ideas, Christine de Pizan was

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anomalous for her time: not only was she proficient in Latin and a well-trained copyist, she also had access to numerous manuscripts, and was an associate of many notable male intellectuals. But it is commonly thought that, prior to the sixteenth century, philosophy was practised in an institutional setting among male scholars versed in the scholastic tradition. According to this chronology, the early seventeenth century marked a shift in the popular conception of ‘the philosopher’, and this shift opened the way to philosophy for those individuals who had never received a scholastic education. Cartesian method, it is argued, popularised an egalitarian conception of reason and the challenging of ancient authority. In his *Discourse on the Method* (1637), Descartes emphasises that God has given all human beings the power to distinguish between truth and falsity. There is nothing exceptional about the philosopher in this respect: anybody can attain clear and certain knowledge, so long as they purge themselves of all preconceived notions, begin with clear and distinct ideas in the mind, and proceed from simple to complex ideas in an orderly manner. In this way, Descartes says, ‘I made perhaps more progress in the knowledge of the truth than I would have if I had done nothing but read books or mix with men of letters’.

This new, non-elitist persona liberated the philosopher from the schools. The best philosopher, according to Descartes, has a mind unencumbered by learned languages, the works of the ancients, or the art of syllogism – educational baggage that women lacked anyway. In her article, ‘Radical Doubt and the Liberation of Women’, Ruth Perry thus asserts that ‘Cartesian assumptions and Cartesian method … liberated women intellectually and thus psychically, by making it possible for numbers of them to participate in serious mainstream philosophical discourse’.

But the popular account of the ‘liberating effect’ of Cartesian rationalism can be challenged on at least two counts. First, contrary to scholarly opinion, women had discovered the emancipatory potential of reason long before the rise of Cartesianism. Two hundred years prior to Descartes, Christine de Pizan began her *Book of the City of Ladies* (1404-5) with a dialogue between the author and three personifications of the

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virtues, Reason, Righteousness, and Justice. Christine questions Reason concerning the almost universal misogyny of the male satirists and philosophers that she has read; and Reason, in response, urges Christine to use her own senses and intelligence. To accept the testimony of male authorities, Reason suggests, would be to act like the fool who, having been dressed in women’s clothes while asleep, becomes convinced that he has been turned into a woman. De Pizan was part of a vibrant early Renaissance culture which, while it continued to rely heavily on argument by authority, was well aware that, since the authorities often disagree, one also has to rely on sense and reason. Modern scholars must be careful, therefore, to avoid misrepresenting the late medieval period as an age dominated by a moribund scholasticism – a mythical conception to which Descartes himself contributed in his *Discourse on the Method*. This narrow conception of medieval thought fails to take into account the vibrancy of philosophical culture during the late medieval period, manifest both in the ‘philosophical poets’, Petrarch and Dante Alighieri (who directly inspired de Pizan), and in scholars whose works de Pizan knew, such as Nicholas Oresme, who both translated Aristotle’s *Ethics* and *Politics* into French and who wrote important scientific and economic treatises.

Second, the popular account of the Cartesian influence on women promotes a rather simplistic view of the philosophical scene in seventeenth-century England. Although seventeenth-century English women were inspired by a popular form of Cartesianism, textual evidence suggests that they were much more directly influenced by their fellow countrymen. Without great proficiency in Latin and French, these women were often reliant on English texts, English translations, or the commentaries of their English peers. Margaret Cavendish is a notable case in point: her numerous works reveal that her nearest influences were men such as her husband, William Cavendish, as well as

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Thomas Hobbes, Walter Charleton, and Joseph Glanvill – Englishmen who were intimately associated with the new scientific advances in England and the advent of the Royal Society. On the one hand, these men embraced the ‘new’ philosophical persona promoted in the works of Descartes: they were opposed to assertions of authority, and they valued the natural intellect over book learning. John Aubrey reports that Hobbes, for example, ‘had read much, if one considers his long life; but his contemplation was much more than his reading. He was wont to say that if he had read as much as other men, he should have knowne no more then other men’. But on the other hand, English natural philosophers, such as Charleton and Glanvill, upheld a different conception of philosophy to that of their continental peers. While the French Cartesians were devoted to the pursuit of clear and certain knowledge, the English natural philosophers dedicated their studies to the empirical, the hypothetical, and the probable. The Englishmen rejected the language of certainty and the search for axioms so typical of Cartesian philosophy. As Walter Charleton says in a letter to Cavendish: ‘the Virtuosi of our English Universities … have proclaimed open War against the tyranny of Dogmatizing in any Art or Science’. The English natural philosopher is characterised by his anti-dogmatism, open-mindedness, and willingness to accept probabilities, rather than certainties. If we are to understand Cavendish’s conception of herself as a philosopher, we must pay careful attention to this English philosophical background.

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13 Walter Charleton to Margaret Cavendish, 7 May 1667; in A Collection of Letters and Poems: Written by Several Persons of Honour and Learning, Upon divers Important Subjects, to the Late Duke and Duchess of Newcastle (London: Langly Curtis, 1678), p. 112.
iii. Cavendish and de Pizan compared

Cavendish originally published her short fictional piece, *The Description of a New World, Called The Blazing World*, together with a work on natural philosophy entitled *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* (1666). Few scholars have examined the significance of this joint publication. Why, one might ask, does Cavendish append a work of fiction and fancy to a serious philosophical treatise? One explanation is that the *Blazing World* serves a strategic purpose: Cavendish uses this fictional tale to promote an image of herself as a legitimate philosopher. A few centuries earlier, Christine de Pizan had employed a similar strategy. In *Christine’s Vision*, a crowned lady named Libera praises Christine’s aptitude for intellectual study. Libera says to Christine

Friend, to whom God and Nature have conceded the gift of a love of study far beyond the common lot of woman, prepare parchment, quill, and ink, and write the words issuing from my breast; for I wish to reveal everything to you. And I am pleased that you, following your wise good will, should henceforth present the written memories of my worthiness.

Libera chooses Christine to be her scribe or clerk. As Glenda McLeod observes, this relationship between Libera and Christine models the relationship between a sovereign and secretary, and thus functions to promote de Pizan’s own authority and stature as a writer. In the *Blazing World*, Margaret Cavendish’s fictional counterpart is also employed as a scribe to a sovereign. The ‘soul’ of Cavendish is recommended to the Empress as non-dogmatic and rational compared to the souls of other well-known philosophers:

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17 De Pizan, *Christine’s Vision*, n. 16, p. 46.
Then I will have, answered she [the Empress], the soul of some ancient famous writer, either of Aristotle, Pythagoras, Plato, Epicurus, or the like. The spirit said, that those famous men were very learned, subtle, and ingenious writers, but they were so wedded to their own opinions, that they would never have the patience to be scribes. Then, said she, I’ll have the soul of one of the most famous modern writers, as either of Galileo, Gassendus, Descartes, Helmont, Hobbes, H. More, etc. The spirit answered, that they were fine, ingenious writers, but yet so self-conceited, that they would scorn to be scribes to a woman. But, said he, there’s a lady, the Duchess of Newcastle, which although she is not one of the most learned, eloquent, witty and ingenious, yet is she a plain and rational writer, for the principle of her writings, is sense and reason, and she will without question, be ready to do you all the service she can.18

The Duchess subsequently becomes the Empress’s ‘favourite’. So, like de Pizan, Cavendish draws on an imagined female authority figure in order to affirm her status as a philosopher, and to promote her own philosophical persona.

As part of their self-presentation as philosophers, both Cavendish and de Pizan also present a brief survey of the history of philosophy in order to contrast the ‘mistaken’ views of other thinkers with their own ‘enlightened’ views of the present. Out of their critical responses to the male tradition, however, there emerges two very different personae.

In Cavendish’s *Blazing World*, the Empress’s spiritual advisers tell her that ‘your ancient and modern philosophers … endeavoured to go beyond sense and reason, which makes them commit absurdities; for no corporeal creature can go beyond sense and reason’.19 When the fictional Cavendish begins to construct a ‘new world’ of her own (in her head), she considers and then rejects the views of past and present thinkers, including

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Pythagoras, Epicurus, Descartes, and Hobbes. Above all, the Duchess scorns those writers who hold inflexible opinions:

The truth is, said she, wheresoever is learning, there is most commonly also controversy and quarrelling; for there be always some that will know more, and be wiser than others; some think their arguments come nearer to truth, and are more rational than others; some are so wedded to their opinions, that they never yield to reason; and others, though they find opinions not firmly grounded upon reason, yet for fear of receiving some disgrace by altering them, will nevertheless maintain them against all sense and reason, which must needs breed factions in their schools, which at last break out into open wars, and draw sometimes an utter ruin upon a state or government.\(^20\)

When the fictional Cavendish has completed her examination of the history of philosophy, she resolves to create a world ‘of her own invention’, a world ‘composed of sensitive and rational self-moving matter’.\(^21\) This new world, a world that conforms to Cavendish’s own materialist conception of nature in the *Observations*, was ‘so well-ordered and wisely governed, that it cannot possibly be expressed by words’.\(^22\) The Empress expresses her strong admiration: ‘Her Majesty was so ravished with the perception of it, that her soul desired to live in the Duchess’s world’.\(^23\) In the *Blazing World*, Cavendish thus dramatises the philosophical explorations of her serious companion piece, the *Observations*. But while Cavendish merely expounds her theory in the larger work, in her fantasy fiction, her general attitude and approach to philosophy wins support and approval.

What, then, is distinctive about the philosophical persona that is affirmed in this discourse? First, Cavendish’s Duchess displays those character traits typical of the seventeenth-century philosopher: she is hostile toward ancient authorities, she promotes a reliance upon the self as a source of knowledge, and places a high value on reason and

\(^{21}\) Cavendish, *The Blazing World*, p. 75.  
\(^{22}\) Cavendish, *The Blazing World*, p. 75.  
\(^{23}\) Cavendish, *The Blazing World*, p. 75.
rationality. In her other works, Cavendish uses these attributes to justify being both a woman and a philosopher. In the preface to the _World’s Olio_ (1655), she says that ‘It cannot be expected I should write so wisely or wittily as the Men, being of the Effeminate Sex’. Yet, she points out, some women might be wiser than some men, if only they would make the effort:

Women can have no excuse, or complaints of being subjects, as a hinderance from thinking; for Thoughts are free, those can never be inslaved, for we are not hindered from studying, since we are allowed so much idle time that we know not how to pass it away, but may as well read in our closets, as Men in their Colleges; and Contemplation is as free to us as to Men to beget clear Speculation.

A woman might achieve ‘clear speculations’ by spending her free time in contemplation, rather than trivial pursuits. Adopting a similar stance in a preface to the _Observations_, Cavendish says ‘That I am not versed in learning, nobody, I hope, will blame me for it, since it is sufficiently known, that our sex being not suffered to be instructed in schools and universities, cannot be bred up to it’. But she dismisses her lack of education by saying that she would rather prove ‘naturally wise’ than learned and foolish. Cavendish thus embraces the persona of the ‘unlearned thinker’ to legitimise her endeavours as a woman philosopher.

Cavendish also appeals to those character traits typical of the English natural philosopher: a lack of pride or conceit in one’s opinions, and a commitment to finding the most probable theory, rather than holding dogmatically to one’s viewpoint. In the _Blazing World_, the Duchess criticises those philosophers ‘who are so wedded to their opinions, that they never yield to reason’. In her _Philosophical and Physical Opinions_ (1655), Cavendish defends herself against her ‘Condemning Readers’, by arguing that although

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24 Margaret Cavendish, _The Worlds Olio. Written by the Right Honorable, the Lady Margaret Newcastle_ (London: J. Martin and J. Allestrye, 1655), sig. A4r.
25 Cavendish, _The Worlds Olio_, sig. A5r.
27 Cavendish, _Observations_, p. 12.
her theories are only probable, all natural philosophy is built upon probabilities; ‘and until probabilities be condemned by absolute and known truth’, she says, her own theories ought to ‘have a place amongst the rest of probabilities’. Cavendish advises that natural philosophy does not ‘binde a man to strickt rules as other Sciences do, it gives them an honest liberty’. Then, in her *Philosophical Letters* (1664), Cavendish says that ‘I love Reason so well, that whosoever can bring most rational and probable arguments, shall have my vote, although against my own opinion.’ Cavendish presents herself, in other words, as a ‘philosophical libertine’, an individualist thinker who is not tied to one theory or other, but free to follow her own sense and reason. Her main criticism of her fellow natural philosophers is that they stray from their commitment to philosophical liberty, and become enamoured of their own opinions. This ‘libertine’ persona enables Cavendish to claim some legitimacy for her own original theories, without displaying an unfeminine confidence or arrogance in her own work.

Christine de Pizan also presents a survey of past philosophy in order to define the merits of her own viewpoint. But her chosen persona is notably different to that of Cavendish. In the second book of *Christine’s Vision*, Christine meets Dame Opinion. She is a huge vague form, made up of a multitude of moving coloured shadows. Christine sees these shadows floating around the heads, in through the ears, and all about a multitude of debating ‘clerks’ whose disputes seem to be determined by the multitude of variegated shadows that surround them. Turning to her, this great shadowy Opinion informs Christine that she (Opinion) is the cause of men’s disputes and that

From the earliest times, there were a few clever men whom I incited to such inquiry that they discovered philosophy; all the arts and sciences were thus investigated – and the way to reach them was found – because of me. If I had not existed, Philosophy would never have been discovered, as I will explain to you more plainly hereafter. Notwithstanding that Philosophy and her

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29 Margaret Cavendish, *The Philosophical and Physical Opinions, Written by her Excellency, the Lady Marchionesse of Newcastle* (London: J. Martin and J. Allestrye, 1655), p. 27
daughters existed before me and that she is the daughter of God, I was created as soon as human understanding was; and she and I (understanding first and then myself) opened the way for clear-witted men to discover her.33

Dame Opinion warns Christine that because she is built on the imagination, she often produces erroneous judgments.34 To show ‘that there is no person so wise that I do no cause him to err’,35 Opinion critically assesses the early ancient philosophers, Thales, Anaxagoras, Empedocles, and Pythagoras. Basing her account closely on Aquinas, de Pizan has Dame Opinion inform her that all these philosophers erred because they inquired into material causes alone: ‘All these proposed a body as the first principle and element; and so by what has already been said, everyone previously discussed seems to have proposed only the material cause’.36 Aristotle, however, enjoyed a more noble mind and understanding than the other philosophers: he was the ‘prince of philosophy’.37 ‘He did not attack the ancient ones as poets,’ according to de Pizan, ‘but because they resembled philosophers and were without truth’.38

The true philosopher, on de Pizan’s view, never settles for mere opinion. ‘Oh what folly in man,’ says Dame Opinion, ‘whose mind should be governed by reason, to base his understanding on me and decide with surety through me about uncertain and unknown matters!’39 De Pizan thus conceives of her role as a philosopher as that of a searcher after truth. Dame Opinion says to Christine,

Dear Friend, be at peace … there is no fault in your works, even though because of me, many people variously argue about them. For some say that students or monks forged them for you and that they could not come from the judgment of a woman. But those who say this are ignorant, for they do not

33 De Pizan, Christine’s Vision, p. 61, Le livre de l’advision Cristine, pp. 54-5.
34 De Pizan, Christine’s Vision, p. 63, Le livre de l’advision Cristine, p. 56.
36 De Pizan, Christine’s Vision, p. 72, Le livre de l’advision Cristine, p. 69.
37 De Pizan, Christine’s Vision, p. 73, Le livre de l’advision Cristine, p. 70
38 De Pizan, Christine’s Vision, p. 69, Le livre de l’advision Cristine, pp. 64-5.
39 De Pizan, Christine’s Vision, p. 81, Le livre de l’advision Cristine, pp. 81.
know the written accounts that mention so many valiant and educated women of the past – wiser than you – and especially the prophets, and since Nature is not diminished in her power, this can even yet be so. Others say that your style is too obscure and that they cannot understand it, so it is not very enjoyable. Thus I variously cause some to praise and others to repress praise. But as nothing can possibly please everyone, I tell you this much: truth, by the testimony of experience, does not let censure affect reputation. I advise you then to continue in your work, for it is valid, and do not suspect yourself of failing because of me. When I am based on law, reason, and true judgment in you, you will not err in the foundations of your work ...

Dame Opinion says that she cannot exist ‘within intelligences that see the truth and understand the nature of all things’. Like Aquinas, de Pizan regards philosophy as ultimately inseparable from theology, and this is the note on which her allegory ends. But since God has created women as well as men in the image of God, worship and understanding are as much within a woman’s reach as in a man’s. De Pizan thus lays claim to the status of philosopher. She says to Dame Philosophy,

To me, a simple woman, you have shown yourself by your noble grace in the form of Holy Theology to nourish my ignorant spirit most wholesomely for my salvation. Have you not treated me as your handmaiden, but better than you promised, that is, have you not served me from your most advantageous and worthy dishes which come from the table of God the Father, for which I thank you (which is to say God, who is you) more than I would know how to express? Truly you are all science. You are the true physics, which is theology inasmuch as you are about God, for the causes of all of nature are in God the Creator. You are ethics because you teach the good and honorable life, or loving what should be loved, which is God and one’s neighbor. These

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things, Theology, you yourself reveal in the sciences of ethics and physics. You are logic because you demonstrate the light and truth of the just soul. You are the study of politics because you teach the virtuous life, for no city is better protected than by the foundation and water of the faith and by the firm agreement to love the common good, which is true and supreme. It is God you discuss in the science in which you have revealed yourself to me, that is, in theology. Oh theology, the supreme philosophy, which I long to praise, Lady, in you!42

For de Pizan, then, following the well-worn synthesis of Platonism and Christianity crafted by Augustine and Aquinas, opinion is the shadowy knowledge available to the soul that has not yet been graced by true philosophy — the understanding of theology and Christian truth. Christine establishes her claim to be a philosopher on argument, her membership of the human race, and the fact that as a woman, ‘she is not another species than man’.43 Rhetorically she exploits the Boethian imagery that represents Philosophia as a woman who comes to console the unjustly despised. In Christine’s Vision, Philosophia is represented as speaking as directly to her daughter Christine as she once spoke to Boethius, underscoring her daughter’s claim to participate in philosophical wisdom.

The image of the philosopher presented by Boethius is one of truth spurned by corrupt powers which is able to take solace in inner virtue and a direct relation to divine truth. De Pizan found in this image a powerful endorsement of her own struggle for wisdom. She also wrote at a period when Boethius’ vision coincided with Christian sensibility. Although women were represented as weak, their weakness could also be represented as a strength. In L’Advision, Christine ends her account of the prophecies of Daniel to Nebuchanezzar with the comment, ‘thus will be confirmed the prophecy of the Virgin which says: “Deposuit potentes de sede et exaltavit humiles [the powerful will be cast down and the humble raised].”’ This text can be read as a warning to corrupt princes,

but it can also be interpreted as holding out hope for women.\(^{44}\) Within this Christian mentality, with its emphasis on chastity, humility and grace, women, as nuns, abbesses and anchorites, could operate with considerable authority. De Pizan’s later acceptance as a legitimate authority was perhaps partly predicated on a perception of her in a similar light. In a manuscript, apparently copied for John Fastolf in Rouen between 1430 and 1450, de Pizan is represented very much as a nun, in a black habit, which differs considerably from the blue dress in which she is typically clothed in those manuscripts that were illuminated under her supervision. De Pizan was fundamentally a secular writer, who urged that women have as great a capacity for prudence as men, and who extended the active life of practical *phronesis*, extolled by Aristotle as a model for men, to include women. But, as was evident in the quotation above, she saw the divide between the secular and sacred realms as permeable. Practical philosophy was subsumed within theology, and a woman’s practical engagement in the management of the household, estate or state could be interpreted as as much a form of charity or love of God as could the devotion and prayers of a nun.

These two critical surveys of past philosophy underscore the differences in the way these two thinkers conceive of philosophy. Margaret Cavendish wrote at a time when a Thomist epistemology was no longer dominant. She does not observe a sharp distinction between truth and opinion but supports the common view of her fellow Englishmen according to which the philosopher can only ever put forward provisional claims. In her 1983 work, *Probability and Certainty in the Seventeenth Century*, Barbara Shapiro observes that in Cavendish’s time knowledge came to be seen as a continuum: ‘The lower reaches of this continuum were characterised as “fiction”, “mere opinion”, and “conjecture”; its middle and high ranges as “probable”, “highly probable”; and its apex as “morally certain”.\(^{45}\) Knowledge, on this view, was a matter of degree, rather than an all or nothing affair. Contrary to de Pizan, Cavendish maintains that the ideal philosopher can no longer aspire to attain absolute truth. In the *Blazing World*, the Empress asserts that ‘No particular knowledge can be perfect’;\(^{46}\) only God is capable of

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having an absolute and perfect knowledge of all things.\textsuperscript{47} In her other philosophical works, Cavendish provides a metaphysical basis for this view: as finite creatures in an infinite universe, she says, humans can have no vantage point from which to judge that their particular theories are correct. On the true nature of the natural world, ‘we are all but guessers’.\textsuperscript{48} For similar reasons, Cavendish is opposed to de Pizan’s conception of philosophy as the study of God. For our limited intellects, according to Cavendish, God’s nature is utterly incomprehensible: we can never possess ‘a finite idea of an Infinite God’.\textsuperscript{49}

iv. Cavendish and de Pizan: the problem of reputation

In their fictional personae, both de Pizan and Cavendish appeal to conceptions of the philosopher that enjoyed prominence in their respective historical periods. Although they are highly critical of their male counterparts, they base their criticisms on received notions of philosophical ‘truth’. Cavendish criticises modern philosophers for being conceited and rigid in their opinions, but she criticises them according to their own anti-dogmatic ideals. De Pizan likewise condemns philosophers for being duped by opinion, instead of pursuing truth in the form of theology – the true vocation of the philosopher according to Aquinas. It is curious, however, that while de Pizan was respected as a philosopher in her lifetime, Cavendish failed to find support and acceptance among her intellectual peers. Why, we might ask, is there such a marked difference in the contemporary reception of each author?

In her day, Cavendish’s philosophical works were roundly condemned for having ‘neither ground [n]or foundation, nor method’.\textsuperscript{50} Even intellectual women, such as Katherine Ranelagh (the sister of Robert Boyle) and Mary Evelyn (the wife of John Evelyn) were quick to dismiss Cavendish as mad or nonsensical. Upon meeting Cavendish, Mary Evelyn remarked that

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\item \textsuperscript{47} Cavendish, \textit{Blazing World}, p. 56.
\item \textsuperscript{48} Cavendish, \textit{Observations}, p. 269.
\item \textsuperscript{49} Cavendish, \textit{Philosophical Letters}, p. 139.
\item \textsuperscript{50} Cavendish, \textit{Observations}, ‘To the Reader’, p. 21.
\end{itemize}
Her gracious bows, seasonable nods, courteous stretching out of her hands, twinkling of her eyes, and various gestures of approbation, show what may be expected from her discourse, which is as airy, empty, whimsical, and rambling as her books, aiming at science, difficulties, high notions, terminating commonly in nonsense, oaths, and obscenity.  

Similarly, in a letter to her brother Richard Boyle, Katherine Jones claimed that Cavendish had barely escaped the lunatic asylum. In April 1667, England had just begun peace talks with Holland to bring an end to the Second Anglo-Dutch War. But Jones reports that ‘the Duchess of Newcastle is more discoursed of than the Treaty, and by all the Characters I hear given her I am resolved she escapes Bedlam only by being too rich to be sent thither’. Cavendish was, however, ‘mad enough to convey that title to the place of her Residence’. Male philosophers were slightly more accommodating. Her friend and correspondent, Walter Charleton, praised Cavendish for being ‘above her sex’. But even Charleton thought that there was little to approve in her natural philosophy. ‘I have not yet been so happy,’ he says, ‘to discover much therein that is Apodictical, or wherein I think my self much obliged to acquiesce’. Another fellow of the Royal Society, the Platonist Henry More, assured his friend Anne Conway that no one would bother replying to Cavendish’s arguments; and Samuel Pepys – another Society man – rudely dismisses her as a ‘mad, conceited, ridiculous woman, and he [William Cavendish] an asse to suffer [her] to write what she writes to him and of him’.

De Pizan’s own account of her troubles show that, for her too, philosophical acceptance was by no means a given. Nevertheless, she clearly managed to establish a considerable reputation. In Christine’s Vision she tells how the count of Salisbury, who

51 Mary Evelyn to Ralph Bohun, April 1667; in Evelyn, Diary and Correspondence, vol. 4, pp. 8-9.
53 Charleton to Cavendish, 3 May 1663; in Collection of Letters And Poems, p. 92.
54 Charleton to Cavendish, 7 May 1667; in Collection of Letters And Poems, p. 111.
had been sent to France in relation to the marriage of Isabelle of France to Richard II, was aware of her skill as a poet and consequently invited her son to accompany him on his return to England, to be a companion to his son. Salisbury soon afterwards lost his life attempting to oppose Henry IV’s usurpation of Richard’s throne; but Henry IV was no less impressed by de Pizan, and invited her to the court of England (an invitation that de Pizan declined after some dissimulation). Not long afterwards, she was invited to the court of Jean-Galeas Visconti at Milan, an offer which tempted her more, but which she was unable to take up because of the duke’s death. These invitations came quite early on in de Pizan’s career and we know of them through her own account. By the time she died, which was around 1430, she was a well-known figure. In a 1434 description of the town of Paris, Guillebert de Mets mentions her as having written many treatises in Latin and French. In his 1441 poem, *The Ladies’ Champion*, Martin le Franc uses de Pizan as the most notable local example of a woman whose capacities show that women are capable of all the excellences of men. Le Franc claims that her name will be celebrated endlessly, by trumpet and horn, and her death is fulsomely lamented. She is described as valiant, virtuous, versed in Latin and letters, a Tully for eloquence and a Cato for wisdom.

So how might we explain the negative reception of Cavendish as a female philosopher, compared to that of de Pizan? It is rather perplexing, after all, that Cavendish was rejected and ridiculed in a period that was supposedly congenial for women thinkers.

One explanation might be found in the way in which Cavendish’s persona *diverges* from the more general persona of the natural philosopher in the early seventeenth century. Although Cavendish cultivates the persona of a philosophical libertine, she also demonstrates a profound scepticism toward a principal aspect of natural philosophy in England – the new experimental method. Cavendish’s *Observations*

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includes an extended critique of Robert Hooke’s *Micrographia* (1665) and Henry Power’s *Experimental Philosophy* (1663) – two key items of propaganda for the newly established Royal Society. In the *Observations*, Cavendish scorns experimental philosophy, and microscopy in particular: ‘most of these arts are fallacies, rather than discoveries of truths’, she says, ‘for sense deludes more than it gives true information, and an exterior perception through an optic glass is so deceiving, that it cannot be relied upon’. 60 In the *Blazing World*, Cavendish’s critique takes the form of satire. Of telescopes, the Empress says that ‘these telescopes caused more differences and divisions … than ever they had before’. 61 The Empress commands the experimenters to break their instruments because ‘nature has made your sense and reason more regular than art has your glasses, for they are mere deluders, and will never lead you to knowledge of truth’. 62 In response, the experimenters (represented as ‘bear-men’) plead with the Empress, claiming that ‘we shall want employment for our senses, and subjects for arguments; for were there nothing but truth, and no falsehood, there would be no occasion for to dispute, and by this means we should want the aim and pleasure of our endeavours in confuting and contradicting each other’. 63 The supposed rationale for the new technology, in other words, is to provide subject matter for dispute and disagreement – to promote elitism rather than a new egalitarianism.

This satirical representation of experimental philosophy was hardly likely to appeal to supporters of the new experimentalism – figures such as Katherine Ranelagh, Mary Evelyn, Walter Charleton, Henry More, and Samuel Pepys. Cavendish’s alternative, contemplative, philosophic ideal puts her at odds with her empiricist-driven contemporaries. In mid-seventeenth century England, a vital part of the new scientific enterprise was the compilation of masses of empirical data with the assistance of new instruments such as microscopes and telescopes. There was an expectation that the new philosopher would roll up his sleeves, abandon his armchair, and venture out into the world in a quest to find new facts. The natural philosopher could no longer rely on the word of established authority or expect to claim certainty for his results; the best he could

63 Cavendish, *Blazing World*, p. 28.
settle for was ‘high probability’. To claim this degree of probability, as Barbara Shapiro observes, it was necessary to avoid error and fallibility in one’s findings.\textsuperscript{64} One way to do this was to conduct experiments and to invite others to witness the verification of one’s hypotheses. The Royal Society played a vital role in the public staging of experiments: in Joseph Glanvill’s opinion, reports of their trials could ‘be received as undoubted Records of certain events … Which advantage cannot be hoped from private undertakers, or Societies less qualified and conspicuous’.\textsuperscript{65} With formal public approval, one could then legitimately represent one’s findings as ‘highly probable’. Science, for the English natural philosopher, had thus become a collective enterprise. The classic ideal of the philosopher, alone and loitering in his closet or at his desk, was replaced by the communal ideal of the scientist. Natural philosophy was divorced from pure speculation and theory, and associated instead with practical, public experimentatio.

On closer inspection, then, Cavendish’s conception of the role of the philosopher differs from that of her contemporaries in a very significant respect. Philosophy, for Cavendish, is closely related to fiction writing: it is an activity of the individual’s mind, something dependent on one’s internal sense and reason, rather than practical experiment and collective investigation. In the \textit{Philosophical Letters}, Cavendish boasts that her theories ‘did merely issue from the Fountain of my own Brain, without any other help or assistance’.\textsuperscript{66} This conception of philosophy is also affirmed in a key scene of the \textit{Blazing World}, when Cavendish’s fictional persona and the Empress start ‘creating new worlds’ from their fancy. Elsewhere, the Empress is told that ‘every human creature can create an immaterial world fully inhabited by immaterial creatures, and populous of immaterial subjects, such as we are, and all this within the compass of the head or scull’.\textsuperscript{67} By contrast, Joseph Glanvill warns that ‘while we frame Scheames of things without consulting the Phaenomena, we do but build in the Air, and describe an Imaginary World of our own making’.\textsuperscript{68} For the English natural philosopher, such purely mental constructs were dangerous and likely to lead to mistaken dogma. But Cavendish

\textsuperscript{64} See Shapiro, \textit{Probability and Certainty}, p. 5.
\textsuperscript{66} Cavendish, \textit{Philosophical Letters}, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{67} Cavendish, \textit{Blazing World}, p. 72.
openly supports the contemplative life: she consciously represents herself as a solitary thinker, rather than part of a cooperative, collective enterprise.

This aspect of Cavendish’s philosophical persona brings her closer to Christine de Pizan. Both writers, for all their differences, uphold a conception of the philosopher as a solitary, contemplative character. In this respect, the strategies of self-representation adopted by these two women are remarkably similar. Indeed, further similarities in the pictorial representations in their works suggest that Cavendish was acquainted with the collected works that de Pizan prepared for Isabeau of Bavaria in 1414 (now Harley MS 4431 in the British Library). This volume was inscribed with the signature of Henry, Duke of Newcastle in 1676, and was therefore almost certainly known to Margaret, his stepmother. In a recent article, Cristina Malcolmson argues that Cavendish’s husband, William, may have brought back a copy of de Pizan’s *City of Ladies*, among other works, from Europe. In her works, de Pizan often represents herself as a figure apart; lonely and widowed, she takes solace in the solitary study of wisdom. This is expressed in what is perhaps her most famous poem ‘Alone am I’. Her solitary study is represented over and again in introductory miniatures to her manuscripts, in which one sees de Pizan alone at her desk. A typical example of this is found in Harley 4431, fol. 4. In her works, Cavendish also represents herself as alone and apart: not bereaved by widowhood, as de Pizan was, but alienated from society by her desire to produce a philosophical system, and her commitment to the development of original ideas. The frontispiece to *The World’s Olio* includes an engraved portrait of Cavendish seated at her desk in her private closet. There are several notable similarities between this portrait and that of de Pizan in the Harley manuscript: both authors are represented as alone and at work, the desk sits to the right of the author, and a small box lies open on the desk. In each, the author turns to

69 Cristina Malcolmson, ‘Christine de Pizan’s *City of Ladies* in Early Modern England’, in *Debating Gender in Early Modern England, 1500-1700*, edited by Cristina Malcolmson and Mihoko Suzuki (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 15-35. This tempting hypothesis appears, however, to be impossible to substantiate. The last known owner of Harley 4431 was Louis of Bruges who may have acquired it during his stay in England in 1472-3. His Flemish library was acquired by Louis XII of France and was housed at Blois by 1518, but Harley 4431 was not then included among his books (see Maureen Cheney Curnow, *The ‘Livre de la cite des dames’ of Christine de Pisan: A Critical Edition*, PhD Vanderbilt University, 1975, pp. 377 and 431-2). It is therefore possible that the manuscript was never taken out of England, and there is no reason to surmise that it was in Flanders during the Cavendishes’ exile, as Malcolmson proposes.
look at the viewer, and she appears to be in the middle of writing a composition, although de Pizan has the quill in hand, whereas Cavendish is merely contemplative. There are no other books or manuscripts on the desk. Cavendish’s portrait includes the words:

    Studious She is and all Alone
    Most visitants when She has none
    Her Library on which She looks
    It is her Head her Thoughts her Books,
    Scorninge dead Ashes without fire
    For her owne Flames doe her Inspire.

The key difference, of course, is that while the contemplative ideal had been superseded in Cavendish’s lifetime, in de Pizan’s time it was still of contemporary relevance. The persona of the philosopher in the late-fourteenth and early fifteenth century was more literary than scientific, more theological than empirical. De Pizan, echoing Dante, explains how she pursued the ‘long path of learning’ and discovered the beautiful style of the philosopher poets which was natural to her. It was as a poet that she made her early reputation, but this was poetry and rhetoric put to service in the pursuit of moral and religious truth. The female allegorical figures who peopled the moral universe of Dante, Petrarch, and, most importantly, Boethius allowed themselves to be transformed into allegories of wisdom that could serve as images of de Pizan herself. Thus, in the *Epistre Othea*, one of de Pizan’s most widely copied works (dating from 1400), Othea, goddess of prudence and wisdom, looks down from the clouds, in the illuminated versions of the text supervised by de Pizan, looking not unlike de Pizan, who in other miniatures, offers her work to a patron, Louis of Orléans.\(^7\)

Like Cavendish, then, de Pizan saw a connection between fiction, or poetry, and philosophy. In doing so, however, de Pizan was not out of step with her male contemporaries, but very much one among them. In the letters that make up the debate over the *Romance of the Rose*, de Pizan forcefully puts forward the view that poetry and

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\(^7\) This observation was first made by Sandra Hindman, *Christine de Pizan's "Epistre Othea" Painting and Politics at the Court of Charles VI* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1986).
rhetoric have their place as a means of engagement whereby higher moral and theological truth is illuminated. She criticises the moral ambiguities of Jean de Meung’s development of the poem, and compares him unfavourably with Dante.\textsuperscript{71} De Pizan’s imagination did not have to represent itself as a mere ‘fancy’, but could build on a well-established allegorical tradition to represent itself in the most serious terms as a literary path to philosophical illumination. De Pizan consciously, and often quite brilliantly, exploited the philosophical conventions of her time to construct for herself a female philosophical persona which drew its authority as much from Boethius’s Dame Philosophy as from the Virgin Mary. Having gained as much access to the works of the established authorities as was available to the average clerk, she was able to construct a philosophical persona on nothing more than literary style, reason, sense, and a judicious mining of the established texts for material that suited her purposes.

v. Concluding remarks
On the surface, the seventeenth century seemed to offer a favourable environment for women philosophers such as Cavendish. In the early modern period, Descartes and his followers popularised a new egalitarian conception of reason that inspired women to engage in the intellectual enterprises of their time. Cavendish openly embraces the persona of the ‘unlearned thinker’ in her \textit{Blazing World} and in the prefaces to her other philosophical works: although she is an uneducated woman, she says, she is capable of using her natural intellect to develop rational and probable theories. On closer analysis, however, the ‘new philosophy’ was not so easily appropriated by women in early modern England. To become a successful natural philosopher in England, one increasingly needed expertise in experimental mechanics, experimental method, and mathematics. These forms of expertise had to be acquired in an institutional setting. Women, however, were not permitted to attend ‘public’ institutions such as the Royal Society; and nor did they have easy access to expert training. Although Cavendish attended a Royal Society meeting in 1667, the invitation was at her own behest, and it was not until 1945 that women were permitted to become official fellows of the Society. Indeed, the early Royal Society prided itself on being an exclusively masculine environment. In a verse in

Thomas Sprat’s *History of the Royal Society*, Abraham Cowley writes that Philosophy ‘whatso’ere the Painters Fancy be’ is indisputably a ‘Male Virtu’.\(^{72}\) Like Aristotle before them, the Society men associated the feminine with everything that philosophy was not.

Thus, despite the received view of the earlier period as one in which an ageing scholastic institution militated against women philosophers, the example of de Pizan suggests that the first flush of the Renaissance offered a philosophical persona – the ‘philosopher poet’ – that was relatively congenial for a woman with literary skill and philosophical aspirations. With hindsight, it is not surprising that Cavendish’s self-fashioning as a philosopher failed to find acceptance amongst her peers. Like de Pizan, Cavendish emphasised the connections between philosophy and *fiction* – an enterprise that relied on the imagination, rather than external proofs and collective endeavours. In her works, Cavendish appropriates this contemplative ideal of the philosopher in order to justify her intellectual efforts as a woman. Unfortunately for Cavendish, this was the very persona that empiricist philosophers defined themselves against, and that would later – with the rise of the literary novel – be disparagingly associated with the feminine. Far from encouraging women, these further developments in the persona of the philosopher – the evolution of the philosopher into a *scientist* or experimenter – facilitated women’s exclusion from yet another intellectual sphere. Alone in her time, Cavendish was divided from philosophy by her sex, and from her sex by philosophy. For de Pizan, by contrast, the persona of the philosopher that she found in Boethius was a mantle as easily worn as that marvellously figured cloak in which Philosophy appeared when she came to console him. This is the persona of the philosopher on the margins of society, who looks within the self, and is consoled by love of wisdom and the doctrine that virtue is the highest good. For de Pizan, as for her peers, the virtue of philosophy was no painter’s fancy, but an allegorical depiction of the deepest truth. In conclusion one might say that ultimately the contrasting reception of Cavendish and de Pizan was a case of Philosophia lost.