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Intimate Correspondence: Negotiating the Materials of Female Friendship in Margaret Cavendish's *Sociable Letters*

"The correspondence of two ladies, living at some short distance from each other, which make it not only their chief delight and pastime, but their tie in friendship, to discourse by letters" ("The Preface").¹ With these introductory words, Margaret Cavendish positions her 1664 printed letter collection, *CCXI Sociable Letters*, within the popular familiar, or friendship, letter tradition. Modeled on printed fictional letter collections published in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, such as Jacques du Bosques's *The Secretary of Ladies* (1638), Nicholas Breton's *A Poste with a Packet of Madde Letters* (1602), and the fictional letters of Angel Day (1586) and William Fulwood's (1568) epistolary manuals,² Cavendish's opening emphasizes friendship and correspondence at a distance—the two defining features of this widespread genre. Cavendish's seemingly straightforward definition of her text, however, elides crucial differences between her collection's management of friendship at a distance and the genre conventions defined by writers like Day, Fulwood, and their humanist predecessors, and now widely accepted among early modern scholars.

In Lisa Jardine's influential work on Erasmus and Renaissance epistolary culture, she demonstrates that the early moderns took a special interest in epistolary techniques that successfully "fabricat[ed] intimacy" across distance.³ "Even if you dictate rigidly," Erasmus warns in one of his many discussions on the subject, "intimacy will still be missing" because an intermediary can never "reproduce the movements of the head and eyes, the play of expression, or the inflections of the voice of the original sender."⁴ Following Erasmus's instruction, early

modern letter-writing manuals and epistolary collections employ rhetoric aimed at recreating bodily presence and, in particular, emphasize the significance of the correspondents' handwriting in constructing intimacy through absence. Consequently, these conventions become the foundation for current scholarship on the friendship letter genre, which overwhelmingly focuses on textual marks of the friend's absent body. Alan Bray's influential argument, for instance, demonstrates that letters stand in as "bodily tokens."⁵ In Bray's theorization, handwriting, or the "individual trace of the author's hand," is essential for marking the "privileged intimacy" between correspondents.⁶ Jonathan Goldberg similarly argues that the familiar letter becomes "a mode of presence...that is constituted solely on the basis of absence."⁷ In other words, within a genre defined on the premise of absence, the friendship letter and its component parts construct a scene of epistolary intimacy through an accumulation of material presences, allowing letters to dissolve the distance between writing bodies. As these arguments make clear, for scholars interested in epistolary constructions of friendship, the intimacy generated by familiar letters is contingent on both the real-world friendships that letters are meant to supplement, and the handwriting in manuscript letters that serves as a material mark of the friend's body across distance.

As a printed, published collection of letters to an imaginary correspondent, Cavendish's *Sociable Letters* forecloses the material marks of intimacy defined within these parameters. Consequently, Cavendish's text is consistently excluded from conversations on the genre. In Gary Schneider's thorough study of both manuscript and print early modern letters, for instance, he concedes that Cavendish's *Sociable Letters* "deserves mention[]," but then dismisses the text as one that "embraces the association of epistolary writing and sociality...in its title alone."⁸ I contend, however, that it is precisely because of its ostensible shortcomings that *Sociable Letters*

has much to add to discussions on both early modern epistolary culture and the friendships it scripts. In this essay, I argue that Cavendish's contribution to the friendship letter genre has gone unrecognized because *Sociable Letters* experiments with different modes of intimacy than those dictated by the genre's conventions. As a printed letter collection intentionally scripting a fictional friendship, *Sociable Letters* intervenes in the early modern epistolary process and negotiates alternatives for the traditional bodily and material markers of intimacy between letter writer and interlocutor. Because Madam, the collection's unnamed correspondent, is imaginary, the text becomes less about this specific female friendship and more about the construction of female friendship through letters, an exploration of how intimacy is marked in a genre that defines its very parameters by the relationship it signifies. Too often scholars look to letters for evidence of friendships rather than considering how the negotiations of early modern friendships may have shaped the genre within which they were primarily articulated. Constructing a fictional friendship for a public readership, Cavendish is able to experiment with the genre and examine how the structures of both friendships and friendship letters mutually inform and reinforce one another. Therefore, my analysis of Cavendish's text prompts a broader reconsideration of how we read early modern epistolary correspondence and the relationships it structures in both manuscript and print.

As my opening quote from Cavendish's text demonstrates, *Sociable Letters* announces its explicit investment in friendship, specifically female friendship, in its prefatory material. Most scholarly work on *Sociable Letters*, however, does not focus on female friendship, and instead builds on Catherine Gallagher's influential work on Cavendish's "ideology of the absolute self."⁹ Grounding their arguments in a line from the text's prefatory poem, "this lady only to her self she writes," scholars take Madam's imaginary status for granted, and focus instead on

Cavendish's authorial self-fashioning ("Upon Her Excellency The Authoress").¹⁰ Susan Fitzmaurice, for instance, acknowledges the role Madam plays in Cavendish's letters, but only as the "critical cipher" that Cavendish can "attribute appropriate assumptions and presuppositions to in constructing an epistolary exchange."¹¹ While my arguments are indebted to this critical work, these discussions necessarily limit our readings of this rich collection of letters. Rather than starting with Cavendish's prefatory statement, I build my argument from the questions of sociability introduced by the text's very title. Consequently, this essay considers implications of the text's intentionally constructed female interlocutor that go beyond reading Madam as another example of "the infinitude of selfhood" Gallagher finds in Cavendish's texts.¹²

In order to outline the particular modes of epistolary intimacy I read in *Sociable Letters*, I build my argument in three parts. In my essay's first section, I consider early modern and contemporary critical accounts of the absent friend trope and turn to *Sociable Letters* to explore how absence signifies in letters addressed to a fictional correspondent. Interested in how spatial distance between bodies affects friendship, Cavendish's letters suggest that absence and distance preserve intimacy more effectively than real world interaction because materials rather than bodies carry the friendship's affective weight. In my second section, I focus more closely on the content of those materials in *Sociable Letters* in order to demonstrate that Cavendish situates the intimacy between Madam and the letter writer within the complex temporal structures woven throughout their epistolary exchange. In this section, I borrow and build on Elizabeth Freeman's arguments on queer time to illuminate how Cavendish manipulates the epistolary genre's temporal registers, making room in her text for a deeper sense of time that heightens the intimate feel of her printed letters. Finally, I bring these explorations of materiality and temporality together to argue that *Sociable Letters* is an experiment in how intimacy can be gradually

absorbed into print. As the materials of this text's friendship come to the fore, Cavendish prompts us to rethink our emphasis on the friend's body, which becomes dematerialized as she translates its essence into the materiality of the text itself. Tracking this process of translation, I find new formulations of intimacy and female friendship that have as much to contribute to Cavendish scholarship as they do to conversations on textual representations of early modern friendship more broadly.

“Rather scenes than letters”

Throughout *Sociable Letters*, Cavendish dramatizes the tension between the text's construction of a fictional friendship and its exaggeration of the absent friend trope, a trope contingent on the physical bodies of real world friendships.¹³ About halfway through the collection, for instance, Cavendish stages a missed encounter between the two women. Voicing her regret afterwards, the letter writer states, “I am sorry, that when you were last in this city, I was forced through my being sick, to deny my self the honour of your company...for your company would have been some recompense for the absence of my health” (Letter 145). Syntactically, Cavendish's use of “absence” refers to the letter writer's health, but the notion of absence is also echoed in the fact that the writer is forced to “deny” herself Madam's company, a sentiment that implicitly marks the friend's absence and evokes the conventional trope. At first glance, such scenes throughout *Sociable Letters* appear to model what Schneider calls “the imaginative recreation of...bodily presence,” often “rhetorically inscribed in the letter” as writers grapple with the anxieties of communication at a distance.¹⁴ In a 1602 letter from Mary Sidney Herbert to Sir Robert Cecil, for instance, Herbert describes the “paper forme” of her letter as a “dumbe shew” standing in for her body “till...better performance may folow.”¹⁵

The “imaginative recreation of...bodily presence,” however, functions differently for Cavendish than it does for her contemporaries. *Sociable Letters* is the text where Cavendish famously defines her writing as “paper bodies” (Letter 143), a crucial emendation to Herbert’s rhetoric of “paper forme,” and one that invites, to borrow Lorna Hutson’s language, “a rethinking of the relation of embodiment to the cultural capital of friendship in seventeenth-century women’s writing.”¹⁶ Cavendish scholars often cite the phrase “paper bodies” as evidence of Cavendish’s attention to the materiality of writing throughout her oeuvre,¹⁷ but this rhetorical synthesis of text and body takes on heightened significance within the specific context of *Sociable Letters* because it emphasizes the tension between the text’s imaginary interlocutor and the collection’s use of the genre’s conventional bodily markers of friendship. The phrase erases the gap between the material of writing and the bodies within it, collapsing imaginary constructions on paper with fleshy bodies of the real world. The phrase “paper bodies” redefines the parameters of absence and presence in Cavendish’s text, and functions as a direct response to standard familiar letter conventions. Rather than simply marking bodily intimacy in print by using the “paper forme” of her letters to stand in for bodily presence, the phrase “paper bodies” suggests a more nuanced experiment with the degrees of embodiment and subsequent intimacies available in the material of a printed text itself.

By linking the materials of writing to embodiment, the phrase “paper bodies” can help us make sense of the slippery spectrum between real and imaginary bodies many of the collection’s letters articulate. For instance, while the majority of the letters are addressed to Madam, nine of the text’s final twelve letters are addressed to other individuals, two of whom are recognizable historical figures: Eleonora Duarti (the daughter of a merchant living in Antwerp, where Cavendish lived in exile for several years) and Sir Charles Cavendish (Margaret’s brother-in-

law).¹⁸ In her final letter to Madam, and last letter of the collection, the writer begs Madam's pardon for "mixing some other letters with those to your self" (Letter 211). By concluding the collection with real bodies (fleshy addressees), Cavendish entangles Madam in the spectrum between embodiment and figuration, a spectrum that also demarcates, as scholars have pointed out, the questionable status of the letter writer herself in both of Cavendish's printed letter collections.¹⁹

In fact, as early as the text's prefatory apparatus Cavendish signals that her letters render embodiment differently than standard epistolary conventions. In the preface to "Noble Readers," just before claiming that "this lady only to her self she writes," Cavendish reveals that the correspondences in *Sociable Letters* are "rather scenes than letters." Interrupting the genre's stability from the outset by tying her collection of letters explicitly to a genre contingent on the presence of physical bodies, Cavendish immediately invests her text with a visceral corporeality.²⁰ Although the reason she gives for the choice of genre is simply that she has "put forth twenty plays already," it seems that even in trying to experiment with the new genre of letters, the pull to a more embodied form underlies the collection and the women's friendship written into its pages. By introducing her collection as "scenes" Cavendish calls attention to the shortcomings of printed epistolary correspondence, specifically the lack of bodies and bodily markers that accompany her printed text. If mechanically printed letters lack conventional marks of intimacy, Cavendish's collection works in the space between epistles and drama—genres contingent on absence and presence, respectively—and, thereby, proposes a new version of epistolary intimacy, one contingent on a different "mode of presence," to borrow Goldberg's language. With this opening nod to performance, the interplay between absence and presence in *Sociable Letters* becomes a way to explore a heightened somatic register of the epistolary text.

Given the announcement in her preface, the themes of absence and presence in Cavendish's letters need to be read alongside, rather than commensurate with, the traditional material markers of the friend's body in early modern letters. Absence and presence in Cavendish's text have less to do with marks of the friend's body on the page—handwriting, for instance—and more to do with the position of the friend's physical body in space in relation to her correspondent. Attending to the body's positionality in a way that echoes performance's attention to spatial relationships between bodies, Cavendish's text relies on the two ladies "living at some short distance" not only because such distance necessitates epistolary correspondence, but also because the text is interested in exploring how that distance between bodies affects the relationship between the two women. In several letters, Cavendish characterizes distance as a pleasant, even desired, element of friendship, utterly upending the traditional emphasis on familiar letters as insufficient surrogates for personal contact. In a long letter on her "retirement from the publick concourse," the writer declares that friendship at a distance is part of the "pleasures, and harmless delights" of a solitary lifestyle (Letter 29). Letter 23 explores the problems that arise when friends live too close, arguing that "fondness wears away with use and acquaintance" (Letter 23). The writer discusses two friends who have had a falling out, and cites the fact that they "live and bord together" as one cause. "It is not strange that the Lady L.T. and the Lady A.M. should fall out," the writer notes, because "little envies, will appear betwixt equal persons that live together, especially women" (Letter 23). This letter emphasizes the suffocating possibilities of spatial proximity, not only revealing the writer's anxiety about face-to-face relationships, but also gendering that anxiety—the threats posed by frequent interactions affect "especially women."²¹

These sentiments regarding retirement and solitude suggest that the letter writer and Madam should not be defined as “absent friends” according to the period’s epistolary conventions. What starts to emerge instead is a friendship existing solely through letters, not for the simple reason that Madam is imaginary, but rather because Cavendish prefers friendship at a distance and wants to explore alternative possibilities for intimacy—possibilities necessitated by permanent rather than intermittent distance. Distance, in this equation, is able to preserve the “fondness” that “wears away” with proximity and, consequently, the materials passed through that distance gain heightened significance. The attitudes toward sociability exhibited in Letters 23 and 29, among others in the collection, further confound the sentiments regarding absence and presence we see in some of the other letters, making those standard conventions seem suspect—filler language to ensure her collection participates in the proper tropes rather than genuine dismay at her friend’s absence. If absence and distance are the desired and permanent modes of friendship rather than temporary exceptions to be endured, the bodily markers of the friendship need to shift accordingly. What new modes of intimacy become available when epistolary materials are the relationship’s sole means of expression?

“Three dead men”

The new modes of intimacy Cavendish proposes are entangled within her text’s exploitation of another conventional friendship letter trope. As early modern scholars have demonstrated, epistolary correspondence exists within a fraught temporal framework, and letter writers often work to erase “the gap between the moment of writing a letter and the moment of receiving and reading one.”²² Gary Schneider, for instance, underscores the tension between the desire for immediacy and the reality of delayed, sometimes impossible, correspondence. In the approximately 40,000 letters that comprise his historical archive, Schneider notes a clear “desire

for an ideal communicative system that easily and quickly span[s] time and distance.”²³ Jonathan Goldberg, too, notes that letters “function in the gap that divides any moment,” and he points to writers’ efforts to erase any temporal delay through the language of their correspondence.²⁴ We see examples of such strategies even in printed fictional letter collections like Jacques du Bosque’s *The Secretary of Ladies*, originally published in French in 1635 and translated into English by 1638. In the second letter of Du Bosque’s collection, one of the fictional writers opens by declaring, “I must begin my letter where you end yours,” rhetorically eliding the temporal gap between the initial letter and her response.²⁵ Another writer closes her letter by reporting, “the messenger hastes mee to close this, and affords mee no more time,” emphasizing the messenger’s “haste” in an effort to collapse the time between the writer closing the letter and the reader opening it.²⁶ In part, Cavendish’s text mirrors these conventions. In Letter 152, for example, the letter writer declares that she is sending her reply with the same messenger who brought Madam’s latest letter, an assertion that echoes the strategies used in Du Bosque’s text. Additionally, the writer begins many letters throughout the collection with “in your last letter” before launching into the topic at hand.²⁷ While these gestures directly participate in the genre’s conventional management of time, these instances of explicit temporal elision are tempered by letters in Cavendish’s collection that linger on questions of time and complicate negotiations between temporal registers. Rather than erasing the gap between writing and reading moments, this lingering foregrounds temporal gaps and, as I aim to demonstrate, becomes integral to the collection’s rewriting of epistolary intimacy.

It is fairly late in the collection (Letter 162) before the reader starts to recognize that time functions differently in *Sociable Letters* than the conventions emphasized in scholarly accounts

of epistolary time. Letter 162 opens with a shared memory from the writer and Madam's childhood that reads:

Remember, when we were very young maids, one day we were discoursing about lovers, and we did injoyne each other to confess...whom we loved, and I confess'd 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 (Letter 162).

Caught within the already complex temporal framework of the epistolary genre, this recounted secret of the letter writer's desire as a young woman is not merely past tense. At first glance, the framing language places the memory firmly in the past—the writer entreats Madam to “remember” and harkens back to “one day” when the two “were very young maids.” Ultimately, though, the confession activates past and present moments because the writer's past desire is pulled into the present moment of letter writing and reading. By recalling a past confession, the writer's desire is re-confessed to her friend and newly confessed to the reading public of this text. Such reverberation dramatizes the deep temporal register structuring the friendship of this fictional epistolary exchange, and calls attention to the friction between Cavendish's use of time and time's function in standard epistolary correspondence.

In addition to drawing our attention to these multiple temporal registers, this shared memory connects the writer's desire to historical bodies, thereby infusing this letter's content with a palpable embodiment that recalls the slippage between real and imaginary bodies we have seen elsewhere in the collection. While early modern scholars have been rigorously attentive to the temporal instabilities of the epistolary genre, critical work on queer time beyond the early modern period offers particularly nuanced models for considering the somatic resonances

engaged by Cavendish's theorization of epistolary temporality. Rooted in both feminist and queer critical frameworks (two fields in which Cavendish has a familiar place), Elizabeth Freeman's theories in particular help reveal that the shared personal histories evoked repeatedly in *Sociable Letters* are directly in service of the material intimacy already glimpsed in Cavendish's repurposing of the absent friend trope. Freeman argues for a mode of productive temporal expression that exhibits the same "pull of the past on the present" we see in the lingering accounts of time and memory in Cavendish's text.²⁸ This "temporal drag," as Freeman terms it, marks a very different use of time than what standard epistolary conventions outline. Recall that in Du Bosque's letters, the female correspondents overwrite the temporal gaps between moments, using language to tighten the connection between the moment of writing and the moment of reading. Freeman's sense of temporal pulling provides a much more consistent account of the way time functions in Cavendish's *Sociable Letters* than the impulse toward erasure we see in *The Secretary of Ladies* and other early modern letter collections.

Temporal drag, in Freeman's articulation, manifests on and through bodies, which can "registe[r] on their very surface the co-presence of several historically contingent events."²⁹ Bodies signify and exist within multiple temporal registers, constantly articulating "a kind of *temporal* transitivity" that refuses to leave the past behind.³⁰ This layering of multiple temporal registers seems precisely what early modern familiar letters hope to avoid in their gestures to erase the delay between writing and reading. For Cavendish, though, letters become a temporal locus, invested with the "temporal transitivity" Freeman ascribes to bodies, and as the letters linger over the writer and Madam's shared memories, they take on a heightened significance within the material world of this friendship. Turning back to Letter 162, for instance, Cavendish's layering of historical bodies and shared memories constructs a "temporal

transitivity” within the material of the letter. As she manipulates the friendship letter conventions, Cavendish uses memory and historical bodies to call forth a mummified past that saturates the textual space of these women’s correspondence with a deep, historical time. The writer’s past desire, as my above reading demonstrates, is pulled into the present moment of letter writing and reading, but, crucially, in that action of pulling past into present, Cavendish allows each temporal register to linger and exist simultaneously.

After urging Madam to remember this shared moment from their days as “young Maids,” the writer goes on to discuss her husband. “Soon after” the confession, she writes, “we both married two worthy men,” adding another memory to the layers of time at work in this letter (Letter 162). This recounting of another past moment does not erase the prior shared confession. Rather, the writer’s confession that she “only was in love with three dead men” lingers, both in the timeframe the letter lays out—the marriages are “soon after” but in no way elide the original confession—and in the space on the page. Letter 162 makes room, textually, for both moments. Moreover, the writer goes on to ascribe the traits of the “three dead men” to her husband, again pulling past into present by creating a kind of palimpsestic figure. “As for my husband,” she writes, “I know him to have the valour of Caesar, the fancy, and wit of Ovid, and the tragical, especially comical art of Shakespear” (Letter 162). With this description, the historical (dead) bodies of the letter writer’s past confession to Madam come “bodying forth” into the present moment.³¹ The historical time of the referenced male figures, the shared past confession to Madam, the past moment of her marriage, and finally the present moment and her husband’s status all exist alongside and on top of one another—tangential connections across time and space, to evoke Carla Freccero’s language.³² Rather than the body of Madam or the letter writer

serving as the physical signifier for temporal drag, the material letter itself registers the “co-presence of several historically contingent events” on its surface.³³

By using the letter, the material on the page, as the site for her collection’s temporal pulling, Cavendish saturates the letters themselves with the force of the women’s friendship over time. Instead of looking for ways to perform or recreate bodily contact over the spatial and temporal distance of the letter exchange, the letters become the material site for the entirety of the women’s friendship. To borrow Hutson’s language regarding Katherine Philips’ poems, these letters are not “mimetic recreations of the spaces and scenes...[of] bodily intimacy.”³⁴ Knowing that her letters cannot be read within those parameters given Madam’s imaginary status, Cavendish finds a way to materially manufacture the women’s intimacy over the course of her collection. Almost anticipating an epistolary novel, the reader’s sense of the women’s relationship develops across the temporal plane of *Sociable Letters*.

“Scribbles for letters”

While the physical content of the letters does much of this work, the collection also tracks material exchanges between the women that occur beyond the bounds of the text. The writer talks of receiving fruit (Letter 106) and poems (Letter 72) from Madam, in addition to sending her several gifts, including “toyes...as a token to your daughter” (Letter 152). In Letter 148, the writer reflects on a gift Madam has sent her: “I am so pleas’d with the cup because it was yours, and now it is mine, yet it is yours still.” To some extent, these material exchanges participate in the complicated gift economy frequently displayed within the friendship letter genre.³⁵

Functioning alongside the letter correspondence, and given Cavendish’s focus on the materials of friendship, though, these gift exchanges deserve closer examination. We can already see, in the writer’s response to the cup in Letter 148, that the gift exchanges display a sense of temporal

drag similar to the content of the letters. The cup “was” Madam’s, it is “now” the letter writer’s, and “yet” Madam’s original ownership lingers within the material object. In fact, the writer cites this layered sense of ownership as the reason she is so “pleas’d” with the gift. Building on my claim that shared memory becomes an alternative site for intimate relations in *Sociable Letters*, the final pages of this essay track a gift exchange between Madam and the writer that *creates* a shared memory, allowing us to feel the material weight of the women’s relationship in the physical objects exchanged. In Letter 131, my final example, Cavendish filters her theorization of epistolary time through the materials of the letter writer’s childhood and, to again borrow Freeman’s language, succeeds in “open[ing] up a tactile relationship to the past” that allows the materials of this friendship to fully absorb the bodies of the friends themselves.³⁶

Letter 131 brings the question of handwriting, supplementary to my arguments thus far, directly to the forefront of Cavendish’s management of epistolary intimacy. Letter 131 provides the only reference to the letter writer’s handwriting in the collection, describes her handwriting as completely inaccessible, and, crucially, locates it firmly in the past. The writer frames Letter 131 as a response to Madam’s request to read “the sixteen books...writ” during her childhood. In this letter, contrary to Letter 162, the writer does not seem eager to share the specters of her younger days with either Madam or her broader readership. The writer describes her childhood books as “remnants, bits and ends of several things,” nothing more than “frippery” and “taylors shreds.” Consequently, the trivial material scraps of her childhood writing beg comparison to the more ordered, legible, and printed text of *Sociable Letters* itself. However, even if the collection as a whole seems to privilege the “regularizing force of print,” the writer’s extended discussion of the “huge blots” and “long, hard scratches” of her childhood hand deserves attention, particularly as part of Cavendish’s broader interrogation of friendship letter conventions.³⁷ In

Letter 131, I read the crucial climax of Cavendish's argument regarding the role of materials in friendship, and demonstrate the significance of print to that argument.

If we look closely at the trifling disregard the writer seems to have for her childhood books, Letter 131 actually frames the writer's handwriting as much more significant than it seems at first glance, ultimately capitalizing on a method of "literally *feeling* the historical" that deepens the intimacy between Madam and the letter writer.³⁸ Positioned just over halfway through *Sociable Letters*, the discussion of childhood books initially becomes significant simply because the writer explicitly notes Madam's desire to see these materials. The writer opens the letter by ventriloquizing Madam's request, "you desired me to send you the sixteen books I writ in my childhood," and then repeats Madam's desire later in the letter. In the second iteration, Cavendish frames the desire specifically within the parameters of friendship. "I cannot imagine," the letter writer speculates, "why you should desire them, unless out of a friendship" (Letter 131). This emphasis on the friendship behind the desire to work through the messy material remains of the writer's past situates the books within the gift exchange conventions of early modern friendship more broadly, but, more crucially, it also retroactively inserts the women's friendship into the "confused...chaos" of the letter writer's past.

Reading her childhood books, the writer warns, Madam will "enter into a vast wilderness, and intricate labyrinth" as she tries to navigate the "tedious, troublesome, and dangerous" content of the writer's childhood hand (Letter 131). But this warning about the perilous "journey for [Madam's] eyes" also calls attention to the fact that these objects and the treacherous reading experience they necessitate will now be something Madam and the letter writer share. Like the layered memories of Letter 162, the childhood books will now be a shared piece of history—here a very personal and crucially material history—between the letter writer and Madam. Madam's

desire to read and reuse the childhood writings, combined with the implication that the letter writer and Madam will then share the experience of the “vast wilderness” that is the writer’s past, allow these books to become a material repository for the intimacy constructed between the two women across the letter exchange.

With this sole mention of the letter writer’s handwriting in *Sociable Letters*, Cavendish opens up the possibility for the “privileged intimacy” ascribed to handwritten letters,³⁹ only to foreclose that intimacy from her readers because the handwriting is not included in the collection. Rather than simply an act of foreclosure, this private exchange of handwriting becomes the capstone gesture in Cavendish’s tactics for generating intimacy in print. The intentional inclusion of the handwritten books and the resulting private exchange takes what Cathy Shrank calls the “latent intimacy of the scribal form” and situates it beyond the boundaries of the printed sociable letters Cavendish presents for her reading public.⁴⁰ At the end of Letter 131 the writer concedes, “if no perswasion will alter you, but you are resolved to see them, send me word in your next letter, and I will send them to you.” As is customary with this collection, we do not read Madam’s response, but in Letter 134, Cavendish directly announces that this private exchange of handwriting has indeed taken place. “It is a great[] wonder to me,” the writer marvels, “that you would take the pains to peruse...those books I sent you” (Letter 134). By insisting on a private exchange of handwriting, Cavendish signals that the women’s intimacy is, to some degree, shielded in a way that counters the otherwise exposed, highly public context of this published volume of letters.

Given the resonances of such an explicitly private act, if we turn back to the question of sociability introduced by the text’s title, the phrase “sociable letters” starts to offer more than simply a forecast of the recounted social relations in the collection’s content. Rather, the friction

in the title between “sociable” and “letters” prefigures the collection’s theorization of epistolary female friendship—socially exposed through publication but craving ways to mark the deeper, more privileged intimacy so tantalizingly elusive within the epistolary culture of early modern England. As Gary Schneider reminds us, “privacy was a very malleable designation” in the period, and the audience for one’s letter was never guaranteed to be limited to the sole addressee.⁴¹ In her text, though, Cavendish finds a way to make something about the published letter exchange explicitly private and, in the process, calls attention to early modern epistolary culture’s problematic reliance on manuscript hand as producer of intimacy. Consistently throughout this collection, the bodies at either end of the letter correspondence become less important than the materials exchanged between them. Cavendish strips the correspondents of their privileged positions and, instead, situates the privileged intimacy of her collection within the interstices of her printed letters. She lingers on Madam and the letter writer’s recounted memories and past exchanges in order to call heightened attention to the fact that the reader is only privy to the recounting. The intimacy of these moments is reserved for the women themselves and preserved in the materials of their friendship. Such gestures saturate Cavendish’s printed collection with an intimacy that early modern scholars often ascribe solely to manuscript letters, and invite us to read between the lines of other printed letter collections for alternative marks of intimacy in print.

As my analysis has aimed to demonstrate, *Sociable Letters* is deeply interested in early modern friendship structures, with much to contribute to broader conversations on the friendship letter genre and female friendship relations in particular. Ultimately, my argument prompts us to rethink Cavendish’s famous prefatory statement, “this lady only to her self she writes,” and the way this statement has echoed throughout critical work on this prolific female writer. Rather than

simply signaling Madam's imaginary status, the text's heightened attention to written materials and the bodies in direct contact with them invite us to read this statement as one that marks the text's exploration of intimate relations, whether between interlocutors or between a writer and her text. Even if Cavendish writes "only to her self," she uses friendship as a scaffold for the nuanced theorization of printed intimacy offered by *Sociable Letters*. Instead of indicating Cavendish's "infinite, unfathomable regression of interiority," the fictional friendship that structures *Sociable Letters* foregrounds the role sociability plays in her writing.⁴² Whether she writes "to her self," to Madam, or to a broader readership, she is always writing *to*.

¹ Margaret Cavendish, *Margaret Cavendish: Sociable Letters*, ed. James Fitzmaurice (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1997). References to *Sociable Letters* are from Fitzmaurice's edition and will be noted in the body of the essay by letter number.

² Jacques du Bosque, *The Secretary of Ladies*, trans. I.H., (London, 1638), Text Creation Partnership digital edition, *Early English Books Online*; Nicholas Breton, *A Poste with a Madde Packet of Letters* (London, 1602); Angel Day, *The English Secreterie*, (London, 1586); and William Fulwood, *The Enemie of Idlenesse*, (London, 1568). For a useful overview of these models, see W. Webster Newbold, "Letter Writing and Vernacular Literacy in Sixteenth-Century England," *Letter-Writing Manuals and Instruction from Antiquity to the Present*, ed. Carol Poster and Linda C. Mitchell, (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2007), 127-40. For a particularly compelling account of the potential link between Cavendish's *Sociable Letters* and Du Bosque's collection specifically, see Diana Barnes, "The Secretary of Ladies and Feminine Friendship at the Court of Henrietta Maria," *Henrietta Maria: Piety, Politics and Patronage*, ed. Erin Griffey (Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2008), 39-56.

³ Lisa Jardine, "Reading and the Technology of Textual Affect: Erasmus's Familiar Letters and Shakespeare's *King Lear*," *The Practice and Representation of Reading in England*, ed. James Raven, Helen Small, and Naomi Tadmor, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 77-101 (84); and Jardine, *Erasmus, Man of Letters: The Construction of Charisma in Print*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

⁴ Desiderius Erasmus, *De recta latini graecique sermonis pronuntiatione dialogues*, trans. Maurice Pope, *The Collected Works of Erasmus*, Volume 26, ed. J. Kelley Sowards (Toronto, 1985), 391-2.

⁵ Alan Bray, *The Friend*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 162.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Jonathan Goldberg, *Writing Matter: From the Hands of the English Renaissance*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 249.

⁸ Gary Schneider, *The Culture of Epistolarity: Vernacular Letters and Letter Writing in Early Modern England, 1500-1700*, (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005), 266.

⁹ Catherine Gallagher, "Embracing the Absolute: The Politics of the Female Subject in Seventeenth Century England," *Genders* 1 (1988): 24-39 (25).

¹⁰ For instance, see, Melissa Hill, "'A Conversation of Souls': Community and Subjectivity in Margaret Cavendish's *Sociable Letters*," *Proceedings of the PMR Conference* 16-17 (1992-93): 139-147; Kate Lilley, Review of *Margaret Cavendish: Sociable Letters*, ed. James Fitzmaurice, *Seventeenth-Century News* 57, no. 1-2 (1999): 36-8; Susan Fitzmaurice, "'But, Madam': The Interlocutor in Margaret Cavendish's Writing," *In-Between: Essays and Studies in Literary Criticism* 9, no. 1-2 (2000): 17-27; and Diana Barnes, "Familiar Epistolary Philosophy: Margaret Cavendish's Philosophical Letters," *Parergon* 26, no. 2 (2009): 39-64. Barnes gestures

toward the sociable framework of Cavendish's *Philosophical Letters* (1664), but focuses on the implications for Cavendish's intellectual theories rather than connecting her claims to early modern friendship studies.

¹¹ Susan M. Fitzmaurice, *The Familiar Letter in Early Modern English: A Pragmatic Approach*, (Amsterdam: John Benjamin's Publishing Company, 2002), 176. For exceptions to such accounts, and work that briefly considers *Sociable Letters* in relation to early modern female friendship, see Penelope Anderson, *Friendship's Shadows: Women's Friendship and the Politics of Betrayal in England, 1640-1705*, (Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 225-229; and Katherine R. Larson, *Early Modern Women in Conversation*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 138-165. Also see Jonathan Goldberg's compelling account of Cavendish's theorization of "a new form of sociality" across her oeuvre: Goldberg, *The Seeds of Things: Theorizing Sexuality and Materiality in Renaissance Representations*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), 122-152 (146).

¹² Gallagher, "Embracing the Absolute," 32.

¹³ For more on the absent friend trope see Jardine, *Erasmus*, 147-174; and Schneider, *Culture of Epistolarity*, 37-55.

¹⁴ Schneider, *Culture of Epistolarity*, 110.

¹⁵ Mary Sidney Herbert, *The Collected Works of Mary Sidney Herbert Countess of Pembroke*, Volume 1, ed. Margaret P. Hannay, Noel J. Kinnamon, and Michael G. Brennan, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 292.

¹⁶ Lorna Hutson, "The Body of the Friend and the Woman Writer: Katherine Philips's Absence from Alan Bray's *The Friend* (2003)," *Women's Writing* 14, no. 2 (2007): 196-214 (197).

¹⁷ For instance, see Sylvia Bowerbank and Sara Mendelson, ed., *Paper Bodes: A Margaret Cavendish Reader*, (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press Ltd., 2000), 11.

¹⁸ In his introduction to *Sociable Letters*, Fitzmaurice also indicates that many of the “characters” discussed in the letters to Madam are, in fact, “actual people more or less carefully hidden behind initials and anagrams” (xii).

¹⁹ The preface’s definition of the text as the “correspondence of two ladies” suggests that the letter writer may also be one of Cavendish’s figurative characters, but several letter closings suggest otherwise. Letter 90 is signed “I, M.N,” Cavendish’s own initials, and the letter to Charles Cavendish is signed “sister-in-law.” For work that reads Cavendish’s letters autobiographically, see Hill, “Conversation of Souls”; James Fitzmaurice, “Autobiography, Parody and the Sociable Letters of Margaret Cavendish,” *A Princely Brave Woman: Essays on Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle*, ed. Stephen Clucas, (Ashgate, 2003), 69-83; and, for a useful counterargument, Diana Barnes, “The Restoration of Royalist Form in Margaret Cavendish’s *Sociable Letters*,” *Women Writing 1550-1750*, ed. Jo Wallwork and Paul Salzman, (Victoria, BC: Le Trobe University, 2001), 201-214.

²⁰ Cavendish published two collections of plays (*Plays* [1662] and *Plays Never Before Printed* [1668]), both of which scholars have categorized as closet drama collections. As with Cavendish scholarship more broadly, though, there is consistent debate about the genre of these plays, particularly whether or not they were meant for performance. For more on Cavendish’s manipulation of the closet drama genre, see Katherine R. Kellet, “Performance, Performativity, and Identity in Margaret Cavendish’s *The Convent of Pleasure*,” *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 48, no. 2 (2008): 419-443. For work on Cavendish’s slippery genre distinctions more

broadly, see Line Cottegnies and Nancy Weitz, ed., *Authorial Conquests: Essays on Genre in the Writings of Margaret Cavendish*, (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003).

²¹ In addition to voicing her preference for solitude over the course of the collection, the letter writer seems particularly annoyed by the company of other women. For an overview of Cavendish's inconsistent attitude toward the female sex, see Bowerbank and Mendelson, *Paper Bodies*, 16-23. This is an oft-debated topic in Cavendish scholarship, and it is at the center of Cavendish's troubled history with early modern feminist criticism more broadly. It is outside the scope of this essay to intervene directly in these debates, but I aim to make the case for *Sociable Letters* as generative new ground for critical conversation on Cavendish's proto-feminist status. For a sample of foundational feminist scholarship on Cavendish, see Sylvia Bowerbank, "The Spider's Delight: Margaret Cavendish and the 'Female' Imagination," *English Literary Renaissance* 14, no. 3 (September 1984): 392-408; Gallagher, "Embracing the Absolute"; Mihoko Suzuki, "Margaret Cavendish and the Female Satirist," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 37, no. 3 (Summer 1997): 483-500; and Deborah Boyle, "Margaret Cavendish's Nonfeminist Natural Philosophy," *Configurations* 12, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 195-227.

²² Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 97.

²³ Schneider, *Culture of Epistolarity*, 36.

²⁴ Goldberg, *Writing Matter*, 250.

²⁵ Du Bosque, *Secretary of Ladies*, 5.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 133.

²⁷ Letters 6, 9, 10, 24, 37, 56, 78, and 140 are a handful of the letters that begin this way.

²⁸ Freeman, *Time Binds*, 62.

²⁹ Ibid., 63.

³⁰ Ibid., original emphasis.

³¹ Freeman, *Time Binds*, 135.

³² Carla Freccero, “Tangents (of Desire),” *The Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 16, no. 2 (Spring 2016): 91-105.

³³ Freeman, *Time Binds*, 63.

³⁴ Hutson, “Body of the Friend,” 208.

³⁵ For more on the link between letter exchange and gift exchange, see Bray, *The Friend*, 140-76; and Felicity Heal, *The Power of Gifts: Gift Exchange in Early Modern England* (Oxford University Press, 2014), especially chapter 4.

³⁶ Freeman, *Time Binds*, 93.

³⁷ Goldberg, *Seeds of Things*, 141. My reading of Letter 131 speaks back to Goldberg’s argument that the sociable possibilities of Cavendish’s works emerge within scenes of illegibility. In Goldberg’s account, both handwriting and print in Cavendish’s texts become sites of interaction structured through “misreading and incomprehension,” but that “strangeness” generates possibilities for “new form[s] of sociality” (Goldberg 145-46). Along with Goldberg, I consider how the shared experience of these illegible handwritten texts becomes a site for intimacy, but, as my analysis will make clear, I prioritize the generative possibilities of shared experience as opposed to illegibility.

³⁸ Freeman, *Time Binds*, 93, original emphasis.

³⁹ Bray, *The Friend*, 162.

⁴⁰ Cathy Shrank, “‘These few scribbled rules’: Representing Scribal Intimacy in Early Modern Print,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 67, no. 2 (June 2004): 295-314 (300).

⁴¹ Schneider, *Culture of Epistolarity*, 69.

⁴² Gallagher, “Embracing the Absolute,” 32.