

Sonia VILLEGAS-LÓPEZ, editor and translator. 2024. *Cartas Sociables*. Cátedra, Letras Universales

Sergio MARÍN-CONEJO
Universidad de Sevilla, Spain

Trabajad, señora, trabajad, olvidaos de escribir libros,
Porque, de seguro, mujeres más sabias nunca escri-
bieron uno

Preface (95)¹

In recent years, the figure of Margaret Cavendish (1623–1673), the seventeenth-century Marquess and later Duchess of Newcastle, has experienced a remarkable resurgence in scholarly attention. Though she was once dismissed as an eccentric figure by Samuel Pepys (1633–1703) and Virginia Woolf (1882–1941), even if both, ironically, paid her inadvertent homage, her contemporary Bathsua Makin (1600–1675) praised her alongside other learned noblewomen.² *The Blazing World* (1666, 1668) remains this “*creatoress*”³ most widely recognized and captivating work of fiction, often regarded as a precursor to science fiction, but its very prominence may paradoxically hinder deeper engagement with her broader oeuvre. As Fitzmaurice (2016) argues in the introduction to the first edited version of *Sociable Letters*, this work offers a more revealing entry point if we want to know the author since it provides a rich hybrid of fiction, essay, and (pseudo)autobiography, artfully woven through an epistolary exchange.

This is precisely what editor Sonia Villegas-López (University of Huelva) has identified and has also achieved with this translation to Spanish, tailored to modern readers and supported by a rigorous critical framework. Our colleague enriches the translation by contextualizing each of the 221 letters that comprise this foundational collection with a substantial introduction and critical notes that are essential frame-

¹ “Work Lady Work, let writing Books alone, For surely Wiser Women ne’r writ one” (Fitzmaurice 2016, 4).

² In *An Essay to Revive the Ancient Education of Gentlewomen*, referencing “the present Duchess of New-Castle,” in Emersonian fashion “by her own Genius, rather than any timely Instruction,” as she “over-tops many grave Gown-men” (1673, 10).

³ As the duchess refers to herself in the introduction “To the Ladies” in *The Description of a New World, Called The Blazing-World* (1666–1668).

works for understanding Cavendish's work and its place in the broader literary canon.

Focusing first on the translation technicalities, the essence of Cavendish's voice has been preserved while making the text accessible to today's readers by modernizing spelling and punctuation for the sake of clarity. The duchess's writing, though brimming with originality, is sometimes erratic, with irregularities and period-specific spellings that have often proved challenging to translate. This volume carefully maintains the stylistic nuances of the original, allowing readers to engage with the historical and cultural context of this fictional correspondence.

On opening the book though, we find three series of richly annotated introductory sections. Her life, her production, and the context to *Sociable Letters*. The first division provides insight with six biographical milestones: a detailed exploration of the Lucas family of Colchester (her maiden lineage); the impact of the Civil War on both her family and herself; the arrival of William Cavendish to her life; and the particularly compelling chapter examining their exile to continental Europe; the Restoration; and their return to England. In the next section, Villegas-López conveniently puts her literary production into its historical context. The editor has divided it into three more subsections: namely, Cavendish's female writing in which we can read her influences and her understanding of writing as a political act; the literature she produced during her 16-year exile; and her extraordinary use of different genres, as she discussed the traditional taxonomy of fancy and non-fiction: "Así, Cavendish consigue además dismantelar la tradicional separación de obras del intelecto y obras de la imaginación y proponer, bien al contrario, la idoneidad de ambas en su conjunto" [Thus, Cavendish also manages to dismantle the traditional separation of works of the intellect and works of the imagination and to propose, on the contrary, the appropriateness of both as a whole] (52).⁴ Villegas-López highlights Cavendish's ornate style, and at some points, excessive use of paratext and prefatory material as a means of demonstrating control over her works and the intended influence over her audience.

The final section addresses *Cartas Sociables* as an example of epistolary literature in the seventeenth century. The editor's analysis of the letters' form and content, based on the genre itself, shows that genre's gender-situated nature. It overturns conventional narrative structures by deliberately performing a "textual intimacy" (Kort 2012), a strat-

⁴ All translations of Villegas's introduction are my own.

egy Cavendish employed to stage female intellectual resistance. This approach is particularly significant when we consider her husband's suggestion that she write more practical epistles rather than "Cosas tan lamentables que solo / Para tapar la olla de mostaza sirven, al lado de vuestro ingenio" (93) ["Such Wolful things, as they are only fit To stop Mustard-pots, to this Ladies Wit" (Fitzmaurice 2016, 3)]. Through its illusion of intimate, unmediated expression (Altman 1982), into which we are invited to peer, the duchess displays a performance of individuality that encodes sociohistorical critique mingled with details from mundane daily life and deep philosophical musings. Similarly, as Bayer puts it in relation to Apha Behn's *Love-Letters* (1684), "[the author] needed to move outside of the confines of epistolary writing to approach the kind of social realism that critics like Ian Watt have identified as the foundation for the birth and rise of the novel" (2024, 25).

Cartas Sociables is a collection of messages, featuring imaginary correspondence with an unnamed noblewoman (like Cavendish, exiled from England), that is a complex interplay of fiction, social critique, and deeper understanding, but as mentioned above, a political act: "Sin duda, hay en el mundo tan poco entendimiento que, si el mundo de los hombres se dividiera en cuatro partes, tres partes y media de las cuatro serían zopencos ignorantes" (CIX, 302) ["so little Understanding is in the World, that if the World of Mankind were Divided into Four Parts, Three Parts and a Half of the Four are Ignorant Dolts" (Fitzmaurice 2016, CIX, 117)]. Her materialist notion of science as oriented toward utility and practice ("obras de arte excepcionales o útiles" ["rare and profitable Arts" (Fitzmaurice 2016, CIX 117)]) is scorned by most men who "manifiestan que les hastían." She described her lived experience of marginalization by recounting how they would manifest their weariness through "bostezos, canturreo, carraspeo y salivazos, o se sientan como si fueran estatuas, sin vida o sentido, como si fueran insensibles a todo ello" ["are Weary of them, by their Yawning, Humming, Hauking, and Spitting, or sit as if they were Statues, without Life or Sense." (Fitzmaurice 2016, CIX, 117)]. Beyond this observation, the author's resolute position is as simple as an attitude in which comprehension can be gained through heightened communication with the world, or in Villegas-López's words, with "sociabilidad natural" [natural sociability] (71). Paradoxically, she pursued this aim in isolation, mirroring her uniqueness. While forging this intellectual "amistad femenina" [feminine friendship] (73) through her missives, she remained withdrawn from public view, laboring in seclusion with a proto-Romantic

sensibility. This contemplation was inseparable from her political vision of her desire to heal England's post-civil war divisions which women also suffered, further universal evidence of the struggle that, 300 years later, the *Mouvement de libération des femmes* expressed with the motto: "Il y a plus inconnu que le soldat, c'est sa femme." The key is, Villegas-López highlights, the very principle of virtue expressed as "sociabilidad," the female one "como forma de reconstrucción social" [as a type of social reconstruction] (68). Indeed, both the corporeal notion of sociability and the distinctive epistolary form constitute the core of Villegas-López's contribution. From a feminist perspective, not only does it reinforce Cavendish's significance within the *Querelle* tradition by critically strengthening the duchess's strategic exposition of her staged intimacy, but it also foregrounds her proposal of a political balm to heal the conflicts that precipitated her exile, a struggle that persists even today. This is a sensitive approach to forced migration and a pragmatic attitude, which probably better describes the author's subversive quintessence.

Cartas Sociables, published by the prestigious Cátedra in 2024, is likely the first contribution and scholarly translation into Spanish of a complete volume of the duchess accompanied by a comprehensive critical apparatus. This translation expands scholarly engagement by making her work accessible to a broader Spanish-speaking audience, enabling reliable cross-disciplinary access and thus fostering interdisciplinary dialogue through scholarly sociability, if I may. Sonia Villegas-López's meticulously annotated and analyzed Spanish translation of Cavendish's letters marks this a watershed, paying tribute to the authoress and helping with her restoration to the literary canon. This significant work sheds light for the Spanish-speaking readers on the volume that most vividly captures her role as one of the seventeenth century's most fascinating writers of fiction and non-fiction. The translation stays true to Cavendish's versatility and wit and is an essential read for those interested in English literature, as this project not only counters centuries of caricature but expands Cavendish's global reach, confirming her place in the literary canon, proving her prophecy of her own "true fame" to be correct at last. Moreover, her reinstatement reflects a broader shift toward recovering overlooked and downtrodden and suppressed female intellectuals, trailblazing visionaries who defied the constraints of their time by cunningly using all literary genres and testing new ones: *inter folia fulget scientia et labore*. This ensures her

place in the pantheon of influential early modern authors, just as she incessantly foresaw throughout her works.

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Author's contact: smarin@us.es

Postal address: Facultad de Filología, Dpto. Literatura Inglesa y Norteamericana, Universidad de Sevilla, C/ Palos de la Frontera, s/n, 41004, Sevilla, Spain.