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Margaret the First: A Novel

By Danielle Dutton

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Margaret the First: A Novel By Danielle Dutton

Margaret the First dramatizes the life of Margaret Cavendish, the shy, gifted, and wildly unconventional 17th-century Duchess. The eccentric Margaret wrote and published volumes of poems, philosophy, feminist plays, and utopian science fiction at a time when “being a writer” was not an option open to women. As one of the Queen’s attendants and the daughter of prominent Royalists, she was exiled to France when King Charles I was overthrown. As the English Civil War raged on, Margaret met and married William Cavendish, who encouraged her writing and her desire for a career. After the War, her work earned her both fame and infamy in England: at the dawn of daily newspapers, she was “Mad Madge,” an original tabloid celebrity. Yet Margaret was also the first woman to be invited to the Royal Society of London—a mainstay of the Scientific Revolution—and the last for another two hundred years.

Margaret the First is very much a contemporary novel set in the past. Written with lucid precision and sharp cuts through narrative time, it is a gorgeous and wholly new approach to imagining the life of a historical woman.

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Margaret the First: A Novel By Danielle Dutton Bibliography

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for Danielle Dutton:

Margaret the First

"The duchess herself would be delighted at her resurrection in *Margaret the First*. . . . Dutton expertly captures the pathos of a woman whose happiness is furrowed with the anxiety of underacknowledgment. . . . [She] surprisingly and delightfully offers not just a remarkable duchess struggling in her duke's world but also an intriguing dissection of an unusually bountiful partnership of (almost) equals." —Katharine Grant, *The New York Times Book Review*

"This slender but dense imagining of the life of Margaret Cavendish, a pioneering 17th-century writer and wife of the aristocrat William Cavendish, could be classified as a more elliptical cousin of Hilary Mantel's Thomas Cromwell novels. . . . Ms. Dutton's style is tightly poetic. 'It was indescribable what she wanted,' she writes of Margaret. 'She wanted to be 30 people. . . . To live as nature does, in many ages, in many brains.'" —John Williams, *The New York Times*

"Dutton's Duchess . . . exists, in this book, as a study in textual vestiges, as much palimpsest as person. . . . There are vivid, episodic bursts of narration, recounting a birthday party, the teasing of her by siblings, and Margaret's time at court in Oxford, after the revolution interrupted her aristocratic family's bucolic life. . . . In *Margaret the First*, there is plenty of room for play. Dutton's work serves to emphasize the ambiguities of archival proof, restoring historical narratives to what they have perhaps always already been: provoking and serious fantasies, convincing reconstructions, true fictions." —Lucy Ives, *The New Yorker* online

"Margaret Cavendish (1623-73) did something that was vanishingly rare for women in 17th-century England: She became a famous writer This is the story Danielle Dutton tells in her beguiling biographical novel *Margaret the First* The loveliest aspect of this novel is its gentle, wondering portrayal of the Cavendish marriage. William, a poet and patron of the arts, encourages his wife's ambitions even as they bring notoriety upon the household. . . . Margaret laments when told of the scandal her writing provokes. Yet this inimitable woman made her reputation anyway, and Ms. Dutton's novel charmingly enhances it." —Sam Sacks, *The Wall Street Journal*

"Danielle Dutton engagingly embellishes the life of *Margaret the First*, the infamous Duchess of Newcastle-upon-Tyne." —*Vanity Fair*

"Best New Book by a Local Author" —*The St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

"What an excellent subject on which to hang a novel. . . . Dutton's literary voice is unusual, and arresting." —Sarah Murdoch, *Toronto Star*

"Dutton's remarkable second novel is as vividly imaginative as its subject, the 17th-century English writer and eccentric Margaret Cavendish... Though Dutton doesn't shy away from the "various and extravagant" antics (such as attending the theater in a topless gown) that earned her subject notoriety and the nickname "Mad Madge," her Margaret is a woman of fierce vitality, creativity, and courage. Incorporating lines from

Cavendish herself as well as Virginia Woolf, whose essays introduced Dutton to Cavendish, this novel is indeed reminiscent of Woolf's *Orlando* in its sensuous appreciation of the world and unconventional approach to fictionalized biography. Dutton's boldness, striking prose, and skill at developing an idiosyncratic narrative should introduce her to the wider audience she deserves." —**starred review**, *Publishers Weekly*

"With refreshing and idiosyncratic style, Dutton portrays the inner turmoil and eccentric genius of an intellectual far ahead of her time."—Jane Ciabattari, BBC.com

"Although *Margaret the First* is set in 17th century London, it's not a traditional work of historical fiction. It is an experimental novel that, like the works of Jeanette Winterson, draws on language and style to tell the story. . . There is a restless ambition to [Danielle Dutton's] intellect." —Michele Filgate, *The Los Angeles Times*

"This vivid novel is a dramatization of the life of 17th-century Duchess Margaret Cavendish. . . While the novel takes place in the 1600s, the explorations of marriage, ambition, and feminist ideals are timeless." —*The Boston Globe*, "Pick of the Week"

"Conjured in a prose at once lush and spare—so precise and yet so rich in observation—Danielle Dutton's Margaret is a creature exquisitely of her own creation, who can tell herself, and perhaps believe, that she 'had rather appear worse in singularity, than better in the Mode.'" —Ellen Akins, *The Minneapolis Star Tribune*

"Despite its period setting and details, this novel—more poem than biography—feels rooted in the experiences of contemporary women with artistic and intellectual ambitions. Margaret's alternating bursts of inspiration and despair about her work may feel achingly familiar to Dutton's likely readers, many of whom will probably also be aspiring writers." —*Kirkus Reviews*

"A perfect dagger of book: sharp, dark sentences, in and out quick." —Jonny Diamond, *Literary Hub*

"[A] brazen feat of tenderness. . . visionary." —*BOMB Magazine*

"The taut prose and supple backdrop of courtly life are irresistible. . . . Dutton is something of a meteor herself."—*The Millions* Most Anticipated Books of 2016

"Each sentence in *Margaret the First* is like sea glass, exquisite and unyielding. The sentences stand out for their crafting, not overly ornate or precious, but determined, assured. . . . While reading *Margaret the First*, I get the sense of looking at paintings, of stillness animated while turning pages. The immersion becomes almost meditative, like sitting before a Mark Rothko painting and melting into its colors." —Anne K. Yoder, *The Millions*

"Beautiful, accessible, and hypnotic." —*Bustle*, "15 Of The Best Books Of March 2016 That Will Make Your Literary Kite Soar."

"Margaret Cavendish is the fascinating subject of Danielle Dutton's hypnotic new novel, *Margaret the First*. . . With just a few precise brushstrokes, Dutton paints a gorgeous, richly detailed world that lingers long after the novel ends; this sublime writing and imagery are the book's great strengths." —Caitlin Callaghan, *The Rumpus*

"A fabulous (and fabulist) re-imagining of the infamous Margaret Cavendish. . . *Margaret the First* isn't a historical novel, however; magnificently weird and linguistically dazzling, it's a book as much about how difficult and rewarding it is for an ambitious, independent, and gifted woman to build a life as an artist in any era as it is about Margaret herself. Incredibly smart, innovative, and refreshing, *Margaret the First* will resonate with anyone who's struggled with forging her own path in the world." —*BookRiot*

"Layered and engrossing. . . Dutton's profile constructs [Margaret] as a fully formed, complicated human being, as a woman whose interests and inclinations stem from a complex personal history. It's this profile that's the star of the novel as much as its subject, since it deftly weaves together primary and secondary sources to form a wholly integrated, believable and gripping account of a woman who didn't belong to the times in which she was born, not least because these times were too volatile for her to ever plant herself in them." —*Electric Literature*

"Danielle Dutton's novel, *Margaret the First*, published by Catapult, is a literary page-turner, which explores Cavendish's adventurous life, weaving historical details into a spool of crafted, poetic prose." —Gretchen McCullough, *The Literary Review*

"Dutton refreshes Cavendish's words for a contemporary audience, rendering them relevant and powerful once more." —Megan Burbank, *The Portland Mercury*

"Dutton, an accomplished writer and daring publisher, here upends the genre of the historical novel in a brilliant book about Margaret Cavendish, a mold-breaking British Duchess of the 17th century who wrote poetry, drama, philosophy, and even science fiction." —*Flavorwire*, "Most Anticipated Books of 2016"

"Danielle Dutton's novel, *Margaret the First*, published by Catapult, is a literary page-turner, which explores Cavendish's adventurous life, weaving historical details into a spool of crafted, poetic prose." —Gretchen McCullough, *The Literary Review*

"Dutton's fictionalized biography is unconventional in its approach, but entirely sensuous and captivating in its style—much like her subject." —*Historical Novels Review*

"Dutton's book unfurls in prose which is arrestingly poetic; it concentrates on the small moments, emotions, and sensuous details which make up Margaret's life, though without forgetting about the larger, less fleeting events which might be termed her life's frame. It is a work in which colourful linguistic molecules reign, a work whose language is perhaps as excessive and stunning as Lady Cavendish's own wardrobe was said to be. . . Its energy is inimitable; its curious aura—its curious beauty—burns a long while." —*Numero Cinq*

"Dutton joins Alexander Chee in the camp of writers who are looking to history for vibrant settings and new ways to explore their themes of choice." —*Vol. 1 Brooklyn*

"With Dutton's characteristic flair for rich language, *Margaret the First* evokes a bright, lively seventeenth century world that feels immediate and familiar." —Kristen Evans, *Brooklyn Magazine*

"Indebted to Virginia Woolf in both content and form, Dutton examines the life of a woman who upended social norms by being intelligent, imaginative, and ambitious without apology. Cavendish's intellectual and personal growth are explored with sensitivity in poetic prose style. This short literary book offers big rewards to readers interested in the complex mind of a woman ahead of her time." —Sarah Cohn, *Library Journal*

"*Margaret the First* is set in the seventeenth century, but don't let that fool you. It's a strikingly smart and

daringly feminist novel with modern insights into love, marriage, and the siren call of ambition.” —Jenny Offill, author of *Dept. of Speculation*

"All this trouble for a girl," say the bears in the book Margaret Cavendish writes within this remarkable book written by Danielle Dutton, the story of a very real woman at a very particular moment in history that is at the same time the story of every woman artist who has ever burst loose the constraints of her particular moment in history to create "a new world called the blazing world." —Kathryn Davis, author of *The Thin Place* and *Duplex*

"*Margaret the First* has such incredible sentences, and a sense of history that feels like intimacy." —Sara Jaffe, author of *Dryland*

"Ever since I first encountered her writing, I've told every serious reader I know that Danielle Dutton is one of the most original and wonderfully weird prose stylists of our time, every bit the contemporary of Lydia Davis, Cesar Aira, and Diane Williams. How perfect that her new novel is a portrait of Margaret of Newcastle, whose perceived excesses and eccentricities were an object of fascination for her time, as well as for Virginia Woolf, who laments in *A Room of One's Own*, 'What a vision of loneliness and riot the thought of Margaret Cavendish brings to mind!' And what a visionary portrait Margaret the First is, not only for the sheer joy of the sentences, but also as it's a marvel of tenderness, rewriting a historical caricature as a life, delighting in Margaret's passion for writing and love of the beautiful and strange from childhood on. I am in awe of what Dutton accomplishes here, in this novel of the small and the sublime. What a triumph!" —Kate Zambreno, author of *Green Girl*

Attempts at a Life: Stories (2007)

"Refreshingly eccentric. . .Glorious."

--Kate Zambreno, author of *Green Girl*, in *Review of Contemporary Fiction*

"Indescribably beautiful, also indescribable."

--Daniel Handler, *Entertainment Weekly*

"Danielle Dutton writes with a deft explosiveness that craters the page with stunning, unsettling precision."

--Laird Hunt, author of *Neverhome*

Sprawl: A Novel (2010)

"Both unabashedly voracious in terms of literary sources and an extraordinarily original text."

--*The Believer*

"In the long line of novels about the vapidness of suburbia, Dutton's has a narrator who may be one of the most likable. Aloof and hilarious, she dissects lives with the casualness of a cynical scientist."

--*TimeOut Chicago*

"Dutton's mini-masterpiece--a womanly treatise on suburban decay and fatigued love--is a triumph! Each sentence should be celebrated for its hilarity, rigor, eccentricity, and passion. *Sprawl* is the work of a brilliant mind."

--Deb Olin Unferth, author of NBCC finalist *Revolution*

About the Author

Danielle Dutton's fiction has appeared in magazines such as *Harper's*, *BOMB*, *Fence*, and *Noon*. She is the author of a collection of hybrid prose pieces, *Attempts at a Life*, which Daniel Handler in *Entertainment Weekly* called "indescribably beautiful," and an experimental novel, *S P R A W L*, a finalist for the Believer Book Award. In 2015, she wrote the texts for *Here Comes Kitty: A Comic Opera*, an artists' book with collages by Richard Kraft.

Dutton holds a PhD in Literature and Writing from the University of Denver, an MFA from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and a BA in History from the University of California at Santa Cruz. Prior to her current position on the creative writing faculty at Washington University in St. Louis, she taught in the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at Naropa and was the book designer at Dalkey Archive Press.

In 2010, Dutton founded the small press Dorothy, a publishing project, named for her great aunt Dorothy Traver, a librarian who drove a bookmobile through the back hills of southern California. Now in its fifth year, the press's books are widely reviewed. The press itself has been praised in the *New York Times* and *Chicago Tribune*, and Dutton has been interviewed in the *Paris Review*, *Kirkus*, and elsewhere for her work promoting innovative women writers.

Users Review

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