Margaret Cavendish’s writings give a snapshot of the tension between old and new science in seventeenth-century Europe. Examining a range of her works, her physician’s letters and the period’s medical manuals, I view her understanding of Galen’s humors (bodily fluids / temperaments) in light of the century’s new scientific findings. While Cavendish’s claim to a melancholic temperament may, in part, be an attempt to capitalize on an older view that associated melancholy with genius, I conclude it was more than a pose. Rather, it addressed several of her debilitating and baffling behaviors (e.g., extreme shyness, strong startle reflex, and an “addiction” to writing), helping her explain them to herself and others; it also gave her a focus in her search for remedies.

If Margaret Cavendish appropriates a melancholic stance to promote herself as an inspired thinker, it is a bold stance. In the seventeenth-century, melancholia, like writing and publishing, was masculine territory. Furthermore, melancholy carried not only the glamorous cachet of genius but also an association with madness. Even Aristotle, upon whom Ficino and subsequent Renaissance writers based their fusion of melancholy and inspiration, warned of its debilitating nature (Klibansky, Panofsky and Saxl 17-33; Babb 59-60). Scientific and medical treatises put more weight on melancholy’s mental detriments than its associations with inspiration. Timothy Bright, for example, runs the following terms together in the preface to his treatise on melancholy: ‘phrenies, madness, lunacy and melancholy’ (‘Preface’). And though writers might portray characters or themselves as intellectually gifted melancholics, even they could not ignore the risk of becoming mad and ultimately suicidal. A character like Hamlet and a writer like Robert Burton readily come to mind.

The humor most appropriate to women was phlegm, cold and wet, and of the four the least active, physically or mentally. Gail Kern Paster points out in the iconography of the period, ‘Only in the