

Margaret Cavendish (1623–1673)

Joseph Glanvill's letters to Cavendish



The letters are in the original order that they were published, in Sir William's *A Collection of Letters and Poems*. Please note that the original transcription comes from the Early English Books online database. The letters were subsequently edited: the spelling and some of the grammar was modernized to make the letters more accessible and a pleasure to read.

Many of the letters are undated. For an alternative interpretation of the chronological sequence, see Broad (2007, p. 493, footnote 1).

References

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Letter 1: 22 December, no year, pg. 85

Madam,

I gave your grace not long since the trouble of a very large letter, and know not whether I may wish it came safe, being afraid there was some kind of rudeness in so tedious a scribble. I now send this to crave pardon for the bold importunity of that; and to desire another addition to your Grace's favours, which is, to honour the last edition of my *Witchcraft* with your illustrious eye, and acceptance. I suppose I have in it answered some of your Grace's objections, and have added a relation or two, which I am well assured of, and believe them good evidence of fact. I have ordered that book I have so long spoken of to be sent with it, if it can yet be procured; and implore your Grace's ingenious candour in judging the faults of both. For that of pre-existence I have many things to say more about it, which I think not fit publicly to expose; your Grace may command my inmost

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sentiments of those matters which I shall be proud to impart to a person of so great honour and judgement, being really

Bath, Dec. 22.

Madam, Your Grace's most humbly devoted servant, Jos. Glanvill.

Letter 2: undated, pp. 98-100

Madam,

I am very sorry that my unhappy fate hath necessitated an unbecoming slowness in acknowledging a favour, that requires all possibilities of gratitude, and exceeds them. But yet, had I nothing else to say in excuse of my no earlier return to the last noble effects of your Grace's goodness, it were sufficient; that my sense of that mighty honour was too big for my pen; and when I began to speak my resentments of it, I found my self as unable to express them, as to deserve their occasion. But yet, Madam, this is not all the reason, for I was from home when your Grace's present came, and have been so almost ever since; otherwise I had not added to my want of merit on other accounts, that also of appearing insensible, and defective in endeavours of acknowledgment; I must say endeavours, for my gratitude can rise no higher. Since my receipt of your Grace's ingenious works, I have, as my occasions would permit, cast my eyes again into them, and I am sorry they cannot dwell there, where I find so pleasing, and so instructive an entertainment. And though I must crave your pardon for dissenting from your Grace's opinion in some things, I admire the quickness, and vigour of your conceptions, in all: in which your Grace hath this peculiar among authors that they are, in the strictest sense, your own, your Grace being indebted to nothing for them, but your own happy wit, and genius; a thing so uncommon even among the most celebrated writers of our sex, that it ought to be acknowledged with wonder in yours. And really, Madam, your Grace hath set us a pattern, that we ought to admire, but cannot imitate. And whereas you are pleased sometimes to mention your being no scholar, as an excuse of defects, your modesty supposes; by that acknowledgment you show our imperfections that pretend we are so, rather than discover any of your own.

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As for the last trifle I was bold to present to your Grace's eye, it is much indebted to the obliging reception you were pleased to afford it; and there is nothing that sets such a lustre on your Grace's great wit, and Intellectual perfections, as that sweet candour of your spirit that renders you so accessible, even to your meanest admirers. Whereas your Grace is pleased to object against some part of the design of my discourse, that it sets the perfection of the sense higher than that of ratiocination; I humbly desire that your Grace would consider, that there are two sorts of reasoning, viz. those that the mind advances from its own inbred ideas and native store, such are all metaphysical contemplations. And those natural researches which are raised from experiment, and the objects of sense. The former are indeed most perfect when they are most abstracted from the grossness of things sensible, but the others are then most complete when they are most accommodated to them; and when they are not, they are airy, and fantastic. Now what I have said about those matters is to tie down the mind in physical things, to consider nature as it is, to lay a foundation in sensible collections, and from thence to proceed to general propositions, and discourses. So that my aim is, that we may arise according to the order of nature by degrees from the exercise of our senses, to that of our reasons; which indeed is most noble and most perfect when it concludes aright, but not so when 'tis mistaken: and that it may so conclude and arrive to that perfection, it must begin in sense: and the more experiments our reasons have to work on, by so much they are the more likely to be certain in their conclusions, and consequently more perfect in their actings. But Madam, I doubt I begin to be tedious, and therefore, at present dare add no more, but that I am,

Illustrious Madam, your Grace's most humble and most devoted servant, Jos.
Glanvill.

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Letter 3: 13 October, no year, pp. 102-103

Madam,

I received the honour of your Grace's last Letter; but have not time now for so large a return, as so ingenious a discourse might justly require, only I cannot forbear intimating to your Grace, that I am not so fond a mechanist, as to suppose all the phenomena of the world to be raised merely by those laws; but most of them perhaps by a principle that is vital; and the anima mundi I take to be a very likely, and convenient hypothesis. Of this I am ready to give your Grace an account, that you shall be pleased to permit it. But the business of this is somewhat of another nature, being to implore a favour from your Grace, not upon mine own, but a public account. There is in this place a library erected, chiefly for the diversion of gentlemen that come hither upon the occasion of the bath. There are in it several worthy authors, but it wants the great honour and ornament of the illustrious Duchess of Newcastle's works. I know, Madam, your grace hath always writ out of a principle of noble generosity, and charity towards mankind; and are very ready to dispense your influence to those that need your informations: to this I understand most of the considerable libraries of England can bear a testimony; and therefore I am bold upon the confidence I have in your Grace's goodness, to become an humble solicitor in the behalf of ours, which will be very much ennobled by so glorious an instance of your Grace's favour, if you shall please to honour it with those ingenious works, by which your Grace doth so much outshine your sex, and many, that would be thought the greatest wits, of ours. You see, Madam, what an apprehension I have of your Grace's benignity and candour, in that I can appear before your Grace in a request for a favour to others, when I am my self so infinite a debtor to those many obligations your Grace hath been pleased to lay upon me, for all which I have nothing to return, but the most humble and devout acknowledgments, of,

Bath, Octob. 13.

Illustrious madam, your Grace's most obedient and most obliged servant, Jos. Glanvill.

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Letter 4: 25 August, no year, pp. 104-105

Madam,

I received a fresh obligation from your Grace in the excellent history you were pleased to order for me. In which your Grace hath done right to one of the most illustrious heroes of our age, and erected a lasting monument to his Virtue. And in it, Madam, your grace hath sweetly and wonderfully twisted the faithfulness of an historian, with the affections of a wife; and your illustrious Lord hath in this an honour beyond the other great subjects of history, that his Grace hath not only as much deserved to be celebrated as they, but hath moreover the happiness of the nearest relation to an heroine, whose pen is as glorious as his sword. And 'tis not easy to say which is really the greater wonder, the famous loyalty of that great person, or the uncommon excellence of the pen that described it. But I must take up from a subject, in which, when I have said all I can, I shall be defective; and return to the last letter wherewith your Grace was pleased to honour me. For the business of witches upon which your Grace reflects again in this, I have spoken many things more about it in some additions to my Considerations, which I am now sending to the press. As soon as that discourse is extant, I shall beg your Grace's acceptance of it. In the interim those things may be superseded.

By lower nature in my last, Madam, I meant, the mere animal, and plastic faculties, whose violent impetus is the cause of many of our irregularities and vices. As to the rest, I acquiesce in your Grace's determinations; and whereas your Grace is pleased to excuse the liberty of arguings; 'tis Madam with me that which least of all things needs to be excused. For I profess the largest freedom of discourse and inquiry. As for violent and captious disputes and oppositions, I indeed much dislike the immodesty, and immoralities of them; but for free and ingenious exchange of the reasons of our particular sentiments, 'tis that which discovers truth, improves knowledge, and may be so managed as to be no disinterest to charity. Your Grace, Madam, I know is a person of so much Honour and judgement, as not to take any thing amiss from my liberty in expressing my apprehensions, which I use not to obtrude upon any, but to propose to their consideration and enquiries; and for my self there is nothing obliges me more than the knowledge of variety of conceptions. There is a discourse of mine extant upon a subject not very ordinary, which contains notions which some excellent

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persons have not despised, and are not usually met with in other writings. I am inquiring after it for your Grace, and as soon as I can procure one (which is not very easy, that being out of print) I shall submit it to your Grace's judgement. I never saw that book of experimental philosophy, which your Grace mentions. And to this, Madam, I have no more to add at present, but that I am

Bath, Aug. 25.

Your Grace's most humble honourer and servant, Jos. Glanvill.

Letter 5: 13 October 1667, pp. 123-127

Madam,

I owe it to your graces singular condescension, and goodness, that my letters are not displeasing, and I see a great deal of generosity, in your Grace's acceptance, of such mean things, as my slender stock of knowledge can impart. As for your inquiry about the plastic faculties; I answer, that they are those, whereby the body is formed at first, and by which the alimetal juices, are after, through the whole course of life, orderly distributed for the purposes of growth and nutrition: but whether, as your Grace inquires, they are faculties inherent, in the soul, or are only mechanical motions of the body I cannot determine certainly. But I rather incline to the Platonists, who will have the soul to be the bodies maker, and they affirm (as is ordinary; though with some diversity in the names and presentation) that there are three sorts of faculties, which they fancy as analogous parts, or regions in the soul, (viz.) the mind, so they call the highest faculties of abstract reason, and understanding, which is the first. The second they call the soul, (viz.) as it is united to the body, and exercises the operation of sense. The third, is the image of the soul, which is those faculties, that are called plastical, that move and turn the body, but are devoid of understanding, or sense;

Now how the soul, which is immaterial, can manage and order corporeal motions is a difficulty of which philosophy as yet hath given no account, as I have particularly taken notice, and proved in my *Sceptis Scientifica*, but yet the thing

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ought not therefore to be denied, because the manner of the most obvious sensible things is to us unknown; and by this we can only prove, that we have yet no certain theory of nature: and, in good earnest, Madam, all that we can hope for, as yet, is but the history of things as they are, but to say how they are, to raise general axioms, and to make hypotheses, must, I think, be the happy privilege of succeeding ages; when they shall have gained a larger account of the phenomena, which yet are too scant and defective to raise theories upon: so that to be ingenious and confess freely, we have yet no such thing as Natural Philosophy; natural history is all we can pretend to; and that too, as yet, is but in its rudiments, the advance of it your Grace knows is the design and business of the Royal Society; from whom we may reasonably at last expect better grounds for general doctrines, than any the world yet hath been acquainted with; but this, Madam, is an excursion.

I therefore return to your Grace's letter, which inquires some things, about my notion of the souls original: as to this I would not be understood to affirm peremptorily a thing, which the greatest part of men, neither have, nor can receive, only I consider it as an hypothesis, that may be taken up to satisfy those minds that are much troubled at the seeming inequalities of providence; and whether true, or false, this I will take the boldness to be confident in, that the doctrine of the souls pre-existence, doth best suit with the appearances of the world. And best answers for the divine justice and goodness, in all the affairs of providence; in this Madam, I am a little dogmatical, and this step further, I think I may take, without immodesty; that the doctrine hath so much to say for it self, from reason, and the highest antiquity, as to render it fit to be considered, and indeed, since the two other ways, are confessedly desperate, methinks there should be no harm in examining this; which is all I pretend to. But particularly to your Grace's query, whether were souls created or uncreated? I Answer, no doubt created: but then I do not see how that follows, which your Grace is pleased to infer, viz. that sin was then created, for our souls in their state were spotless and innocent, as the angels of God. That mankind was so first, and fell by a voluntary transgression, is the common Doctrine; and how we may suppose it was particularly in the way of pre-existence, your Grace will see easily, when I shall have procured that book of mine, I have mentioned, and promised your Grace, but cannot yet light on. The other part also of

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your Grace's division: viz. that if those souls were eternal, they are gods; is I humbly conceive a mistake likewise, since though the world, had been created from eternity (which even the schools confess possible) it had nevertheless been a creature, by reason of its dependence upon another, for its being, and to have been produced, and yet from eternity, is no absurdity, our faith affirms it, in the eternal generation of the son, and procession of the Holy Ghost, and to take an instance with which we may make more bold: if the sun had been from eternity no doubt it would have shone eternally, and yet it's beams had been effects and dependent; and whereas your Grace says again, that what is immaterial is a god: I must here also take the boldness, to enter my dissent to your proposition; indeed Mr. Hobbes denies all immateriality to created Beings, but I think upon grounds precarious and unsafe, that our souls are immaterial in their natures, hath been sufficiently proved by some late philosophers; particularly by the most learned Dr. H. Moore, and I also have done something about this, in my book of pre-existence, if your Grace demands my reasons; they shall be ready at the least intimation, of those commands which I shall ever account a singular Honour to observe. For the antiquity of pre-existence, which your Grace rightly observes, to be no certain argument of the truth of it, I humbly say I have not alleged it, for a demonstration of the thing, but to take off the prejudice we are apt to have against all supposed novelties, and to shew that it is not so despicable, an hypothesis but that several great minds of former times, even in the ages of the best antiquity have owned a kindness for it, and consequently that we cannot, without some immodesty, deny it a favourable hearing, but madam, I forget my self, and the consideration I ought to have of your Grace's time and patience, and therefore only add, that I am,

Bath, Octob. 13. 1667.

Illustrious Madam, your Grace's most obedient servant, Jos. Glanvill.

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Letter 6: 22 April, no year, pp. 135-136

Madam,

Ever since I had the happiness to see any of your Grace's most ingenious writings, I have felt a mighty desire to speak my particular gratitude for those singular composures to all which the world is obliged; and had attempted something towards it more than three years since, but that my acknowledgments miscarried in the way. I am, Madam, an admirer of rarities, and your Grace is really so great an one, that I cannot but endeavour some testimony of a proportioned respect and wonder, though perhaps there may be indecorum the boldness of such unknown addresses. I am sensible it can contribute nothing to your Grace's great stock of fame to be acknowledged by inconsiderable persons; but yet we must be just, and 'tis religion to celebrate the virtuous. And I know your Grace is too generous to condemn the offerings of the meanest devotee, upon the encouragement of which belief I am bold to beg favour and acceptance for a trifle of mine that was designed for your Grace, as soon as it saw the light, but could not find its way into the north. I should not have the confidence to present so mean a thing to so deep and sagacious a judgement, had I not an opinion of your Grace's candour and goodness, equal to my apprehension of your other celebrated perfections; and these are so illustrious and so great, that our sex would envy, did they not admire, and your own too, Madam, were they not universally concerned in the honour. For your Grace hath convinced the world, by a great instance, that women may be philosophers, and, to a degree fit for the ambitious emulation of the most improved masculine spirits.

But, Madam, 'tis time to beg your Grace's pardon for the rudeness of this bold intrusion; and I know, that grandeur and generosity of mind that occasioned the fault, will forgive it to

Bath, April 22.

Illustrious Madam, the humblest of your Grace's admirers, and servants, Jos. Glanvill.

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Letter 7: 8 July, no year, pp. 137-142

Madam,

The greatest favour I could have expected in answer to my boldness, was but a pardon for the confidence of that intrusion; but that your Grace should so generously accept my trifles, and make me so glorious a return as I received in your most ingenious letters, this, Madam, was an honour as much beyond my expectation, as desert; and exceeds all my possibilities of acknowledgment. But if ever any thing happen within the reach of my endeavours, by which I may serve or gratify your Grace, I shall then give evidence of the great resentment I have of this condescension, and the veneration which is due to a person of so obliging and so unusual a virtue. Your Grace, I know, is nobly inquisitive, and hath a rich stock of generous apprehensions; and persons of this character use to be pleased in the perusal of the variety of others conceptions; and on this account I presume, that those notions I sometimes entertain my self with, may not be unacceptable, being not altogether of the road and common track. And if your Grace please to permit, and pardon my importunities, I shall take occasion to give you my sense of some things that are not of the meanest concernments. For the present I am obliged to answer the particulars of your Grace's letter, in which your Grace hath very much obliged me by those arguments you are pleased to excuse; and to them I make this humble return.

1. That whereas your Grace calls the inducements to the belief of witches, probable arguments, I am apt, with submission, to think some of them to be as great demonstrations as matter of fact can bear; being no less than the evidence of the senses, and oaths of sober attesters, and the critical inquiries of sagacious, and suspicious persons; which circumstances of evidence, your Grace knows, some of those relations have to prove them. And there is a particular story which is sufficiently famous, and of part of which I my self was a witness, which I think is not subject to just exception. 'Tis that of the drum in the house of Mr. Mompesson of Tedworth in Wiltshire. Of this, Madam, I shall take an occasion to give your Grace a particular account, if you have not yet been acquainted with the circumstances of that unusual disturbance. But to confine my self now to your Grace's considerations on the subject;

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2. The second thing I observe, is the intimation of an argument against the existence of witches, because they are not mentioned by Christ, and his apostles, concerning which I humbly desire your Grace to consider. That negative arguments from Scripture use not often to be of any great signification or validity. Our Saviour spoke as he had occasion, and the thousandth part of what he said, or what he did, is not recorded, as one evangelist intimates. He said nothing of those large unknown tracts of America, gives no intimations of the existence of that numerous people, much less any instructions about their conversion. He gives no particular account of the affairs and state of the other world, but only that general one, of the happiness of some, and the misery of others. He makes no discovery of the magnalia of art, or nature, no not of those whereby the propagation of the Gospel might have been much advanced; viz. the mystery of printing, and the magnet. And yet no one uses his silence in these instances as an argument against the being of things, which are the evident objects of sense. I confess the omission of some of these particulars is pretty strange and unaccountable, and an argument of our ignorance of the reasons and ménages of providence, but I suppose of nothing else; or if it were, I crave leave to add,

3. That the Gospel is not without intimations of sorcery, and contracts with evil spirits. The malicious Jews said our Saviour did his miracles by their assistance, he casts out devils by Beelzebub. And he denies not the supposition or possibility of the thing in general, but clears himself by an appeal to the actions of their own children, whom they would not so severely criminate. And besides this,

4. The apostles had intimations plain enough of the being of sorcery and witchcraft, as seems to me evident from Gal. 3. 1. Gal. 5. 20. Rev. 9. 21. Rev. 21. 8. Rev. 22. 15.

'Tis very true as your Grace suggests that superstition and ignorance of causes make men many times to impute the effects of art, and nature, to witchcraft and diabolic contract. And the common people think God or the devil to be in every thing extraordinary. But yet, Madam, your Grace may please to consider, that there are things done by mean and despicable persons, transcending all the arts of the most knowing and improved virtuosi, and above all the essays of known and ordinary nature. So that we either must suppose that a sottish silly old

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woman hath more knowledge of the intrigues of art, and nature, than the most exercised artists, and philosophers, or confess that those strange things they perform, are done by confederacy with evil spirits, who, no doubt, act those things by the ways and applications of nature, though such as are to us unknown. This, Madam, is, I conceive, as much as is necessary to be said to the argumentative part of your Grace's excellent letter.

As for the following periods, I am mostly of the same opinion with your Grace, in the way that I understand them. Nature is in a continual motion (for there is no such thing as rest in the world) and perhaps that is not purely mechanical, but may, in great part (at least as to the beginnings and directions of it) be ascribed to the soul of the world, which possibly is the great archeus that forms plants, animals, and other more curious phenomena. And there is no doubt but (as your Grace suggests) that much wickedness is caused by the mere impulse of lower nature; and I believe several men are determined to actions of vice by the oddness of their particular make and contexture. But whereas your Grace says that nothing but God himself can be perfect, I cannot so well understand that. Absolutely so, and in all kinds, 'tis true, I grant it, but your Grace doth not seem to intend the proposition in that sense. And to be perfect in a lower kind is but to have all the parts and faculties that are requisite to such a being, in that order, disposition, and all other circumstances which are suitable to its idea, and proper for its respective ends. And in this sense I think all things are perfect in their first constitution; according to what your Grace says afterwards, that God cannot create any imperfection, being absolute perfection himself which appositely fits mine, but I can not see how it so well consists with your Grace's former assertion, except it be intended to infer, that God made nothing; a proposition which methinks your Grace should not own; but some things that follow seem to look that way, when you are pleased to say neither can I conceive how God could actually make or act any thing, either in a mechanical manner, or a free, being not locally moving. To which I humbly say that if your Grace doubts the possibility of the creation out of nothing, I think I can speak some things as a philosopher, that may render it reasonable. Nor is actual motion in the deity necessary to His actions, since He is immense and needs not local motion to render Him present by His essence, or His virtue, to any place of the great universe, being eternally there by the infinity of His being, and His power. And

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whereas your Grace is pleased to say, that God is no mechanic, I consent that He is not so properly, in that He needs not material Instruments to act by. But yet He hath made all things by a kind of geometry; in number, weight, and measure, says the Holy Oracle. And there is a sort of mathematics in all the works of nature.

Thus, Madam, I have made bold with your Grace's patience, in confidence of your candour, and your goodness, which I implore, for the pardon of this voluminous trouble. And in order to it, I have this to say, that I could not well have said less without having been wanting in some of your Grace's periods; and there is something else, in which I despair of being ever able to say enough, and that is, to express how much I am,

Illustrious Madam, your Grace's humble admirer, and devoted servant, Jos.
Glanvill.
Bath, July 8.