

A HOT DUTTON ISSUE

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ABSTRACT: Danielle Dutton is an American writer and publisher that utilizes style in fresh and exciting ways to juxtapose old-fashioned concepts and feminist modernity. I will examine multiple published works of writing by the author in order to determine which stylistic elements are being used, and how they affect the writing as a whole.

Introduction

Danielle Dutton is an American writer, publisher, and current professor of Creative Writing at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri. Dutton is also the co-founder of The Dorothy Project, a feminist press that focuses on smaller works done primarily by women. She has received wide recognition and appreciation of her first novel released in 2009, which is set in the 17th century and takes the real life of Margaret Cavendish and pushes it into the realm of fiction and modernity. Her interests, evidenced in both her own writing and the work she selects for publishing via the Dorothy Project, are wide and varied, which makes each of her works fresh and vibrant for even the most jaded reader. Much can be divined from analyzing an authors' writing compared to other writers, but it is less common to contrast the writer's work with themselves. By comparing work written by the same author at different times, the unique voice and style can be more easily revealed, including the juxtaposition of literary elements like the making of lists and feminist inspirations that connect Dutton's works.

Margaret the First & Attempts at a Life

Published nine years apart, *Attempts at a Life* and *Margaret the First* display vastly different approaches to writing, as well as document the great strides Danielle Dutton has taken in her approach to the overarching genre of fiction. There are evident thematic similarities in subject matter; Dutton is clearly interested in women writers (as well as Louis-Ferdinand

Céline and William Carlos Williams) of the past and the stories they had within and without their own writing. Clearly the circumstances that led these women, in different ways peculiar, heroic, and wild, to become acclaimed writers is critical to Dutton's message through her work. By comparing Dutton's first book with her most recent, the poetic strategies that she employs become significant, and show how Dutton was able to expand upon ideas born in *Attempts at a Life* into a focused and rich narrative evidenced in *Margaret the First* with great success. The book communicates its own poetic sensibilities from the initial impression given through a quote by Gertrude Stein as a preface: "And it is necessary if you are to be really and truly alive it is necessary to be at once talking and listening..." (AaaL 1). This quote sets up the book quite well in terms of how each section contains a different, and often multiple different voices, both taking material from past works to be rewrought and creating new material with inspiration taken from the writers in question.

In Steinian fashion, Dutton manipulates language through "expert, miniscule slips" (Peter Connors, Rain Taxi) and while the words maintain more of their literal clarity than Stein's poetry, the effect is similarly successful. In the section "Selections from *Madame Bovary*," this manipulative practice is evident through very brief segmented stories in the form of chapters: "She *finis* came to the puffed-thumb Emma person. Provincial and jolly, wasn't square in the rattle. The rockets candle her, then collapse" (AaaL 44). The words teeter on the

edge of complete understanding, reveling in the confusion and similarity of the words that jut out and bump together on the page. Even the section inspired by *Jane Eyre*, titled as such, weaves in and out of conventional language to create an entirely new but perhaps not unwelcome voice for a well-known literary figure. The slips become more natural, even within a few lines of the chapter, and more difficult to parse out which linguistic decisions are made. While *Attempts at a Life* endeavors to create slices of each of the character's lives in a powerful but brief manner, *Margaret the First's* length alone allows Dutton to elaborate on her personal writing interests to a greater extent.

One major and evident difference is of course, the narrative structure present in *Margaret the First*. *Attempts at a Life* is broken into a multiplicity of small-portioned text, some only a couple lines long while others are many pages. *Margaret the First* follows a chronological order of Margaret Cavendish's (fictionalized) life, with sections dividing major events, changes, and stages of life. What is similar in Dutton's arrangement of text are the frequent page breaks, sectioned off tidily even when the diversion is abrupt. This organization, or perhaps the illusion of organization, allows the text in each piece to be self-contained while also operating within the greater structure of each book. On *Margaret the First*, "It's bold, tender, funny and strange; a short book, but not in any way slight, more like a fever dream which brings a real, eccentric, talented woman unnervingly to life even as it showcases its author's rare and lavish gift for the conjuring up of the unreal" (Belinda McKeon, author of *Tender*, in *The Irish Independent*). The work is indeed both feverish and dreamlike, and exemplifies organized chaos by a deft hand.

Margaret the First follows a narrative structure, albeit one that switches perspective and verb tense throughout the novel. The reader is thus moved closer and further from the main character's story, able to partially embody Margaret when the tense remains in the first

person and then to examine her situation from a removed position in the third person. This same stylistic choice is echoed in *Attempts at a Life*, though the stories primarily stay in the first person, while others take a third person approach. "Mary Carmichael," which begins on page 67 and ends on 71, remains in the third person narrative voice throughout the piece. This allows the reader to take a step away from the characters and is of course an intentional poetics decision. "Attempts" as a choice of word in the title implicates that perhaps these lives as they were lived were not entirely successful, or at least not in the traditional sense. They contain tainted broken chronologies, multiple voices, and unreliable narration throughout misinformation and ornamented numerical figures on the brink of fiction.

Feminist Focus

The fact that Dutton intentionally writes with a focus on women is another deliberate use of poetics; she seems to hint at the abundance of information and attention turned toward male authors throughout history. While their feminine counterparts overlooked and disparaged in equal measure. In eras where the education of women was inadmissible or punished, it is a marvel that women learned to write (often from a higher social class with the means to do so) and made lasting impressions on the literary canon despite consistent misogynistic dissent. Margaret Cavendish, the star of *Margaret the First*, is one outstanding example of this, reveling in her unique brand of creative nonsense despite criticism. While there are two male writers represented within the smattering of found material, there is clearly a focus on the women writers and the feminine experience overall. Sex and the body are recurring themes both in *Attempts at a Life* and *Margaret the First*, centered from a woman's perspective. This furthers the idea that Dutton seamlessly blends each voice into the next, as the feminine perspective often carries over each piece regardless of source material.

The Style of Lists

Attempts at a Life is Dutton's first novel and was published in 2007 by Tarpaulin Sky Press. It was well-received, and furthered Dutton's career greatly. Perhaps summing it up the most succinctly is the following review excerpt: "Indescribably beautiful, also indescribable. In fact, I'm not quite sure what this book's about, really" (Daniel Handler, *Entertainment Weekly*). This statement of confusion is a bit unexpected, and perhaps reveals more about the reviewer's unwillingness to delve beyond the surface of the book. Because it attempts to accomplish much within its scant 73 pages, one might argue that the book is indeed too nebulous to be making any critical point to its fullest possibility. Due to its small-portioned nature, it contains elements in near equal measures of poetry, biography and fiction. There are sections which take material or inspiration from *Jane Eyre*, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Katherine Mansfield, Sappho, *Revolution of the Word*, Alice James, Diane Williams, Gertrude Stein, Ann Quin, Ann Radcliffe, Virginia Woolf, and William Carlos Williams. Thus, it can be surmised that intertextuality is hugely important to the sense of the piece overall. The voice of the book, while obviously being filtered through Dutton's own writerly sensibilities and choices, blends surprisingly well together, a Frankenstein assemblage of a multitude of found sources. The original writers of the sources are scattered across the globe and throughout time, from Sappho, estimated to have been born in 630 BC (*Sappho in the Making*), to Diane Williams still alive today. Both the similarities and the differences between the language are woven into the final product, which echoes Dutton's own writing voice, especially in passages with beautiful, list-like descriptions.

The lists have become indicative of Dutton's writing style, only increasing in frequency since *Attempts at a Life*, which does have the presence of some lists, some much more peculiar than others: "But life changes on a dial, in a garden, a

clinking of beetle wings, a shrimp bush and dry pink petals of chinese lanterns dangling" (AaaL 9). Sometimes Dutton uses her convention of beautiful list-making to humorous effect: "a lily, a pomegranate, a noodle" (AaaL 33). In comparison, *Margaret the First* is absolutely riddled with lists, adding to the sense of Margaret's own dreamy perception of the world: "The sea, the air, the double white violet, the wallflower, stock-gilliflower, cowslip, flower-de-lice, cherry trees in pink" (MtF 24); "Beds like ships from China, or beaded purses, in black and white, or pearly" (MtF 38); "Flemish tapestries, drawing tables, lenses, the telescopes from Paris, books, of course, and perfumes, platters, ewers, ruffs, tinctures, copperplates, saddles, wax" (MtF 86). What seems of massive importance to both Dutton and the character Margaret is food, which are treated in very much the same fashion as the beautiful features of nature or decor: "Roasted carp, claret, a shoulder of mutton with thyme, and a fine sugar cake with sprigs of candied rosemary like diamonds" (MtF 39), "On the buffet sat wine, cheeses hard and soft, bread, poached apples, berries or asparagus, fish with horseradish, sliced salted ham" (MtF 41), "an olio, a spicy Spanish stew (a pinch of this, dash of that, onions, pumpkin, cabbage, beef)" (MtF 70). Dutton's use of listing is a stylistic one that yields a great deal of information within a short space, giving more or less equal importance to each item listed. It also allows the reader to be caught up in the pacing of the text, carried away in the often-fanciful lists. The sense of abundance of objects, of scenery, of food or decoration, all adds to the decadence of Margaret the First's rich life, a masterfully subtle way to show not just presence of the objects, but their plenitude.

Margaret Cavendish as Inspiration

Readers of Renaissance drama may be familiar with the fascinatingly joyful and strange work of Margaret Cavendish, most notable of which is her closet drama *The Convent of Pleasure*. It is a unique take on relationships and the

comedy that can arise from these relationships in a woman's perspective. *Margaret the First* explores many more avenues of her life, albeit while fictionalizing and creating some of the historical detail. Dutton effectively makes Cavendish's life feel as fresh and faceted as any modern woman. As Dutton tells it, Cavendish could see entire universes in water bubbles and inside ladies' earrings. Margaret was able to pursue her fantastical thoughts in writing far into her adult life. True, she was discredited constantly, not only for her gender, but also for her eccentricity. However, it's nonsensical in my view to see only essays with hard-hitting philosophies or factual evidence as valuable literature. Fantasy, nonsense, and flights of fancy all deserve their place on the shelf alongside the research papers. Not every work of fiction needs to undergo rigorous searches for meaning on some higher plane of learning. Creative nonsense can be just as important at face value. It demonstrates in its own way the potentiality of response to a certain time in history outside of scientific discovery or popular philosophy. She was nothing if not authentic to herself. Margaret saw herself in an elevated way, picturing herself as a queen or a princess, and an otherworldly one at that. She reveled in her own femininity despite her profession's condemnation of it. She never had children nor seemed to place her self-worth on this fact; Margaret was a proto feminist who saw value in her existence and thoughts in the face of a patriarchal oppression and frankly, revilement. Perhaps this demarcates Dutton's increased confidence in her choice of subject matter, having addressed celebrated writers, such as Charlotte Bronte and William Carlos Williams, and culminating in *Margaret*, an extended case study of a routinely dismissed and loathed woman whose work was often not even considered to be real writing at all. Even her spelling, which was often incorrect though understandable through sound and context, is addressed in *Margaret the First*: "'Passionitt,' they sniggered—it seems my spelling did astonish—'sattisfackson,' 'descoursee' for

'discourse,' even 'Quine' for 'Queen'" (MtF 68). This mode of writing is put to great use by Dutton, at once addressing found excerpts of Margaret's actual writing as it happened, intertextually. If the reader is to ponder on it for any length of time, be gently reminded that despite expertly embodying Margaret's voice, it is Dutton the author writing about Margaret's writing. One huge clue into Dutton's poetics lies within this concept, and is evidenced again in *Attempts at a Life*, the section titled "How I Met Mikhail." In it, the reader audience can see the birth of the reader illustrated beautifully: "I'll open it on the train ride out of the city. It is a book. In it, I encounter myself on every page, but the me I meet is never the me I remember. It's me but me a misanthropic barber, me a German, a werewolf; or it's me but me advancing, me in slippers, me alone under a great grey sky" (AaaL 54). This is perhaps the greatest stride Dutton makes throughout her work; she is able to see herself within each of her subjects and thus maintains not only unique voices for each of her characters, but not to lose her sense of self as she does so.

Conclusion

Dutton honed her craft to the point at which a single concept explored in multiple ways could be expanded to an entire novel, maintaining themes of found material, historical fiction, and manipulations of language with great effect. With such a relatively small body of work, beginning with *Attempts at a Life*, and including two other novels between its publishing and *Margaret the First* (stream-of-consciousness *SPRAWL* and comic opera *Here Comes Kitty*), it is relatively easy work to consume Danielle Dutton's entire breadth of work in quick succession. Her style is evident whether she chooses selections of found text as in *Attempts at a Life*, or by employing her own unique and fresh take on historical fiction in *Margaret the First*. Whether the evidence is in subject matter alone, in revitalizing writers of the past into refreshingly contemporary voices and personas, or in decadent list-making to provide

an abundance of objects in which the reader can be ensconced deeper into the particularity of setting Dutton so expertly weaves. No matter how naturally bleak or beautiful the lives and places were in reality, Dutton is able to write about them with an eye toward their most essential qualities.

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