When Margaret Cavendish Bentinck, the second Duchess of Portland, one of Britain’s wealthiest women, died in 1785 at the age of 70, the London newspapers were filled with gossip about her will, her heirs, and what would happen to her extensive collections of decorative and natural objects.
She had collected objects of great beauty and rarity – Japanese porcelain, French snuffboxes, Italian cameos, Roman statuary and other antiquities – but her great love was natural history. She collected minerals, fossils, insects, corals, and thousands of shells. When the news soon spread that all would be sold at auction, rumors circulated about her having bankrupted herself purchasing natural history specimens and *objets d’art* and the need for an auction to refill the ducal coffers. These rumors proved to be untrue; she had simply stipulated in her will that the auction’s proceeds were for the benefit of her younger children as her first son would inherit her several residences and estates. The auction was held in the spring of 1786, it having taken the executors and auctioneers nine months to inventory, organize, and describe her collections. Advertised daily in the newspapers, the auction, lasting 38 days, was a spectacular event, drawing hundreds of people who gladly crowded into her Whitehall townhouse to see her things and to watch the action as antiquarians, connoisseurs, and natural history brokers and collectors outbid each other in quest of the rare and beautiful.

Of her collecting practices, W.S. Lewis, himself a collector of Horace Walpole’s letters and manuscripts, wrote in 1936: ‘Few men have equaled Margaret Cavendish Holles Harley, Duchess of Portland, in the mania of collecting, and perhaps, no woman. In an age of great collectors she rivaled the greatest.’ Lewis’s use of the word ‘mania’ is surprising considering he himself was a bibliophile and collector of eighteenth-century manuscripts, letters, and print culture, and one would assume he might have shown more sympathy for her activities. Clearly, there is more than a hint of admiration in Lewis’s statement for the scale on which she operated. His statement bears scrutiny because in praising the scale of her collecting, one that Lewis ultimately approved of, he links collecting on the grand scale with ‘mania’, a passionate commitment that is usually, in Lewis’s mind, reserved for men. He is praising her for behaving like a man, and indeed, she could afford to behave like a man in the economic sense as she was an heiress of independent and considerable means and she could do as she liked, especially once she became a widow. But there is more to Lewis’s ‘compliment’ as it contains an assumption about gender and the emotional and intellectual tenor of the collector’s engagement with the collected object. ‘Mania’, in Lewis’s analysis, is reserved for men, a displacement of libidinal energies from procreative and productive acts onto objects, which, in the case of natural history collecting, were often dead animal and plant specimens. Whether or not Lewis intended to suggest that men

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