

Lisa Walters
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In a preface to her *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, Margaret Cavendish expressed the hope that her philosophy would some day "find an age when she would be more regarded, than she is in this" (Cavendish 2001, 13). Cavendish's wish is starting to be fulfilled. Although her plays, poems, orations, essays, stories, and allegories have been the subject of many studies over the past thirty-five or so years, the ideas contained in her works of natural philosophy are finally also starting to receive their due. Lisa Walters's book, *Margaret Cavendish: Gender, Science and Politics*, adds a provocative perspective to recent scholarly work on Cavendish's philosophical views.

In the Introduction, Walters characterizes her book as challenging the prevailing view that Cavendish was a royalist. Walters observes that she uses the term "royalism" quite broadly, to include not just the belief in monarchy as the best form of government, but also the beliefs "that obedience to social hierarchy is necessary to avoid disorder, as well as that a monarchy's sovereignty is undivided even if limited, that subjects do not have the right to rebel against their monarch and that power does not derive from the common people" (9–10). Thus she links royalism with patriarchalism, theories of the divine rights of kings, and what she calls "royalist science" (93), a heading under which Walters seems to include mechanism (62), a belief in scientific objectivity (67), a belief in the orderliness of Nature (94), and, among some members, beliefs in spirits, devils, and witches (126). This is a very broad understanding of royalism. The four chapters in the book aim to substantiate Walters's claim that "a distinguishing feature" of Cavendish's stories and natural philosophy is "non-conformity to royalist conceptions of power, religion, politics, family, or law" (247). Though Walters concedes that "Cavendish sometimes repeats the ideas of the royalist circle on which she was dependent and in which she was immersed," she argues that Cavendish did not in fact endorse those ideas (6).

In the wide-ranging chapter 1, Walters argues that Cavendish's natural philosophy is a "proto-feminist" disruption of seventeenth-century associations between gender and matter, "a theory of

Nature that implicitly challenges many aspects of early modern culture that justified social hierarchies" (37). Among the aspects of early modern culture that Walters sees Cavendish as challenging are early modern medical theories of the body that treated the female body as an imperfect version of the male; mechanistic theories of nature that viewed the material world as lifeless and passive; Renaissance magical thinking such as "mystical mathematics" that sought to discover the secrets of nature and God; and beliefs in a natural hierarchy and the divine rights of the monarch. In the course of her arguments, Walters discusses Cavendish's depiction of nature as infinitely wise, powerful, and female; the format of *Philosophical Letters*, in which two women correspond about philosophy; Cavendish's depiction of female scholars in her fictional works; her account of body and spirit in *Blazing World*; her views regarding the relationship between God and Nature; and the atomic theory presented in *Poems, and Fancies*. There are also interesting accounts of early modern theories of bodily temperature and sexual difference, reproduction, and the womb. It can be difficult to keep track of Walters's main line of argument as she moves from topic to topic, but the unifying theme in this chapter is meant to be the way Cavendish "systematically deconstructs metaphors, analogies, and cultural associations that define and maintain authority" in various domains (99).

Chapter 2 examines in greater depth the topic of magic, arguing that Cavendish "questions patriarchal assumptions within early modern science, religion, and popular culture" (100). As Walters correctly observes, there has been little critical discussion of Cavendish's views on magic and witchcraft; this chapter contributes to filling that gap. Walters links Cavendish's use of the figures of a witch and an alchemist in her story "The Travelling Spirit" with her claims about witchcraft and the occult in *Philosophical Letters*. An illuminating discussion of fairy lore in early modern culture provides the context for Walters's account of the role of fairies in Cavendish's poems and natural philosophy.

Chapter 3 covers far more ground than is suggested by its title, "The Politics of Free Will in *The Blazing World*: Hobbes, Paracelsus and Absolute Rule," and it is sometimes difficult to see how the sections relate to one another. The chapter begins with an interesting interpretation of *Blazing World*, one of the strongest parts of Walters's book. Observing that the character of the Empress in *Blazing World* "represents an extreme type of government based on arbitrary rule," who rules "without heeding any type of legislative body or parliament" (140) and who exemplifies "a model of monarchy based upon deception, arbitrary rule, imperialism and false miracles" (146), Walters reads *Blazing World* as a kind of *reductio ad absurdum* of Hobbesian principles of absolute monarchy.

The chapter then shifts in sections III and IV to a discussion of Paracelsus's account of cognitive powers, particularly the creative power of the imagination, linking this with Cavendish's emphasis in *Blazing World* on the way that "Any person, regardless of rank, can arbitrarily create and rule worlds" (168). Indeed, Walters writes, for Cavendish "all aspects of Nature have Paracelsian creative powers, for all parts of matter have free will, reason and soul" (171). This leads Walters in section V to a discussion of early modern debates about free will and determinism, which she frames in terms of the contrast between intellectualism (the belief that "laws of the universe are fixed and eternal and not subject to chance or God's intervention" [172]) and voluntarism (the view that "creation is absolutely contingent on God's will" [172]). Although Walters claims that in *Observations* Cavendish endorses intellectualism (175), she

suggests that *Blazing World* shows that "there is a multiplicity of arbitrary, voluntarist individuals" (177). This "decentralized view of the world" (177) would seem to entail that Cavendish thought the universe disorganized and chaotic. It is not clear whether Walters endorses this entailment or not; she argues that "disorders can . . . be understood as *natural and necessary* aspects of natural phenomena" (178; emphasis in original), but she also suggests that Cavendish's natural philosophy shows the need for "consent" in nature (182). Sections VI, VII, and VIII become increasingly fractured (perhaps reflecting the perspectives that Walters ascribes to Cavendish), with a section on the role of imagination in *Blazing World*, a section on the role of plurality in Cavendish's thought, and a section on "the autonomous subject." Walters concludes that *Blazing World* "puts forward a natural philosophy, which when extrapolated to her political worldview highlights a republican and revolutionary strain to her thinking" (193).

Chapter 4 develops Walters's argument that Cavendish had republican and revolutionary leanings by examining two stories by Cavendish, "Assaulted and Pursued Chastity" and "The Contract," both published in the 1656 *Natures Pictures*. Walters locates "Assaulted and Pursued Chastity" in the context of ideologies of self-defense and popular sovereignty during the English Civil War, and usefully contrasts Cavendish's depiction of slavery with that of Aphra Behn in *Oroonoko*. Her discussion of "The Contract" focuses (not surprisingly) on the relationship between that story and seventeenth-century contract theory.

Walters's book draws on the full range of Cavendish's writings to make her case, and engages, too, with the growing body of secondary literature on Cavendish. She is at her strongest in her ability to locate Cavendish's writings in their historical and literary context; her discussions of early modern views on such topics as reproduction, fairies, witches, self-defense, and slavery are well researched and interesting. Walters's interpretation of *Blazing World* as "a critical view of arbitrary power" (155) is interesting. And some of Walters's arguments that Cavendish resisted the traditional gender hierarchy are persuasive; for example, Walters draws from *Blazing World* and *Philosophical Letters* to show that Cavendish did not subscribe to the view that women were colder than men, or that cold is somehow more passive than heat.

However, I am not convinced by Walters's arguments that Cavendish was not a royalist. First, Cavendish does seem to express a commitment to royalism in various passages, such as her suggestion in *Worlds Olio* that a commonwealth should be "governed by one Head or Governour, as a King, for one Head is sufficient for one Body" (Cavendish 1655, 205), or, in a passage that Walters herself quotes, the endorsement of monarchy by the main character of "The She-Anchoret" in *Natures Pictures* (123, n. 91). Walters refers to "Cavendish's more conservative voices" (123, n. 91) and notes that "Cavendish sometimes espoused statements entirely in line with her husband's royalist politics and the royalist circle connected to their household" (4). I would like to have seen more discussion of why these apparent endorsements of royalism appear in Cavendish's texts if Cavendish herself were not sympathetic to the view. At times Walters suggests that Cavendish's own views were contradictory (193; see also 90 and 134), but she also contends that the statements embracing royalism do not represent Cavendish's "real" political views (5).

Walters's case that Cavendish was not a royalist is largely indirect, depending on inferences from claims Cavendish makes in her natural philosophy and fiction rather than on any explicit

endorsements of alternative political systems. But these arguments are not persuasive. For example, Walters suggests that Cavendish's portrayal of all of the parts of Nature as "equal" serves to "deconstruct hierarchy within matter and corporeality" (43–44) and thus is politically significant. But the equality that Cavendish ascribes to the parts of Nature is, as Walters observes, an equality of "life, soul, and knowledge in all matter" (43). This does not seem to be a political sense of equality at all. In fact, Cavendish frequently characterizes the three "degrees" of matter as hierarchically ordered, as when she suggests that rational matter is like a designer or architect, sensitive matter is like a "workman," and inanimate matter is like the materials that the architects and workers use (Cavendish 2001, 24 and 206), or when she writes that just as "the *Constable* rules the *Parish*, the *Mayor* the *Constable*, the *King* the *Mayor*, and some *Higher Power* the *King* . . . Thus may *dull Matter* over others rule,/ According as 'tis shap'd by *Motions Tool*" (Cavendish 1653a, 12–13). Cavendish's very characterization of matter as coming in three "degrees" is revealing, for the *Oxford English Dictionary* lists one seventeenth-century sense of "degree" as "a stage or position in the scale of dignity or rank; relative social or official rank, grade, order, estate, or station" (OED 2015). Cavendish's use of metaphors invoking social rank to describe matter would seem to undermine Walters's contention that "Cavendish . . . has a less hierarchical outlook on the nature of matter" (43).

Walters's interpretations of the stories "Assaulted and Pursued Chastity" and "The Contract" as undermining royalism also seem strained. Walters argues that "Assaulted and Pursued Chastity" shows Cavendish promoting the importance of self-defense, and that because seventeenth-century English republicans often appealed to self-defense in their arguments against royalism, this shows Cavendish's sympathy to republicanism (202–07). However, the passage that Walters takes to be about murdering a monarch in self-defense is about a woman defending her chastity, not about self-preservation in general. Cavendish specifies the character that Walters takes to represent a monarch as being a "subject-prince" (Cavendish 1992, 50), and thus he is not analogous to an absolute monarch. Furthermore, the fact that the story depicts bad, tyrannical monarchs does not mean, as Walters concludes (209–10), that Cavendish thought there were no good models of sovereign power. The story is better read as depicting the wrong types of monarchy, rather than as rejecting monarchy altogether. Similarly, although Walters's interpretation of *Blazing World* in chapter 3 as showing the dangerous implications of Hobbesian principles of absolute sovereignty is compelling and is based on a careful reading of the text, I am not convinced that the story supports the broader contention that "governments cannot control humanity" (157). Both "Assaulted and Pursued Chastity" and *Blazing World* can be read as cautionary tales showing that absolute monarchs can rule badly, but the stories do not support Walters's stronger claim that Cavendish rejected absolute monarchy altogether.

Likewise, Walters overstates the message of "The Contract," reading it as critiquing not only contract theories of royalism, but also "ultimately all the theoretical foundations that support a restoration of monarchy" (241). She argues, "the text suggests that only contracts which are established through consent without coercion can be valid; otherwise they can legally be repealed" (242). But this does not seem to be supported by the story, in which the Duke says he was coerced into an engagement contract with Deletia, and the judges uphold the contract, saying that the law judges acts, not thoughts (Cavendish 1992, 39–40).

In addition to problems in particular arguments for Walters's thesis, Walters's overall argumentative strategy needs further defense. A key claim throughout the book is that there are "recurring analogies, which link natural and political bodies and indicate corresponding relationships between them" (15). Sometimes the precise nature of these relationships is unclear; Walters tends to appeal to vague causal claims that topics in Cavendish's natural and political philosophies are "linked" (121) or "associated" (121), that one "relates to" the other (168), or that there is a "relational principle" between them (92). At other times, Walters suggests that observed features of one realm--either the political or the natural--serve to justify inferences about Cavendish's views in the other realm, but Walters is not always clear about the direction of inference. In the Introduction, she says that "Cavendish's interrelated deconstruction of gender and political hierarchies generates a view of the natural world that is more sympathetic to republican than to royalist ideology" (5–6), which suggests that we should interpret Cavendish's natural philosophy in light of her claims about gender and politics. Elsewhere (and more frequently), Walters argues that Cavendish's natural philosophy has implications for how we should interpret her political philosophy. For example, Walters points out that, in contrast to the mechanists' conception of nature as passive and lifeless, Cavendish genders Nature as female and ascribes to this female Nature many qualities not typically associated with femaleness, such as wisdom, power, and creativity. Walters sees this as "complicating and challenging deeply embedded gendered metaphors within knowledge-construction" (97).¹

But to make the case that Cavendish was really reimagining and challenging early modern understandings of gender, Walters needs to do more to show that Cavendish's claims about a female Nature have anything to do with her claims about female humans. In a notorious preface to *Worlds Olio*, Cavendish elaborates at some length on the ways that women are naturally inferior to men, but Walters mentions that preface only briefly, in the context of a discussion of Cavendish's theory of temperature (53–54). Walters does address Cavendish's "reimagining [of] gender roles in her fictional worlds" (58), showing that many of Cavendish's female protagonists exhibit leadership and wisdom, but in the absence of an argument to show that Cavendish thought her fictional worlds really could be instantiated in our actual world, it is not clear that these texts are enough of a basis for conclusions about Cavendish's views about real women.

Indeed, Walters's assumption that conclusions about Cavendish's political views can be straightforwardly drawn from her natural philosophy needs argument. Walters is correct that Cavendish says that natural philosophy "is the Light that God is pleased to give Man, to Direct him in the Course of his Life" (14), and there are some ways in which Cavendish thinks humans resemble the rest of Nature; for example, she thinks that the parts of Nature, including humans, have free will. However, there is considerable evidence that Cavendish thought that humans differ in important ways from the rest of nature. In "Assaulted and Pursued Chastity," Cavendish's protagonist declares that human minds are "busy and vainglorious," for "the gods mix man's nature with . . . an aspiring ambition" (Cavendish 1992, 73). In numerous texts, Cavendish suggests that ambition derives from vainglory and pride; moreover, she suggests that humans are unique in this respect. At the end of one poem, "A Morall Discourse Betwixt Man, and Beast," she writes about how humans differ from other animals, writing that "Beasts no Ambition have to get a Fame,/ Nor Build they Tombes thereon to write their Name" (Cavendish 1653b, 103). In other words, although Cavendish holds that humans are composed of the same

kind of matter as everything else in nature, she also consistently identifies a politically relevant way in which humans and the rest of nature differ.

This means that we cannot infer normative claims about how human society should be organized simply from Cavendish's natural-philosophical and metaphysical views (which Walters oddly but consistently calls Cavendish's "epistemology" [83, 133, 168]). Even if Cavendish did believe that Nature is "decentralized, equal and autonomous without hierarchy" (94), she could still hold that humans, because of their tendency to pursue ambition, need to be organized and governed in some other way.

Indeed, it is surprising that Walters insists so strongly that Cavendish's political philosophy must conform to her natural philosophy, for a further theme that runs throughout Walters's book is Cavendish's embrace of pluralism. If it is true that "one order or political system could not apply to the entirety of Nature because there are an infinite number of physical and fantasy worlds with infinite social orders" (172), then why not read Cavendish as holding that unruly, ambition-driven humans require some kind of absolute sovereign to keep them in order? Reading Cavendish as a royalist allows us to take seriously the passages in which she seems to endorse royalism, rather than viewing them as evidence of inconsistency or as some kind of unexplained parroting of the views of those around her, as Walters's interpretation seems to require.

Walters also draws a peculiar conclusion from Cavendish's belief in diversity and commitment to pluralism. She writes, "plurality in this study means the recognition of numerous perspectives in natural philosophy and politics which, to some extent, can be deemed valid or true" (6). She even claims that "As Cavendish draws from various scientific, religious, folk and intellectual traditions, she develops a complex epistemology which believes all perspectives, yet simultaneously disbelieves" (136). This strikes me as both implausible and an unpromising basis for interpreting a philosopher's thought; to claim that Cavendish believes and disbelieves all perspectives at the same time is to recast her as the contradictory and incoherent thinker that Virginia Woolf had dismissed as "crack-brained and dim-witted" (Woolf 1953).

Walters's goal of challenging the prevailing interpretation of Cavendish as a conservative royalist is an ambitious one. Despite my skepticism about the success of Walters's arguments, *Margaret Cavendish: Gender, Science and Politics* is stimulating to read. Whether convinced or not, Cavendish scholars from all disciplines will find it of great interest.

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¹ Walters's discussion treads a path familiar since Carolyn Merchant's argument in *The Death of Nature* that seventeenth-century mechanism was informed by masculinist rhetoric (Merchant 1980), but it is worth noting that that interpretation of mechanism has recently been contested. See Osler 2005.