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Lisa T. Sarasohn, The Natural Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish

Reason and Fancy During the Scientific Revolution

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Lisa T. Sarasohn, *The Natural Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish: Reason and Fancy During the Scientific Revolution* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), pp. xii + 251, \$75.00 ISBN-10: 0 8018 9443 3; ISBN-13: 978 0 8018 9443 5.

There is an old folk song (which I know as Scottish, but which folklorists have evidently traced to seventeen different countries) called “The Devil and the Feathery Wife.” A man made wealthy by the devil, after seven years, has to present him with a beast. If the Devil can say what the beast is, the man has to forfeit his soul. If the Devil cannot name the beast, however, the man is free to enjoy his wealth. At the end of seven years the man is rescued by his wife, who rolls herself in birdlime and feathers. The Devil is thwarted when he admits, “I’m damned if I know what it is” (see Ian Spring, “The Devil and the Feathery Wife,” *Folklore*, 99, 1988, 139-45). As I read Lisa T. Sarasohn’s *Natural Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish*, I found myself likening the Duchess of Newcastle to the feathery wife. Even at the end of the book, I felt no closer to understanding who she was, or what she believed she was doing; certainly, like the feathery wife, she was a very strange beast indeed.

For many of her contemporaries, as occasional reported comments make clear, she was simply “Mad Meg.” For the most part, these assumptions were based on her dress and her demeanour, but those who knew her writings also thought them distinctly odd, even if they were too polite to say so. Take for example her repeated notion that our thoughts are suggestions from fairies who dwell in our heads (pp. 17, 48). “The Fairies in the Braine,” she once wrote, “may be the causes of many thoughts” (p. 50). It is impossible to know with any certainty what to make of these remarks, but one possible interpretation is that she experienced some of her thoughts as “voices” in her head (and assumed, quite naturally, that everybody else did too). Unfortunately, Sarasohn does not help with this. Preferring to concentrate on supposed similarities in Cavendish’s writings between fairies and atoms—similarities which Sarasohn sees as marking a *fusion* of the two (though it is not at all clear what she means by that; as far as I can tell, Cavendish believed fairies, like everything else, were made of atoms)—Sarasohn tries to put a positive gloss on Cavendish’s state of mind: “The fusion of fairies and atoms underscores the unity of her work, in which both natural philosophy and fantasy function as complementary products of a unitary mind” (p. 53).

Given the subtitle of Sarasohn’s book, I was expecting a careful examination of the relationship between Cavendish’s writings in the realm of fantasy and those where she tried to develop serious philosophical claims. Clearly, some of her philosophical ideas featured in more or less modified forms in her fantasies, and it is certainly possible that ideas she developed in fantasies might have been adapted to feature in her philosophical writings. But Sarasohn does not offer this kind of nuanced analysis of the ideas in the different kinds of writings. Instead, she prefers to see Cavendish’s writings as all of a piece. “What readers then and now have failed to grasp,” she tells us at one point (p. 39), “is that Cavendish’s decision to mix reason and fantasy is integral to her system: her natural philosophy could be understood only by combining the philosophic and the fantastical.” I have to say that, if Sarasohn believes her account of

Cavendish is now, for the first time, showing us how to read the Duchess aright, I could not follow it. “For Cavendish,” we are told (p. 62), “there is a continuum between science and fiction. Both are equally important in elucidating her thought.” Sarasohn does not seem to realise that it is possible to agree that both aspects of her work are equally important, without having to conclude that we must therefore radically blur any differences between them. By calling equally on Cavendish’s works of fantasy and her philosophical writings to explicate her natural philosophy, Sarasohn ends up presenting a bafflingly weird Margaret Cavendish.

Sarasohn’s account is unhelpful in a number of other ways. She might have tried to elucidate the main principles of Cavendish’s thought, bringing out their similarities to earlier, or contemporary, ideas. But this would require a careful separation of the threads making up Cavendish’s philosophy. Sarasohn prefers to bring things together, however, rather than tease them apart. All too often she jumps from one thing to another, thereby presenting a Cavendish who flits about and makes odd combinations. It seems that for Sarasohn this shows Cavendish’s genius—the ability to make imaginative leaps—but for this reader, at least, it revealed (or falsely created) an undisciplined, and even incompetent, Cavendish. My own reading of Cavendish’s belief in active, self-moving matter, for example, is that it is not so very different from other theories of active matter being proposed by some of her contemporaries (including even Gassendi). According to Sarasohn, however, Cavendish’s matter is not just self-moving, but alive, and even self-conscious. I am left wondering not only how I missed this talk of self-consciousness when I read Cavendish, but also whereabouts in her book Sarasohn actually presents the evidence for this. In so far as I can reconstruct it, Sarasohn seems to assume that Cavendish’s talk of some matter having reason equates with matter being self-conscious (though, to be fair, she never explicitly says this, she just tends to take self-conscious matter for granted—but see p. 58 where she writes: “Presumably, innate [Cavendish’s word for active] matter is self-conscious if it rules over other matter, but does that mean it is alive?”).

In fact, Cavendish is committed to arguing for matter being capable of reasoning by her monistic materialism: just as the vegetable soul and the animal soul are material, so the rational soul also has to be material. Ergo, some matter is capable of reasoning. The matter of each of these three souls is thinner than the one below it in the hierarchy, and the more tenuous matter is, the more spontaneously active it is (the latter idea is fairly common, being found even in the Queries to Newton’s *Opticks*, for example). As I say, it is possible to show how Cavendish fits into the thought of her time; and what the fundamental ideas were that she took up, and how (and why) she modified them to make them her own. I never felt, however, that Sarasohn was doing this; she always seemed to prefer to show a Margaret Cavendish who was *sui generis*.

Another example is afforded by the treatment of Cavendish’s religious views. Again, it seems to me that the Duchess’s lay theology, though unorthodox, is by no means completely separate from contemporary traditions. Nowhere does Sarasohn survey and analyse all the religious sentiments expressed throughout Cavendish’s works, although her religious beliefs crop up in passing in virtually every chapter. In spite of

the clear theism of these varied religious opinions, Sarasohn does not trouble to offer a consistent account. On page 36 we are told that “Fideism remains constant throughout her works,” and a few lines later that “Cavendish’s theology is nature worship at best and atheism at worse [*sic*].” While on page 45 Sarasohn implies that the expression “All things come from God Almighty” is pantheistic!

It is not possible to discuss Cavendish without considering the lessons of recent feminist scholarship and philosophy. Even here, however, Sarasohn does not use this material to the best advantage. From the historical perspective, her account does not help us to decide whether Cavendish’s philosophy was ridiculed because she was a woman, or because it was bad philosophy. To be fair, however, it is hard to see how this could be decided. Cavendish’s contemporaries would have expected a woman to write bad philosophy, because she was a woman, and would therefore have ridiculed her for the attempt as well as the execution. Sarasohn brings out well the fact that Cavendish, not so foolish that she cannot recognise her own intellectual shortcomings, sometimes blames her lack of education, but at other times (poignantly) accepts the standard view that women are mentally inferior to men. From a more feminist philosophical perspective, however, Sarasohn might have done more. Acknowledging the claims of “difference feminism” (p. 11), “whereby women as a group are credited with a more holistic and empathetic understanding of nature,” Sarasohn simply presents a Cavendish whose natural philosophy is holistic, vitalistic, animated, anti-mechanical, and so forth, and implies that this is connected to the fact that she thinks like a woman. All this may in fact be true, but it would have been more satisfying, and much more useful, to see Sarasohn offer a careful account of the relevant parts of Cavendish’s thought, weighing up whether it could be said to be significantly more holistic, vitalistic, or anti-mechanical than the thought of contemporary male philosophers, with a view to deciding whether “difference feminism” is correct, rather than allowing difference feminism to determine from the outset how Cavendish’s philosophy should be seen.

Sarasohn certainly gets it right, however, when she writes (p. 188) that “Cavendish provides a view of how the new science, the new world, and the new religions ignited the understanding and the imagination of those, either female or uneducated, who did not attend universities or meetings of scientific societies.” Thanks to the extent of her writings and their complexity, she ought to be regarded as much more interesting as an independent thinker than Menocchio, the now famous Friulian miller who developed his own cosmology. What Cavendish needs is a tribute to her thought to match Carlo Ginzburg’s tribute to Menocchio, *The Cheese and the Worms* (Baltimore, 1980), but I am afraid this book is not it.

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