

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



David Cuning, *Cavendish* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016). xiv + 321 pp. ISBN 978 0 415 81960 2.

Holly Faith Nelson
Trinity Western University
Holly.Nelson@twu.ca

The title of David Cuning's recent study of the philosophy of Margaret Cavendish points to how far the field has come in the past twenty years: 'Cavendish' alone is sufficient to identify the Duchess of Newcastle as a major thinker in the history of philosophy. The only female philosopher included to date in Routledge's 'Arguments of the Philosophers' series, Cavendish finds a place alongside, for example, her contemporaries Descartes, Locke, and Malebranche. To be identified (at the very least) as the intellectual equal of men like Descartes was one of Cavendish's objectives, and Cuning's volume helps to achieve this end, revealing the role played by her ideas in the evolution of philosophical thought.

Cuning's *Cavendish* offers an extraordinarily thorough, engaging, and persuasive description and analysis of Cavendish's philosophical vision, including her epistemology, metaphysics, aesthetics, political philosophy, and even her theology (though she claimed to leave theology to the Church). He considers not only her works of natural philosophy, but also engages with the philosophical dimension of her poetry, drama and prose fiction. Each of Cuning's eight chapters is prefaced by a lucid abstract of his upcoming argument and each provides not only a close reading of a major aspect of Cavendish's thought, but also locates it in ongoing philosophical debates. The chapters are also teeming with quotations from Cavendish's corpus, which is extremely useful for readers unfamiliar with her philosophy. Perhaps Cuning's most original approach to Cavendish's philosophical ideas is his intervallic imagining in each chapter of how she might have defended her claims against potential objections. His willingness to act as her apologist where needed introduces a creative dimension to the monograph that Cavendish, who was inclined toward both reason and fancy, would have appreciated.

In the introduction to *Cavendish*, Cuning first reviews Cavendish's biography and defends some of the atypical aspects of her philosophy. Cuning maintains that Cavendish, like Descartes, Malebranche and Leibniz, was willing to think outside the philosophical box, resulting in novel ideas; however, these should not be dismissed as irrational simply because they seem peculiar at first. In fact, one of the strengths of Cavendish's philosophical system, Cuning claims in his first chapter, is that she subscribes to fallibilism: she recognizes that all philosophical theories are imperfect given that the human mind is limited.

Cavendish's philosophical humility is evident, Cuning demonstrates, in her theory of perception, especially in terms of how we form ideas in our mind. Most often, she claims, ideas result from the mind's creation of 'pictorial images' of material objects through 'sensory perception' but *not* through the motion or force of that material object (pp. 21, 36). When we see an object, the mind patterns out a visual image with 'figure and dimension', but these images cannot render the object perfectly since 'our cogitations do not reach the level of clarity of a mathematical demonstration' (p. 23). Neither can we fully grasp the complex causality of natural objects and their interactions. However, in recognizing these limitations, Cavendish still tends to trust sensory perceptions as long as they are not 'distorted' by artificial instruments (e.g. the microscope or telescope). She is also willing to accept that we can generate some ideas in the absence of direct sensory perception through reason or fancy alone.

In Chapter 2, Cuning turns to Cavendish's distinct form of monist materialism. He analyses Cavendish's belief that all natural bodies (including the mind, which she holds is material) consist of some combination of rational, sensitive, and inanimate matter, and thus matter is intelligent. She believes that if nature was not composed of matter that thinks (whether consciously or not), it could never be so 'orderly', 'organized', and 'goal-directed' (pp. 71, 74). Although Cuning highlights the Duchess's materialism in *Cavendish*, he pays close attention in Chapter 3 to her reflections on immaterials, insightfully navigating a subject that confounded Cavendish herself. Cuning explains that Cavendish rejects the notion that material beings can hold ideas of immaterial entities, especially God, since a finite material cannot, she believes, have an 'idea' of an immaterial being. However, at the same time, she suggests that our minds can develop a 'notion', albeit a tentative one, of non-material entities, even though such immaterials can never interact with material bodies (p. 110). Given that contact cannot occur, no scientist, Cavendish holds, should integrate the concept or discourse of immateriality into the study of nature. In this chapter, Cuning also explains why Cavendish's philosophy was viewed suspiciously from a theological perspective: not only was she a materialist, she also held that matter, and by extension nature, was eternal and infinite, attributing to nature traits previously assigned only to God. However, Cuning also

reminds us that Cavendish insists that we must venerate God, follow the Church's teachings, and avoid claiming to know God's will (especially for our own gain).

In his fourth and fifth chapters, Cunning focuses on Cavendish's idea of the material universe as an omniscient, wise, infinite 'eternal plenum' or 'dense continuum' without void (pp. 142, 144). Cavendish conceives of the world as one large body which is composed of smaller bodies that operate with purpose in relation to each other (at times becoming composites) in such a way as to reflect the 'order and elegance' of nature (p. 171); any appearance of disorder is a result of humans' flawed perception. Death is not to be feared, according to Cavendish, because bodies simply dissolve in the 'eternal plenum', taking up other forms, since the amount of matter in the universe never alters. Cunning explains that while Cavendish envisions the plenum as a purpose-driven, omniscient whole, individual humans (bodies) are full of partial and biased ideas given the limitations of our minds. Cavendish is often inclined, Cunning demonstrates, to compare the behaviour of humans with those of nonhumans (e.g. ant and bee colonies) only to argue that the former are less skillful and sophisticated than the latter.

In chapters 6 and 7, Cunning turns to Cavendish's conception of agency and volition of bodies within the eternal plenum. Cavendish, Cunning contends, highlights the free movement and interaction of bodies in an ordered and harmonious fashion, which accord with divine decrees, reflecting her understanding that free will and determinism are perfectly compatible. But he also shows that Cavendish, at times, recognizes that the plenum itself can restrict the freedom of the 'internal motions' of particular bodies or that some bodies (e.g. a composite body) become more powerful than others and can thus restrict another's freedom (p. 243). She is fascinated, in particular, with how this might be relevant to female agency, and offers potential solutions when the plenum or other bodies block individuals from pursuing their own 'interests and goals, without interference' (p. 213). In such instances, Cavendish offers alternative forms of freedom and agency: stoic acceptance of our reality, which requires us 'to moderate our desires', or the production of 'escapist writing' through which we can enter 'the pliant world of imagination and fancy', an alternative pathway to pleasure (pp. 248, 234, 252).

In the final chapter of *Cavendish*, Cunning addresses Cavendish's political philosophy, considering what type of government she feels is the most feasible given the workings of nature. While he believes that Cavendish is, for the most part, a monarchist, Cunning points to her periodic deconstruction of this position given the complexity and mutability of social structures and the self-interested nature of human beings. While Cavendish envisions 'monarchy...[as] the best form of government for maintaining security and order' in human communities, since a king or queen is most likely to be seen as 'exceptional and meriting obedience', she recognizes that they remain

dependent on the often-unpredictable behaviour of their subjects and agents (pp. 286, 293). She also notes that in non-human creation, a more republican political system often operates just as well, if not better.

Cunning's *Cavendish* is, generally speaking, a tour de force. There is, in the book, an occasional claim made that is not wholly convincing. Cunning argues, for example, on page 221 that Cavendish wore 'masculine clothes to shine a light on the norm that only men can be writers or philosophers'; though Cavendish did design her own clothes, given her love of fashion, it was only her characters, not the author, who adorned themselves in male clothing as far as I recall. At times, Cunning's tendency to repeat and revisit points in an attempt to guide the reader along some difficult philosophical paths seems unnecessary. Still, for students who are new to Cavendish's natural philosophy, such hand holding may be an advantage. These minor concerns, however, in no way detract from the significance of this comprehensive and compelling study of the philosophical thought of Margaret Cavendish. It is an invaluable resource not only to Cavendish scholars, but also to students of early modern philosophy and of early modern women's contribution to early Enlightenment thought.