

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



**Boyle, Deborah, *The Well-Ordered Universe: The Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish*
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In *The Well-Ordered Universe*, Deborah Boyle integrates her past and current research on Cavendish's philosophy in a remarkably comprehensive, coherent, and compelling monograph. Sections of seven of its nine chapters have previously appeared in journals and edited collections between 2004 and 2017; however, Boyle reworks and augments this material, adding two original essays on Cavendish's ecological vision and medical philosophy. The collection is written in a highly accessible style, happily devoid of disciplinary jargon that might alienate readers only acquainted with her literary works. It also reveals Boyle's extensive knowledge of Cavendish's life and works and of contemporary debates on her philosophical opinions, ensuring that every claim Boyle makes is exceptionally well-informed, even when open to debate.

Whereas David Cunning's recent book on Cavendish's philosophy focuses on delineating every major aspect of Cavendish's thought, Boyle methodically unfolds the way in which Cavendish's range of philosophical opinions support an overarching vision of the natural world as (ideally) inclined toward order, regularity, harmony, and peace. Boyle is convinced that for Cavendish, Nature, in part and whole, was designed to act with the objective of order in mind. This is why Boyle stresses the teleological, or end-driven, dimension of the duchess's philosophy. However, Boyle clarifies that Cavendish's ordered-centered worldview should not be confused with a uniformity-driven one, since the duchess revels in the variety or diversity of Nature (p. 90).

In defending her central thesis, Boyle regularly addresses ‘puzzles’ and critical disagreements in scholarship on Cavendish’s philosophy (p. 56), working to demonstrate why her own readings offer a more accurate version of the duchess’s thought. Boyle pays particular attention to debates over Cavendish’s complex treatment of irregularities and freedom/agency in Nature, as well as over her status as a proto-feminist, proto-environmentalist, and animal rights advocate. Her arguments on such subjects, as in the book as a whole, figure Cavendish as a less progressive thinker than many other critics would have us believe.

Boyle first approaches Cavendish’s philosophy by dissecting its distinct but evolving materialism, the subject of her first four chapters. In this section of the book, Boyle suggests that Cavendish is fixated on order and peace not least because of the traumatic context of civil war out of which her belief system emerged. She revisits Cavendish’s early atomism with two goals in mind: to establish that there were many different types of atomism in the period; and to associate Cavendish with its ‘non-mechanical vitalist form’ (p. 46). Even then, it is a hybrid atomism since it merges aspects of mechanism and theories of sympathy and antipathy, according to Boyle. However, Boyle also raises the possibility that Cavendish never really took atomism seriously, suggesting that her atomistic poems have been misread as representing her actual philosophical beliefs, when, in fact, they are simply playful and fanciful thought experiments.

In turning to Cavendish’s abandonment of atomism and the development of her more mature materialism, Boyle reminds us that Cavendish holds that all things in Nature are made from the self-same matter that is infinite and innately self-moving, self-knowing, and self-loving. This one matter is comprised, paradoxically, of an indivisible mixture of rational, sensitive, and dull (or inanimate) matter. All of the creatures made of this matter (i.e., everything in Nature) also have an innate notion of God, who established the ‘overarching *norms* that indicate’ how parts in Nature ‘are supposed to act’ (p. 111), which also inform the rules or principles of Nature. Boyle considers two critical quandaries related to Cavendish’s mature materialism: the debated roles played by irregularity and freedom. On the first subject, she determines that Cavendish believes there are ‘true disorders’ in finite parts of Nature, even though others theorize that the duchess thinks humans simply misrecognize ‘disorders’ as irregularities due to limited cognition. On the second, Boyle claims that Cavendish’s view of freedom is less critical to her philosophy than is often supposed, but when it is expressed it is more libertarian than Hobbesian.

Though Cavendish, as Boyle maintains, tends to describe Nature in the discourse of order and harmony, she does recognize that freedom can create irregularities in nature. For instance, all individual figures within Nature are held together materially by self-love, necessary for self-preservation in Cavendish's paradigm, prior to death (i.e, material dissolution), as Boyle notes; and they influence each other via occasional causation. However, these figures do have the freedom or agency 'to violate' the rules of Nature in self-destructive ways, though Cavendish is not consistent when explaining *why* parts would choose such violation, which leads to the disorder she fears.

From Chapter 5 onward, Boyle tends to highlight the role of humans in Cavendish's natural philosophy, especially in terms of their difference from other-than-human creatures. Boyle explains that for Cavendish, humans have the greatest inclination to irregularity of motion, and hence disorder, largely because of their propensity for a destructive, rather than a healthy, expression of self-love. Self-love corrupts when the human desire for fame — to be remembered at any cost — is too strong, unsettling and disunifying the social organization of which the individual is a part. This unethical impulse stands in contrast to the self-love that seeks admiration for virtuous deeds. Because the social structures of human and non-human creation differ so significantly in this regard, Cavendish sees the latter as superior and the former in need of a wise and virtuous sovereign, as Boyle explains.

In summarizing Cavendish's political philosophy, therefore, Boyle stresses that the duchess is a conservative thinker, a point she repeats in relation to Cavendish's theories of sexual and ecological relations in Chapters 7 and 8. While Boyle recognizes Cavendish's complex treatment of sex and gender in various works, she ultimately views her as a traditional thinker who supports patriarchal marriage (despite its flaws) because it contributes to social stability. Nevertheless, Boyle clarifies that Cavendish works to expose the abuses that can arise in such marriages and creates temporary textual spaces in which to play with sex and gender. Despite Cavendish's critique of aspects of patriarchy, Boyle warns readers not to designate her a proto-feminist. In the same way, Boyle rejects what she sees as anachronistic readings of Cavendish as 'a proto-animal-welfarist or proto-environmentalist' (p. 214). Boyle believes that Cavendish's desire for an orderly and peaceful Nature has been mistaken for a true sympathy with animals; though Cavendish does not want to see animals abused, this is because such activity destabilizes the natural order of things. Boyle, therefore, speculates that Cavendish wants the use of animals regulated to avoid 'strife and

violence' in Nature and that such a view does not necessitate, for example, vegetarianism or the abandonment of animal experimentation (p. 200).

In her final chapter, Boyle situates Cavendish's medical philosophy in wider early-modern debates on health, disorders, and disease. She identifies the duchess as largely Galenic in thought but focused on disordered motions rather than fluidic imbalance as the cause of illness. Boyle reminds us that Cavendish was for the most part highly critical of the use of iatrochemistry (especially as practised by the Helmontians) in medical contexts, and had a general distrust of physicians, as seen throughout her imaginative literature. In her conclusion, Boyle ties together in a concise and cogent fashion how the kernel of each chapter supports her thesis: that Cavendish desires a 'perfectly well-ordered' universe 'with no irregularities at all', though the duchess realizes this is an ideal rather than a reality.

There is little to criticize in *The Well-Ordered Universe*. In a few instances, sentences are repeated verbatim in different chapters or the same information is shared more than once, such as the description of Cavendish's five objections to alchemical practice (pp. 213, 221–223). And Boyle's minimization of heterodox aspects of Cavendish's philosophy to challenge earlier readings of the duchess as a progressive thinker may go too far. For example, just because Cavendish ate 'a little boyld chickin' now and then does not necessarily mean 'she does not think eating meat is, in itself, morally objectionable' (p. 200). In *Grounds of Natural Philosophy*, the major part of Cavendish's mind does conclude that it is ethically wrong. Near the end of that work, Cavendish argues that Creatures 'might be assisted by the Lives of other Creatures', but should 'not destroy their lives' (p. 273). She then provides examples in support of the ethics of lacto-ovo vegetarianism, which 'all the Parts' of her 'Mind' ultimately agree upon 'unanimously' (p. 275). It is not that Boyle's point is wrong; rather, it is that Cavendish's stance on a given philosophical subject can shift across texts and time. Regardless, Boyle offers a much-needed corrective to anachronistic readings of Cavendish and her monograph is essential reading, alongside David Cunning's *Cavendish* and Lisa Sarasohn's *The Natural Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish*, for Cavendish scholars and students of early modern natural philosophy, particularly of the philosophical theories and systems of early modern women writers.

Works Cited

- Cavendish, Margaret, *Grounds of Natural Philosophy* (London: 1668). Wing / N851.
- Cunning, David, *Cavendish* (London: Routledge, 2016).
- Sarasohn, Lisa T., *The Natural Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish: Reason and Fancy during the Scientific Revolution* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010)