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BOOK REVIEW

Pure Wit: The Revolutionary Life of Margaret Cavendish

Francesca Peacock. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023 (ISBN 9781837930142)

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Pure Wit is a new biography of the 17th century natural philosopher, poet, playwright, and novelist, Margaret Cavendish (1623–1673). There has been a sharp rise in scholarship on Cavendish's philosophy in the last two decades (since the last biography of her was published), motivated in part by Eileen O'Neill's call to arms for early modern philosophical scholarship focusing on women (O'Neill 1997). Thus, it is encouraging to see this accessible and engaging narrative of Cavendish's life and work receive so much attention outside of the academy.

To my mind, Peacock achieves several feats in this text, which goes well beyond simply producing a biographical account of Cavendish's life. One achievement is to rectify some common—often damaging—misconceptions about Cavendish's life and personality which have resulted from previous scholarship, including other biographies. In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf describes Cavendish as "hare-brained" and presents her as something of a warning, or bogie-person, of what happens when women aren't given the freedom to pursue their own education (the proverbial "room of their own") (xvii). Rather than sharply criticizing Woolf's assessment, Peacock presents this take on Cavendish as the ancestor of a longline of misconceptions—sometimes deliberate (and sexist), sometimes more innocent—that can be traced back to accounts of her life from almost immediately after her premature death in 1673 (274–282). People got Cavendish so wrong in the years after her death that it's no wonder that Woolf and others misconstrued her, Peacock seems to suggest, since that's the image of Cavendish that was passed down to them. In her 2003 biography of Cavendish, Katie Whitaker avoids painting a Cavendish as a "hare-brained" madwoman, but (as Peacock points out) still cannot help but use the unflattering moniker "Mad Madge" in the title of her text.

Peacock is not interested in propagating the image of Cavendish as "mad." Instead, she goes back to historical evidence available to us about Cavendish's life and persona, including correspondences, contemporary descriptions of her (including those of Samuel Pepys, who comes across as borderline obsessed), along with her published writings, and starts afresh. The result is a portrait of Cavendish as someone of an often-contradictory nature. Indeed, the apparent contradictions and inconsistencies of Cavendish's life and acts are a recurring theme throughout the text. For instance, Cavendish was not shy about her desire for fame: something she hoped would help

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her to live on after her death (controversially for an early modern writer, she seems to openly doubt the existence of an afterlife).

Yet, her own self-descriptions, corroborated by others—such as those present at her visit to the Royal Society in 1667—indicate that she was "achingly shy" (34). As Peacock notes, this makes her decision to take leave of her family at a young age and join the court of Queen Henrietta Maria somewhat baffling. Similarly, Cavendish was radical and unorthodox in many of her philosophical and theological views, and yet conservative in her staunch defence of Royalism.

Such apparent contradictions were present throughout Cavendish's life. One explanation is that they are simply the result of the fact that, as Cavendish alludes to at several points in her writing, she saw herself as a person in two minds. In both her 1666 *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* and 1668 *Grounds of Natural Philosophy*, Cavendish writes philosophical dialogues between two "parts" of her mind, which are described as "at war" with one another. Cavendish is thus a testament to the fact that human beings, including philosophers, are rarely entirely self-consistent or coherent entities. A biography that presented Cavendish (or anyone) as straightforward would, then, most likely be inaccurate.

While *Pure Wit* is a rich account of the real Margaret Cavendish (inasmuch we can know her), it also serves as an introduction to a wider group of women—especially writers—in early modern Britain. Indeed, early modern women as a demographic of society are almost as central a part of the narrative of this biography as Cavendish herself. Peacock demonstrates that Cavendish was not a lone woman writer amidst a sea of men. Rather, she was one island in a wider archipelago. Peacock draws on insights from other women in the period to enrich our understanding of Cavendish's experiences. In doing so, she is able to (albeit speculatively) fill in some of the gaps in Cavendish's own life, including how she might have felt about particular experiences, that can't be filled in by appealing to her own writing.

Figures like Christine de Pizan (243–245), Lucy Hutchison (63), and Katherine Philips (105) may not have had any direct or tangible impact on Cavendish's life but, as Peacock shows, their experiences are relevant to our understanding of her. Queen Herietta Maria, Cavendish's patron, *did* have a concrete impact on Cavendish's life—they were forced to leave Britain during the Civil War—and is presented as an almost swash-buckling figure, who may have influenced Cavendish's depictions of women protagonists in her later works like *The Blazing World* (1666). There are also informative segues into the broader tribulations of the 17th century women in Britain, including struggles with pregnancy, childbirth, and miscarriage (e.g., 73), that help to give a sense of how Cavendish herself might have felt about having never had children—which her husband, William, desperately wanted. As Peacock notes, after Margaret's death, William could not help but mention on her gravestone that she left behind "noe issue" (i.e., no children) (268).

To my mind, one of the most pronounced *agendas* of the text (something which, again, makes it more than just a biography) is to banish the myth that Cavendish and her contemporaries were, at best, "proto" feminists. Peacock is right: writers like Cavendish are rarely described as feminists without the "proto" qualifier. This qualification is typically employed as a way of recognizing that while Cavendish was ahead of her time—indeed, her treatment of love between women was radical at the time of writing (e.g., 186)—her views would not be seen as feminist today. She is conservative in ways that a modern-day feminist is unlikely to be. Peacock,

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however, combats the idea that Cavendish's feminism ought to be qualified or downplayed. As Peacock puts it:

> [I]f the history of feminism were limited to women who expressed their beliefs in women's worth more or less as we do now, it would be a far shorter history than the subject deserves. (243)

And she continues, explaining that Cavendish and contemporary women writers

> are not just "proto-feminists," imperfect thinkers on the road to some platonic ideal of feminism. They are part of its history, regardless of their contradictions and differences. (243–244)

I think Peacock is raising an important issue here, which is connected to wider discussions about how we assess the moral status of figures in philosophy's history, for good and for bad. Increasingly, when examining the moral fallibility of figures in history, the response that someone was "of their time" is not seen as a good defence. Yes, Hume or Kant's racism was more common in the 18th century Europe than it is today, but that doesn't excuse it. Especially given that such views were not *universally* accepted. And, one might argue, if *negative* moral assessment can be worked into history, why can't *positive* moral assessment be too? This line of thinking supports Peacock's claim that Cavendish et al aren't just "proto" feminists, they are feminists. And why not, given that other historical figures are not just "proto" racists, but racists?

Aside from the wider achievements of the text, *Pure Wit* is littered with rich insights into Cavendish's works. Peacock examines the role that Cavendish's views on gender and sexuality played throughout her writing, from her plays that contain "cross-dressing" to the "platonic" relationship that is struck up between the Empress of the Blazing World and the Duchess of Newcastle (i.e., Cavendish herself, who appears as character in the novel). Peacock also argues that Cavendish's thoughts on womanhood, and the status of women writers, influenced the *way* she wrote and the genres she wrote in. For example, she points out that Cavendish's *Philosophical Letters* are an "in-between" genre: not quite genuine letters, but not quite fictional either (201). This is most likely a response to the fact that Cavendish was not able to correspond with the famous, male philosophers of the period—described, in *The Blazing World*, as being too "wedded to their own opinions" and "self-conceited" (239).

Pure Wit is a successful piece of recovery work on an important early modern philosopher—one that both contributes to a wider body of scholarship that (in line with O'Neill's call to arms) is recovering the work of women philosophers from historical neglect and that also recovers Cavendish's image from its distortion in the hands of less charitable, or diligent, biographers of the past. It is also, alongside a biography of Margaret Cavendish, an insightful snapshot into the lives of women in the 17th century Britain.

Reference

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