A Wicked Step-Mother, as Told From Her Perspective: Margaret Cavendish Reflects on Science, Society, and Culture
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Intro:

First sentences, like first appearances, often leave a lasting impression. If this paper began with a description of woman, during the Sixties, strolling out of her home, in men’s clothing, no one would bat an eye. So let us imagine that my first sentence is not “First sentences, like first appearances, often leave a lasting impression.” Nor is it “In October of 1968, a woman—smartly dressed in a man’s suit—stepped outside her door.” Let the first sentence of my paper be this:

Imagine a woman—an aristocrat, honorable, and by 1660 the most widely published woman ever—venturing out of her home, dressed head to toe in men’s clothing. Now imagine her proclaiming,

I am as ambitious of finding out the truth of Nature, as an honourable Dueller is of gaining fame and repute; for as he will fight with none but an honourable and valiant opposite, so am I resolved to argue with none but those which have the renown of being famous and subtil Philosophers.¹

Margaret Cavendish did both. What “self” was Cavendish representing to an elite, educated public? How did her society and culture “read” this representation? More importantly, how did a civil war, exile, and a restoration England influence Cavendish’s representation?

Thesis:

This paper will analyze Cavendish’s work as a commentary on natural philosophy and Interregnum and Restoration society; this textual analysis will synthesize a view of natural philosophy inextricably linked with its society and culture—providing another building block in the historiography of “science as social,”² as well as a unique, alternative, female perspective.³

Objectives:

The analysis will integrate two further points: one a commentary on academic uses of Cavendish⁴ and the other and examination of a “useful trope.”⁵

Current academic literature’s efforts—“making” Cavendish a “modern” woman—highlight interesting points of analysis, but individually seem too narrow. Like any

¹ “preface…” observations 66
² I need to list some examples whatnot.
³ Treating this as unproblematic/ discussion of Foucault within footnote?
⁴ Some examples, list again
⁵ Who coined trope? Is it still useful? Is it a trope?
historical character, historian, or modern reader, Cavendish was complicated and contradictory—an idea not to be shunned, but embraced as a unifying human ideal across times and places. If similarities are to be found between the historian and the historical actor, they are found in a historian’s desire to be linked with a meaningful past. This is not to say that I will be able to circumvent this issue, and maybe it is not an “issue” at all; but an attempt will be made to allow Cavendish to present her own perspectives through a variety of her works and perhaps this historian will be able to draw conclusions about the present without playing tricks on the dead.

Social factors such as the Republic of Letters, the increase of printed materials, and a growing reading “public” allowed Cavendish’s involvement in intellectual and political conversations. Simultaneously, unspoken cultural rules, like poor education for women, appropriate gender roles, and the style/presentation of arguments, limited her influence.

I would like to review issues surrounding the theoretical trope of “public” and “private” spheres and whether it is a “trope” at all. Cavendish’s story is insightful; it offers many instances in which the public and private, inclusion and exclusion, are complicated and elucidated.

Structure:
(Arguments and Evidence)

In section one, I will address Cavendish’s philosophical works and her accompanying worldview by investigating Poems, and Fancies, Philosophical Fancies (both 1653), The Philosophical and Physical Opinions, and The Worlds Olio (both 1655).

Section two interprets Cavendish’s venture into a new subject matter and medium, the oration and the closet drama. It will include Orations of Divers Sorts, Accommodated to Divers Places, Playes (both 1662), and Plays, Never before Printed (1668) (This text is time-wise a little out of place, but in its style and content is appropriate to this section; I will be reading “The Presence,” a piece written about court life.)

Finally, section three will aim at synthesis by way of Cavendish’s own decision to combine a philosophical work with a piece of fiction, Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy. To which is added, The Description of a New World, Called The Blazing-World (1668). The Blazing-World originally is the second part of Observations, but was reprinted separately in both 1666 and 1668. Here both natural philosophy and an “imaginary” society meet. I am using “imaginary” problematically; while The Blazing-World is most often considered a utopian fiction, Cavendish certainly parodies much of her present society.

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6 Republic of Letters historiography, print/book/novel/poetry historiography
7 Civil society, science as social stuff (again?), gender: difference France/England
8 Note on Playes Never Before, more about Restoration than Interregnum/court life
This structure will allow ample room for discussions of my objectives, as well as an easy setup for synthesis at the end. I hope this will give me an opportunity to investigate inconsistencies and paradoxes in Cavendish’s character and her story—both what a historian would find paradoxical and whether her contemporaries found her paradoxical. She was inevitably a product of her time, a character trapped in her own story. What stories, then, is she telling to the present—a future that she in fact recognized and addressed?

Some Body:

Margaret Cavendish began writing her many discourses on natural philosophy in the early years of her and her husband William’s exile. Poems, and Fancies and Philosophical Fancies were Cavendish’s first publications printed in 1653, the year when Margaret traveled to London to appeal for her husband’s loss of estate (he was unable to go as an outlaw royalist).⁹

Cavendish was first introduced to atomism after her marriage and inclusion in a small, Parisian, salon-like group patronized by her husband. In this general sense, atomism will be defined as a belief that the corporeal world is made of indivisble particles of matter. This definition does not do justice to the many alterations and the theoretical variety surrounding its revival, which was being discussed in just such informal groups. Cavendish does not talk about her involvement in the small group, but she does mention a few of the philosophers she met. The conversation was lacking.¹¹ Most probably, she listened in, gleaning what she could, and then was later thoroughly tutored by both William and his brother, Charles Cavendish.

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¹⁰ What is atomism, what do I mean by atomism
¹¹ Cavendish on meeting hobbes, Descartes, and not talking to them. Philosophical and Physical Opinions, “An Epilogue to my Philosophical Opinions
What was the appeal of the atomistic revival in the 1600s? Anna Battegelli suggests that for Cavendish anyway

Atomism helped to account for the political and psychological conflict that shaped her life by depicting a system in which stability of any kind—material, political, or emotional—was ultimately elusive.¹²

Cavendish shows the foundation of her worldview in “A World made by Atomes.” There is an obvious ordered-ness in Cavendish’s explanations, but none of the expected fear or chaos.¹³ However, in a later poem, she shows both the constructive and destructive powers of atoms.

Thus Life and Death, and young and old,
Are, as the severall Atomes hold…
And Dispositions good, or ill,
Are as the severall Atomes still.
And every Passion which doth rise,
Is as the severall Atomes lies.
Thus Sickness, Health, and Peace, and War,
Are always as the severall Atomes are.¹⁴

The chaos, disorder, disease, angry and murderous passions framing Cavendish’s life had a logical reason. Was Cavendish the only one responding to a need for order? Carolyn Merchant emphasizes a larger society’s need.

“Rational control over nature, society, and the self was achieved by redefining

reality itself through the new machine metaphor.”\textsuperscript{15} Cavendish would ultimately abandon atomism, but not a belief in the complete materiality of all things.\textsuperscript{16}

Matter in motion was central to atomism and mechanistic philosophy—making Cavendish’s rejection of them so surprising. Cavendish takes her materialism to an extreme. Definitions and explanations of her natural philosophy provide contemporary critiques of atomism, mechanistic philosophy, and emphasize that mechanistic philosophy was never the only option when choosing an explanation of nature. Whenever possible this paper will try to draw connections and tease out the differences between Cavendish and her more famous philosopher peers.

In \textit{The Philosophical and Physical Opinions}, Cavendish condemns a view of atomism in which all matter is made of exactly similar, tiny particles. She likens these atoms to a “body of dust.” She is unable to imagine as onely by fleeing about as dust and ashes, that are blown about with winde, which me thinks should make such uncertainties, such disproportioned figures, and confused creations, as there would be an infinite and eternal disorder.\textsuperscript{17}

Denial stems from this apprehension of chaos. Cavendish decides that if all atoms were the same then “every atom must be of a living substance, that is innate matter.” In this early piece, she is stilling work through how matter and motion are related. Nature is, she will argue, “matter, form, and motion, all these being as it were but one thing…The spirits of nature, which is the life of nature,

\textsuperscript{15} Merchant, p. 192-3.
\textsuperscript{16} Philosophical and Physical Opinions, “A Condemning Treatise of Atomes.”
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
and the several motions are the several actions of nature." These early speculations indicate a later strengthening of her animistic materialism, in which all is matter, and all matter is living. Although she has made her opposition to atomism clear, her examination of the vacuum provides another example.

In both *Philosophical Fancies* and *The Philosophical and Physical Opinions*, Cavendish includes two poems, “There is no Vacuity.” and “Of Vacuum.”. If all matter is “equall” or exactly the same, then no vacuum would exist. If the building blocks of nature are different, they will never be joined together, therefore creating a vacuum. Cavendish comments on the important philosophical debate; she presents both sides of the argument and mentions that “The Reader may take either Opinion.” As her work matures, and as the debates continued among her peers, Cavendish eventually sides on the nonexistence of the vacuum. Her decision is not dependent on this early explanation of “equall” matter—unequal matter will blend completely leaving no room for the chaos of the vacuum.

Eileen O’Neill explains the relationship between Cavendish, ancient philosophy, and Descartes’ philosophy. “…Cavendish is already experimenting with the possibility that the structure of corporeal nature in continuous and held together by something subtle—which position the Stoics had urged in opposition to the Epicurean view.” At this point in Cavendish’s career, it would be difficult to determine why she would ultimately disagree with Descartes’ philosophy.

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18 Ibid “The Text to my Natural Sermon.”
19 Philo Fancies, p. 8-9
20 O’Neil, p. xxiii
21 Eileen O’Neill, …p.xxii
O’Neill helps again, “In opposition to the views of Descartes, More, Glanvill, and Van Helmont, she maintains that there are neither incorporeal substances nor incorporeal qualities in nature (Observations, p. 137).”22 The importance of incorporeal substances will be discussed below. Descartes’ Meditations had been translated into French eight years prior to 1655; Cavendish’s learning of them would have been from her husband, brother-in-law, or encounters at informal, philosophical groups. Another plausible theory suggests that Descartes’ mechanical philosophy had yet to make waves. Kathleen Wellman’s study on the conferences of Théophraste Renaudot argues that the intellectual culture of the 1630s and 1640s was diverse, and that “the reign of Louis XIV with its espousal of mechanism, absolutism, and classicism should be seen as anomalous rather than characteristic of the early modern period.”23 As Cavendish only understood English, her education during exile on the Continent was vastly limited to private lessons from her male family members. She was to eventually make a stand; by 1668 Cavendish would claim “Some Learned Persons are of opinion, That there are Substances that are not Material Bodies. But how they can prove any sort of Substance to be no Body, I cannot tell…there cannot be any Substances in Nature, that are between Body, and no Body.”24

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22 Ibid, p. xxiii
23 Wellman, p. 372-373
While natural philosophers hailed the mechanical metaphor—nature as a watch, Cavendish lamented the loss of life and man’s militant dominance over nature. In “Hunting of the Hare,” Cavendish cries

Yet Man doth think himselfe so gentle, mild,
When he of Creatures is most cruell[y] wild.
And is so Proud, thinks onely he shall live,
That God a God-like Nature did him give.

Within traditional gender and class ideologies, Cavendish’s empathy and caring for animals and nature would not be outside its limits. Because humans cannot converse with animals, she argues that “Beasts may have, for all any Man knows, as strange and as fantastical Humours, Imaginations, and Opinions, as Men…” Cavendish implies the need for humanity’s humility in relation to nature; domination of nature had long been, and would continue to be, the relationship between man and the world. Although it might not have been outside ideologies, it was a world view in stark contrast with the dominant one. Thomas Keith argues that “The early modern period had thus generated feelings which would make it increasingly hard for men to come to terms with the uncompromising methods by which the dominance of their species had been secured.” A paradox: on one hand, discussion of the rationality of women, plants, and animals heightened awareness and sympathetic feelings towards all creatures; and on the other, the growing mechanical view of nature reinforced

25 Something here…
26 Cavendish, Poems and Fancies, p. 112.
27 Thomas Keith, blahblah
28 The World’s Olio, p.140
29 Thomas Keith, p. 302
medieval anthropocentric ideals. Cavendish’s rejection of philosophies that included immaterial substances responded to an acute need for a living nature.

In each of Cavendish’s publications, she includes numerous pages of introductory epistles and prefaces. These pieces should be considered highly important in that they are addressed to her public and in response to this public. Among this “public” she includes “Noble, and Worthy Ladies”, “Naturall Philosophers”, “The Reader” 30, “All Professors of Learning and Art”, “the Censorious Reader” 31, “The Most Famous University of Cambridge” 32, and “all the Universities in Europe” 33. These introductory remarks add another subtle layer to her commentary of science and society, changing over the course of her career, changing in response to society. In Cavendish’s first publication, she writes, “Condemne me not as a dishonour of you Sex, for setting forth this Work; for it is harmelesse and free from all dishonesty” 34. Regardless of her sex, Cavendish utilizes the early modern concept of “civility.” Honesty included, as Steven Shapin claims, “the notion of truth telling but was understood far more broadly to include concepts of probity, uprightness, fair-dealing, and respectability.” 35 In this paper’s opening quotation, Cavendish utilizes this concept in an even more explicit way; like an “hounourable Dueller” she searches out “truth.” She wants to participate in the “gentlemanly conversation” which “worked with and enshrined a conception of truth as adequate to the practical

30 Poems, and Fancies.
31 CCXI Sociable Letters
32 Philosophical Letter: or…
33 Grounds
34 Poems, and Fancies
35 Steven Shapin, A Social History of Truth, p. 70
task. And that task was not the attainment of more, more exact, or more powerful truth, but the continuance of the conversation itself.  

Through publishing Cavendish launched her private, closet musings into a reading public. This was not done unproblematically. Later publications included an epistle written by her husband claiming the truthfulness, honesty, and authenticity of her work. He finishes, “[W]hatsoever I have write is absolutly truth, which I here as a man of Honour set my hand to.” In a sense there could be no “regardless of her sex”; William’s claim to honesty trump Cavendish’s and further enmeshes the publications in a world of “civil society.” But Cavendish uses other tools to validate her entrance into a public sphere. Cavendish carves a niche in which she can justify her private musings. “Besides, Poetry, which is built upon Fancy, Women may claime, as a worke belonging most properly to themselves.” She apologizes often, referring to the ancient humoral theory that women’s brains are “mix’d with the coldest and softest Elements”, and then she appeals to truth. In this same preface, she accepts that if properly educated, women might be able to bear the “Fruits of Knowledge”. Finally, she argues, “Women can have no excuse, or complaints of being subjects, as a hinderance from thinking; for Thoughts are free, those can never be inslaved, for we are not hindered from studying, since we are allowed so much idle time that we know not how to pass it away, but may as well read in our closets, as Men in their Colleges.”

36 Ibid, p. 309
37 The Philosophical and Physical Opinions
38 Poems, and Fancies,
39 The Worlds Olio, preface
No doubt, Cavendish was daring—daring enough to publish, publish initially without the approval of her male family members, and comment and critique highly respected natural philosophers. However, she employed societal ideals, often in novel ways, to penetrate into a public from which she had been partially excluded. As her writings and philosophy matured, Cavendish continued to develop new ways in which she might participate in a “gentlemanly conversation.”