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Review of Deborah Boyle on Margaret Cavendish

Abstract

A review of Deborah Boyle's book *The Well-Ordered Universe* (2018), by Dustin D. Stewart.

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Boyle, Deborah. *The Well-Ordered Universe: The Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish*. Oxford University Press, 2018. 273 pp. ISBN 978-0-1902-3480-5.

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A carrot knows it's a carrot, and it knows the rules it has to follow to be good at carrothood. The conical bundle of matter that we call a carrot is, in the words of philosopher Deborah Boyle, aware of itself and its rightful orientation to the world: it recognizes “what the norms are for behaving under various circumstances; it has knowledge of what it is to be a carrot—that is, of the nature of carrots” (240). Although any given carrot has a capacity for choice and some measure of freedom to break the rules, unlike human beings it hardly ever does so. That's why carrot life, as opposed to human life, stays harmonious.

Ignorance is no excuse if every creature—every composite of living matter, each slice of which “has perception and knowledge” (76)—innately knows the right way to act. Nonhuman creatures may on rare occasions be impeded from living normally, and perhaps they grow a bit bored of harmony now and then. Yet human beings have a stronger reason for disobeying the standards set by nature to govern their actions. “Humans,” explains Boyle, “possess a desire for fame, a desire that is simply not present in other creatures, and, because of this, humans are much more likely than other creatures not to behave as they ought” (118). Self-love in other living things fosters unity, but it becomes corrupt in human beings who, anxious about mortality, seek public recognition as “sort of a substitute for continued existence” after death (133). Pursuing it has the effect of spoiling most of their social arrangements in this life, public as well as private. Bundles of wayward human matter ought to know what their rightful place is and how to inhabit it. To offset their ruinous desire for fame, though, they have to cooperate through politics, defined as “a formal system of rules specifying those roles, as well as officials who can enforce the rules” (151). People need “a strong central government—preferably with an absolute sovereign—as well as clearly delineated, hierarchical classes and roles so that the various members of society know how to behave appropriately” (142). Political life at its best, which here means its most hierarchical, can give human existence at least a little of the stability that both matter and nature require.

Boyle is describing the philosophy of Margaret Cavendish (1623–1673). Whether the picture she draws in her major new study is revisionist will depend on which version of her subject her readers have been led to expect. That the prolific seventeenth-century writer and sometime political exile was royalist and rank-obsessed in her thinking will not surprise literary critics who have followed the

historicist work on Cavendish that has proliferated over the past fifteen years or so. Boyle writes as a philosopher primarily addressing others in her discipline, it must be allowed, and so it makes sense that almost nothing of this scholarship appears in her footnotes. And yet her findings mostly affirm earlier literary interpretations that treat Cavendish's royalism as (to borrow a phrase from Julie Crawford) a complex "ideology of hierarchical order." For readers familiar with this framework, the big takeaway from *The Well-Ordered Universe* will be a deepened awareness of just how many of Cavendish's philosophical positions boil down to order, obedience, even normativity. (One potential objection might indeed be that too many of the positions come packaged in such terms. Though Boyle alerts readers that she does not "mean to reduce [Cavendish's] complicated philosophical views to a single factor" (11), the stress on hierarchy does often seem a key to any possible lock.)

A different set of readers, meanwhile, will find more to argue with in Boyle's treatment. A lively strand of interdisciplinary work on Cavendish highlights what is variously called her vitalist or panpsychist materialism, and, in the wake of influential books by John Rogers, Lisa Sarasohn, and (most recently) Jonathan Kramnick, some interpreters have been inclined to see Cavendish as a philosopher of freedom, bravely rejecting human exceptionalism by ascribing movement, knowledge, and experience to everything that exists in the natural world. (In Sarasohn's view, as Boyle quotes her in saying, Cavendish wants to secure "the fundamental liberty of all creatures" [33].) Strongly opposed to such a portrait, Boyle maintains again and again that "when freedom threatens order, Cavendish typically treats order as the higher good" (38). Without quite saying so, the book pushes back against a tendency, perhaps less prevalent among philosophers than certain object-oriented literary and cultural theorists, to equate materialist thought as such with some kind of political radicalism or egalitarianism. It doesn't take much reading of Thomas Hobbes to know that materialism can push in authoritarian directions as well, and Boyle's Cavendish belongs squarely with Hobbes (and with William Davenant, whose poem *Gondibert* (1651) pops up several times) and not with Spinoza. The subject of the present study goes further than Hobbes does, in fact, to naturalize differences of rank and to dress obedience to authority in the language of liberty.

Several negative conclusions follow from the case that Cavendish subordinates freedom to order, with Boyle taking some satisfaction in popping bubbly notions that the early modern author shares progressive social views held by her modern readers. For one thing, Boyle insists, Cavendish was no feminist. Neither, for another, was she any kind of environmentalist.

Extending a discussion of the author's "deeply conservative" perspective on social class (163), the seventh chapter ("Gender Roles and the Roles of Nature") proposes that Cavendish's ideas about gender were more consistent and more conventional than scholars have cared to admit. Unfortunately, this is the most disappointing part of the book, the trouble being that the real-life Cavendish and several of her fictional characters emerge as striking exceptions to the traditional feminine roles and virtues celebrated elsewhere in her writing. Cavendish likewise seems to be talking about other people, not herself, when she discusses the trouble with desiring fame. Boyle never succeeds in explaining away this problem of exceptionality, though she does try, contending that the women who perform masculinity in *The Blazing World* (1666) and *Bell in Campo* (1662) are actually failures who reinforce conservative norms and that Cavendish's own outlandish "cross-dressing," in her writing no less than her wardrobe, was not finally "contrary to feminine virtue" (174). Perhaps more attention to the work on Cavendish's literary-historical context may have been helpful here. Instead of agreeing that Cavendish wasn't perverse or non-normative in her performance of gender, these studies indicate that she saw her perversity as sanctioned by her aristocratic standing, the sort of freedom made possible (though only for a few) within a rigid hierarchy. At any rate, the chapter on gender leans rather heavily on criticism and theory from the 1980s and '90s, a tendency that becomes problematic when Boyle takes up Cavendish's stance on hermaphroditism. Here again the reader is asked to prioritize what the writer sometimes says over what she frequently does.

The chapter also betrays some limitations of Boyle's methodology, to which I am otherwise highly sympathetic. As she explains in a footnote early on, "if inconsistencies in Cavendish's writings can be resolved by appeal to her other texts, then that reading is preferable to leaving the conflict unresolved" (22, note 59). One of the book's foremost achievements lies in its refusal to accept an old picture of Cavendish as a hopelessly erratic thinker. Most of Boyle's footnotes refer readers from one Cavendish text to another (if not two more), and her ambitious strategy, wading through everything her subject wrote in an effort to pin down what she really thought, works best in three early chapters on Cavendish's conception of nature and the evolution of her theory of matter. Running from Chapter 2 through Chapter 4, and dealing especially with *Philosophical and Physical Opinions* (1655, 1663), *Philosophical Letters* (1664), *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* (1666), and *Grounds of Natural Philosophy* (1668), this material constitutes the heart of the book. Particularly illuminating are sections analyzing Cavendish's claims that different sorts of matter are arrayed hierarchically (64-72), that nature is eternal yet somehow distinct from God (78-83), and that causation is reconcilable with free will (97-104). Her theory of occasional causation holds, in brief, that when one ball strikes another, the second ball doesn't receive motion from the first but

moves by its own power. The first ball may entice the second, yes, and the second may opt to imitate the first, but it isn't impelled to do so. This theory has wide-ranging implications, as later chapters show, helping to clarify Cavendish's model of sensory perception and her partly Galenist understanding of health and sickness. According to Cavendish, it is not the case that a disease agent directly causes sickness; rather, its movements are imitated by parts of the host's body, which in the misguided act of imitation make themselves ill.

Yet the writer's fiction, whether presented in verse, prose, or drama, often proves resistant to the philosopher's impressively orderly approach to conflict resolution. Sometimes Boyle decides which voice in a polyvocal literary text best reflects Cavendish's own opinions, diminishing the formal significance of the polyvocality along the way, though sometimes she is forced to concede that strange things can happen in imaginative writing that do not fit very neatly into a coherent philosophical system: "what Cavendish says about the creatures in the imaginary worlds may not be applicable to those in our world" (205). Fiction keeps situating itself at the limits of order, and yet Cavendish rarely shied away from bringing some of the transgressive strangeness out of the worlds she imagined and into the real one in which she lived. Questions linger as to what happens when those of us who read Cavendish's fiction immerse ourselves in her inventions—whether we become participants in or mere witnesses to her aristocratic freedom from constraint, relative and qualified though that freedom must be. It is consoling to think that we too are able to test matter's boundaries and challenge nature's norms in our reading, building fantastical realms that follow different rules. But Boyle's Cavendish might be using that very dream to condition us to remain good carrots, mindful that we ought not to imitate her dazzling mobility but should accept our proper place in the ground, waiting to be consumed.