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Cunning, David, ed. *Margaret Cavendish: Essential Writings*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2019. xxvii+240 pages. ISBN 9780190664053.

David Cunning's *Margaret Cavendish: Essential Writings* brings together textual selections from the published works of the remarkable and challenging – and until recently highly neglected – early-modern philosopher, Margaret Cavendish. This volume joins two other volumes that provide selections from Cavendish's texts: *Paper Bodies: A Margaret Cavendish Reader* (2000), edited by Sylvia Bowerbank and Sara Mendelson, and Susan James's *Margaret Cavendish: Political Writings* (2003), the latter published in the *Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought* series. As the blurb puts it, Cunning's volume stands out in offering the first "full cross section of Cavendish's philosophical views." Published in the *Oxford New Histories of Philosophy* series, whose goal is to assist projects aiming to rewrite the history of philosophy on more inclusive bases, the aim of the volume is to "display the central themes of her [Cavendish's] system and to motivate further understanding and study" (3). Cunning's volume is a tool for those of us who want to familiarise ourselves with a philosophical project that at times appears wonderfully foreign in its insistence that nature itself, as well as all of its parts, is intelligent and perceptive. It is also a project that is notably progressive in its unapologetic promotion of societal and political rights for women and somewhat regrettably conservative in its defence of monarchy (at points, Cavendish seems prepared to defend even tyrannical monarchy) as the optimal form of political government (e.g. 229–30).

The majority of Cavendish's published works are represented in the text: the only exceptions are her first philosophical work, *Philosophical Fancies* (1653), *Orations of Divers Sorts* (1662), the 1664 *Sociable Letters*, and her 1667 biography of her husband, William Cavendish. Although Cunning does not directly explain the decision to leave out these texts, their omission is understandable. Because of the framing of the *Orations* and the *Sociable Letters*, and because they cover a wide range of topics from a variety of perspectives, such that it is not at all easy to determine which of the views presented are Cavendish's own, Cunning briefly notes that he finds these works difficult to place within Cavendish's system (104, n. 7). Although he does not say so explicitly, it would seem that this is the reason behind his decision not to include excerpts from them. Regarding the *Philosophical Fancies*, the situation seems straightforward. The text was reprinted as the first part of the *Philosophical and Physical Opinions* (1655), and Cunning includes a few of the shared chapters in his selection, thus covering some of the main points defended in both texts.

The selected texts are not organised chronologically; the organisation seems to be primarily stylistic. The first part of the volume (chapters one to five)

includes excerpts from two 1655 volumes, *The World's Olio* and *Philosophical and Physical Opinions*, which were published by the same printing house as had published Cavendish's *Poems and Fancies* two years prior and which would publish *Nature's Pictures* the following year. The first part also presents substantive excerpts from her mature philosophical texts, *Philosophical Letters* (1664), *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* (1666), and the *Grounds of Natural Philosophy* (1668). Then, in Chapter 6, Cunning includes some of Cavendish's philosophical poems from *Poems and Fancies* (1653). Chapter 7, entitled "Fiction," has a generous excerpt from the relatively well-known literary text, *The Blazing World*, which appeared in 1668 as an addition to the updated second edition of the *Observations*, along with an excerpt focused on the problem of gender from the play "Bell in Campo" (*Plays*, 1662), and an excerpt from "The She-Anchoret," published in *Nature's Pictures* (1656).

While Cunning's wide selection allows the early-modern student to simultaneously notice the variety of problems Cavendish dealt with and the creative ways in which she explored them in a range of genres, his organization of the selections may have the effect of unintentionally reinforcing some biases about the proper formats for philosophical communication. In particular, I wonder whether maintaining a thick distinction between philosophical writing and literature does justice to Cavendish's work. Her literary works – irrespective of whether they are presented as poems, plays, or as a science fiction narrative in the case of *The Blazing World* – never lose sight of the philosophical problems with which Cavendish is concerned and, indeed, are arguably much more concerned with those underlying philosophical commitments than with, e.g., plotting or painting intricate characters.¹ Cunning's selections effectively make this clear: for example, the focus of the selection from "The She-Anchoret" reproduces philosophical dialogues between the main character and various groups of intellectuals (natural philosophers, moral philosophers, theologians, statesmen). Furthermore, Cavendish, in the prefaces to the *Philosophical Letters* and to the *Observations* seems to make it clear, albeit with a good deal of irony, that her works in natural philosophy take the form they do, and make use of terms of art and method, in order to make her views more acceptable to what she takes to be the conservative and exclusionary philosophical environment surrounding her, and not because there is something inherently philosophical to such formats.

1 For an extended argument of why Cavendish's fictional work should be treated as objects of study for historians of philosophy, see Carlos Santana, "Two Opposite Things Placed Near Each Other, are the Better Discerned': Philosophical Readings of Cavendish's Literary Output," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 8/2 (2015): 297–317.

Alongside the selection of Cavendish's writings, Cunning's volume also includes an introduction, a chronology of the central events of her life and work, and what, arguably, can be considered an indispensable instrument in the toolkit of both instructors and students of early-modern philosophy: a list of topics in the philosophical debates of the period, with references to the pages in which Cavendish explicitly addresses these topics. The list of topics is comprehensive: it touches on many problems that were crucial in much of early-modern debate, such as materialism, the nature of ideas, the nature of matter and the grounding of philosophical principles for natural philosophy, the limits of knowledge, politics and the problem of the best form of government, free will, agency and authority, and so on. The list also includes themes that are central to Cavendish's philosophy but which were present only marginally, if at all, in the debates of her contemporaries, such as the problem of gender, animal cruelty, and the relevance of imagination in "the context of human flourishing and social progress" (4) and in the envisioning of other worlds. Coupled with the impressive number of cross references Cunning includes in footnotes, the list of topics contributes strongly to making this volume an indispensable part of both future undergraduate and graduate education in early-modern philosophy.

While the introduction is not long (about twenty-two pages), it offers a comprehensive overview of Cavendish's fallibilistic epistemology and some of her metaphysical commitments. Cunning discusses in some detail her views regarding materialism and the nature of matter as perceptive and intelligent (7–11); her criticism of the transfer account of motion and her replacement proposal, "occasional causation" (17–8); and her views on perception as patterning. Pride of place in the introduction is given to Cavendish's plenism (the view that there is no vacuum in nature). According to Cunning, the contiguous plenum is one of Cavendish's most fruitful commitments (13): it explains why nature is, for Cavendish, a unified, continuous individual and why there is causal interdependency between the parts of nature, and it informs her social and political views (13–14). Thus, Cunning takes Cavendish's views about morality, society and politics to be consistent with her metaphysical and epistemological views, such that despite Cavendish's intentionally unsystematic writing styles, we are left with a very systematic and coherent worldview.

While Cunning does not defend the latter view extensively, in discussing why alternative imaginative worlds are so important for Cavendish, he suggests that "Cavendish supposes that the actual-world plenum is more supportive and accommodating to some [individuals] than to others" (5). At the same time, the same causal interdependence of parts in a plenum is why we are not condemned to this state of things: one's positioning in the plenum can shift,

and the textual excerpts from “Bell in Campo” and some of the poems Cunning includes envision precisely such shifts. In fact, it seems to me that this observation guides Cunning’s textual selection more than meets the eye. I’d venture to say that Cunning provokes the Cavendish student to explore her views on the plenum and imagination as the interpretative keys to unlocking what Cavendish can teach us about social and political order, about gender dynamics, and about the workings of intellectual life. If there is any warrant behind this speculation, Cunning quietly attempts a shift in current Cavendish scholarship: a shift away from an excessive focus on the impersonal doctrine of complete blending, which Cunning does not explicitly mention and which he barely discusses in a single footnote (118, n. 23), back to Cavendish’s own positioning within her plenum: a socially shy and yet imaginatively bold woman philosopher writing and acting in an environment structured not merely adversarially towards her position, as might be more the case in our current philosophical environments, but structured to ignore her position entirely.

With the shift made, we might increasingly notice the sometimes creative, sometimes conservative ways in which Cavendish advocates for the betterment of the social conditions of women, her constant criticism of man’s arrogance and the image of himself as a tiny deity in nature, and, almost paradoxically, her frequent claim that attaining fame ought to be a central goal in one’s intellectual life – themes that are recurrent throughout the selection Cunning puts together.

Since the publication in 2001 of the first critical edition of a philosophical work by Cavendish, the *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* (put together by Eileen O’Neill, to whom Cunning dedicates the present volume), we have come a long way in turning Cavendish from a largely unknown figure almost never featured in our history of philosophy curricula into a respectable philosopher with a genuine philosophical system deemed worthwhile to teach to students. As Alison Peterman has observed, in a review of Cunning’s monograph on Cavendish, we are in an epoch in which Cavendish “is being canonized with lightning speed by scholars of early modern philosophy.”² It is not straightforwardly clear that Cunning would agree. He reminds his reader that “Cavendish is not a fixture of the philosophical canon, in part because her views and arguments were not picked up and made the subject of commentary in her own generation or in the generations that followed” (3). If this is the model of canonisation Cunning works with, the possibility of Cavendish’s canonisation might seem endangered, since the model seems to presuppose a

2 Alison Peterman, “Canonizing Cavendish,” *HOPOS: The Journal of the International Society for the History of Philosophy of Science* 8 (2018): 191.

rather linear temporality to the canonisation processes. But it is not at all clear that we have good reasons to embrace this image, especially in a climate in which we are becoming increasingly aware that only the very few have been allowed to participate in the canonisation race. It is not at all surprising that Cavendish's views were not picked up in the following generations: as we learn from her own philosophy, the early-modern plenum is structured such that philosophical players who wear the identity markers Cavendish did will be isolated and excluded from the philosophical environment. On the other hand, the current precarious awareness of a need for inclusion in philosophical projects – not only inclusion of more than one race or gender, but also of different means of philosophical expression and of philosophical content – makes Cavendish a likely candidate to be appropriated by future generations of philosophically-oriented historians of philosophy. Students of Cavendish are left with the responsibility of making sure that Cavendish's views survive beyond current attempts to reconfigure the canon on social justice grounds – such attempts at canon reconfiguration are undoubtedly valuable, but they always carry the risk of demeaning Cavendish's work by treating it tokenistically. If the canon of the history of philosophy is composed of philosophical names and themes that we decide to teach because we take these past voices and past projects to still have worthwhile contributions to make to our current image of philosophy, or perhaps to our future images, then Cunning's *Margaret Cavendish: Essential Writings* will play a crucial part in Cavendish's canonisation.

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