

Gender and Natural Philosophy in Margaret Cavendish's *Blazing World*

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ABSTRACT

Margaret Cavendish's *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World* combines scientific philosophy and the fantasy, articulating Cavendish's idea of intellectual equality in the 17th century. Ecofeminism argues that there is a connection between the discrimination towards women and the oppression of nature, both of which stem from a history of patriarchal oppression. From this perspective, this essay attempts to demonstrate how Cavendish shapes the feminine subjectivities in three distinct ways: through her treatment of natural habitation and the construction of authority, the relationship between natural philosophy, God, and gender, and a feminized natural landscape and soul.

INTRODUCTION

Margaret Cavendish's *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World* combines scientific philosophy and the fantasy, articulating Cavendish's idea of intellectual equality in the 17th century. Ecofeminism argues that there is a connection between the discrimination towards women and the oppression of nature, both of which stem from a history of patriarchal oppression. It calls for "new egalitarian gender relations between men and women and between humans and nature" (Warren, Warren and Erkal 232). From this perspective, this essay attempts to demonstrate how Cavendish shapes the feminine subjectivities in three distinct ways: through her treatment of natural habitation and the construction of authority, the relationship between natural philosophy, God, and gender, and a feminized natural landscape and soul.

Natural Habitation and Authority

Cavendish points out how the natural habitation relates to the notion of blood, authority, the human body.

Cavendish enforces the implicit connection between an individual's blood and natural habitation. The first impression of her that we receive is of a beautiful woman gathering shells upon the shore near her house. The opening plot takes the form of the traditional romance. Lee Khanna points out that this opening plot

deconstructs "the image of woman as simple object of male desire" (18). Because the tempest turns everything over as all men are frozen to death, only the Lady remains alive "by the light of her Beauty, the heat of her Youth, and Protection of the Gods" (Cavendish 61). The surrounding environment is near the North-pole. Hampsten points out that in Cavendish's earlier atomistic natural philosophy, men's souls are composed of sharp atoms, which are heat and dryness and men "are associated with the noble element fire. Women are 'compounded' with round atoms, with cold and moisture, and they are characterized by the useful element water" (29). This position recalls the conventional idea that woman's blood is colder than man's. The lady is rescued by taking advantage of female nature in her blood. The plot here "resists the determinism of humoral psychology, which would ally the female with the cold and moist" (Leslie 13). Even though this Empress is closely connected with water, "the heat of her Youth" shows that hot nature can also be equally used by the female, which challenges the idea of blood superiority. I think Cavendish wants to gain authority from conventional male power. The Empress's role changes from a victim to a heroine by equally using male and female nature in their blood.

The blazing world embodies a harmony between natural habitation and authority, as the firm and high natural objects symbolize power. When the

young Empress enters the blazing world, she is politely treated by the anthropomorphized animals. They travel through the river, see the birds' nests-like boats, island, lands, sands, rocks, and talk about the depth of the sea. These animal-like men have a symbiotic relationship with water, which, once again, seems to counter the atomistic natural philosophy mentioned before. Cavendish, it seems, here stresses natural equality. When she sees the Paradise, "the Lady at first could perceive nothing but high Rocks, which seemed to touch the Skies" (67) and "whose lights were placed at the top of every one, because of the heat of sun" (68), the description of the unique apartment of the Emperor of the blazing world is related to the natural elements, such as high sky, sun, heat, firm stones, marble, precious stones, diamonds, gold, etc. Compared with other male creatures here, which lived with earthy places such as water, woods, holes, the Emperor's authority is enforced by celestial bodies in nature, which represent his lasting power.

After constructing a version of male authority, Cavendish expresses her desire for power within a traditional hierarchy through the Empress's marriage with the Emperor. "The emperor rejoicing, made her his Wife, and gave her absolute power to rule and govern all that World as she pleased" (Cavendish 70) and suddenly all the authority is transplanted to the Empress now. Besides, her power is repeated by the same objects as depicted: she wears a cap of pearl with a half-moon of diamonds, her crown with carbuncle in the shape of the sun, and her coat is pearl mixed with diamonds, etc. Then, the Empress holds a meeting in which she asks questions to bird-men, bear-men, fish-men, worm-men, etc. The objects in the questions are related to bodies from celestial bodies including the sun, the moon, the stars, the air, the wind, the clouds, snow, thunder, lightning to earthy objects including vegetables, earth, sea, maggot, oyster, springs, minerals, gold. This up-to-down process is to enforce her power again, as her power, or, more accurately, her husband's power is constructed by this hierarchical system. This way of affirming power repeats in later stories, for example, the two chappels she builds for preach sermons also have the diamonds, pillars, fire and stars.

Cavendish dissolves the boundary between the human body and nature. Body or vehicle is as corrupted as plants or other objectives on earth. Therefore, the essence of the human body is just like any other nature on this planet. When they

enter into the new world, the Lady finds that the dead men's "bodies which were preserved all that while from putrefaction and stench, by the extremity of cold, began to shaw, and corrupt" (Cavendish 62) and then sink. This plot relates the melting bodies to land, which demonstrates a harmonious connection between the natural land and the human body. Besides, near the story's ending, when the Emperor and the Empress discuss the war with the world she comes from, the biggest problem lies in the vehicles of spirits to form an army. As the Empress claims, the dead body "would stink and dissolve; and when they came to fight, they would moulder into dust and ashes, and so leave the purer Immaterial Spirits naked" (Cavendish 144). The body is nothing but an object which is in harmony with natural habitation, and the real authority is the inner spirit.

Nature, God, and Gender

Cavendish's ways of "knowing" challenge established male philosophic conventions. Sarasohn argues that Cavendish "used the skeptical methodology of the new science not only to attack traditional natural philosophy but also a weapon in her battle for the recognition of female intellectual equality" (289). My aim is to juxtapose Cavendish and her contemporaries to see how her idea of nature, God and gender are different or similar to others.

The method of observing the natural world through microscopy's capacity is insufficient, according to Cavendish. In the blazing world, Empress holds the idea that nature should be investigated by natural way, her natural philosophers, which are anthropomorphic animals, should observe their world by their own eyes. When the Empress asks them to observe the stars with their telescope at the end of the pole, she gets angry as her experimental philosopher "instead of discovering the Truth, delude[s] your senses" (Cavendish 79). Therefore, "I command you again to break them; for you may observe the progressive motions of Celestial bodies with your natural eyes better then through Artificial Glasses" (Cavendish 79). Cavendish questions empirical scientists as she suggests that telescopes may deprive the knowledge of truth and that the art of glasses makes the truth irregular, or as Wilkins asserts, that it is her "positive endorsement of natural over artificial enquiry" (250). It cannot discover the interior secrets of nature. Cavendish's criticism of microscopy is

not unique, but also held by Thomas Sydenham, John Locke, and Thomas Hobbes.

Nature should be observed by natural creatures themselves. After abandoning the telescope method, she asks the fish-man about animal creatures in the sea, the fly-man about the form of snow, and the worm-man about whether minerals and vegetables are generated by the same heat within the earth. Specifically, for sea-man, "they were excellent Augurers, which skill they counted more necessary and beneficial then the use of Compasses, Cards, Watches, and the like" (Cavendish 65). Once again, Cavendish reclaims her idea of respecting nature itself instead of artificial things. She challenges male hegemony in approaches to natural philosophy. When exploring the creatures within the earth, Cavendish talks about another disadvantage of microscopes that do little service without light inside the bowls of the earth. The worm man explains, drawing on his personal experience, that there are several sorts of minerals and minute living animals underground.

Her idea of Nature and God is an iconoclast. Cavendish's philosophy attacks traditional patriarchal authority in the Christian tradition. Cavendish's natural philosophy "explore[s] how science [is] not founded on male 'Perogative,' but predicated on co-equal interaction between scientist and nature and masculine and feminine, might help reconstitute society" (Merrens 436). When she closely observes the Emperor's residence in the blazing world, "which in most parts were as pleasant, healthful, rich, and fruitful, as Nature could make them" (Cavendish 67). She praises the creation of Nature rather than God's generous gift. For Cavendish, "There is no beginning in Nature, no not of Particulars, by reason Nature is Eternal and infinite...of their own corporal, figurative self-motions" (Cavendish 90), so nature is an infinite self-moving body, and for the Christian, it is God who creates the world and only God can be eternal and infinite. Her cosmology is regarded as heretical by her contemporaries. Cavendish's connection with the Royal Society begins in May 1667. Her idea stirs up the "fathers of science" (Wilkins 247). As one of the luminaries in the Royal Society, Robert Boyle admits that woman has the capacity for knowledge, but he never pursues it and asserts the masculinity of God and Nature, Boyle is "respect for nature as God's other 'great book'" (Sargent 864). Cavendish says that infinite nature produces infinite effects, and these effects "are more certain than man in their

opinions, for though they cannot discourse like men in their opinions, yet they have sense and reason" (Cavendish 95). For example, herbs and drugs are as wise in their operations as a man in his words and actions or wiser. Cavendish questions the fundamental position of every natural creature and man. Women, who are in the same inferior position as nature in this male-dominated age, can also be wiser than men. Cavendish attempts to use these creatures against the gender bias of her contemporaries. Later, when the Empress asks the Spirits questions which are beyond their knowledge, the Empress explains that "it is the nature of Mankind to be inquisitive" (Cavendish 116). The Spirits answers "desire of knowledge is not blameable" (Cavendish 116). Cavendish speaks of the equal right of acquiring knowledge, and suggests that gender should not be the obstacle to learning. The only thing which can stop humans from acquiring knowledge should be the knowledge itself, which humans' natural reason cannot comprehend.

Feminized Nature and Soul

In the previous chapters, I think Cavendish tends to acquire gender equality by "stealing" power from man and criticizing them, and then, she finally asserts female subjectivities by the feminized nature and soul.

Cavendish dematerializes female power by feminizing nature and spirit, thus shaping her authoritarian figure. Compared to the aforementioned discussion between the anthropomorphic creatures and the Spirits, the voices from the Empress and the Duchess of Newcastle gradually construct a female-dominant world. The first thing they do is to discuss how to write a Poetical or Romancical Cabbala. Except for addressing nature as "herself" (Cavendish 100) and soul as female gender "the Dukes Soul should be present also, to speak for her self" (Cavendish 135), the Platonick lovers: the Empress and the Duchess of Newcastle are prominent in their voices. Compared with famous modern writers such as Galileo, Cassendus, Des Cartes, Helmont, Hobbes, etc, who are "so self-conceited, that they would scorn to be scribes to a Woman" (Cavendish 119). The Duchess of Newcastle is eloquent, witty and ingenious and writes with sense and reason. In their first interaction, "at her first arrival the Empress imbraced and saluted her with a spiritual kiss" (Cavendish 119). Their female friendship gradually replaces the dominant voices in the story. Then, the

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Duchess frames her own world unsuccessful neither according to ancient philosophers like Pythagoras of Samos, Epicurus, and Aristotle, nor the modern opinions such as Des Cartes and Hobbes. From ancient to modern times, these male-dominant ages are denied by the Duchess. She finally makes a satisfying world of her invention which is rational, wisely governed, and also recognized by the Empress. Then the two souls travel back to the Duchess's house in Nottinghamshire. Cavendish creates a textual hermaphrodite that the Duke has three souls in his body, and the conversations between these three souls are pleasant, witty, and gay. The Duke's body and his soul are manipulated by these two Women. For me, these symbolize the process of female's triumph over males.

For claiming the female subjectivity, the feminized soul is enforced the symbolized mother image. For making an agreement between the Duke of Newcastle and Fortune, there is a forum with the speech of Fortune, Rashness, Prudence, etc. As all these souls have been feminized by being addressed as "her", the feminized soul is foregrounded when Honesty puts herself into a position as a mother, as she claims that the Duke "was and is my Foster-son" (Cavendish 138) and "For I Honesty for bred him from his Childhood, and made a perpetual friendship betwixt him and Gratitude, Charity and Generosity; and put him to School to Prudence, who taught him Wisdom, and informed him in the Rules of Temperance, Patience, Justice, and the like..." (Cavendish 138) "Son", "bred", "school", and all these virtues imagine the child's growing experience. Woman, mother, feminine virtue are interconnected, which represents the success of constructing a female voice.

CONCLUSION

Cavendish's anthropomorphism reveals her ideas towards nature and authority. She attacks the tyranny of man over women and nature; she is skeptical about the experimental science, she

not only challenges the phallogocentric privilege of science but provides her method to observe nature. Lastly, her gender-conscious discourses through the feminized souls succeed to shape women's subjectivity. She blurs the distinction between human and inhuman, body and land, the natural world and social world, which provides the possibility of reconstructing a new social order.

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