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»Cavendish, Margaret«

Author

Andrea Strazzoni, Ph.D.

Author's Affiliation

Università degli Studi di Parma, Dipartimento di antichistica, lingue, educazione e filosofia (ALEF)

Title*

Cavendish, Margaret

Alternate names (if there are any)

Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, née Margaret Lucas

Dates and places of birth and death*

(Born: 1623, Colchester, England / Died: 15 December 1673, Welbeck (London), England)

Abstract*

Margaret Cavendish was a philosopher and writer active in mid-seventeenth century England. She is important not just as one of the first women active in philosophy in early modern age, but as the expounder of an original scientific theory based on vitalism and materialism, by which she rejected the mechanical philosophy of Descartes and Hobbes and the experimental philosophy of Boyle and Hooke. Also, while not developing a theory of gender equality, she envisaged a form of emancipation of women based on intellectual activity as a way to social recognition and to the exercise of influence on society and politics.

Biography

Margaret Cavendish was born as Margaret Lucas in Colchester (Essex) in 1623. Her life was impacted by the English civil wars as early as 1642: being a member of a royalist family, her house was seized by parliamentary forces and she looked for the protection of the Queen consort Henrietta Maria, whom she followed in exile in Paris in 1644. The next year, she married the royalist exile William Cavendish, who hosted the “Newcastle Circle”, which was attended, among the others, by René Descartes, Thomas Hobbes and Pierre Gassendi (Kargon 1966, 68-76). After having moved to Antwerp, in 1651 she temporarily came back to England to compound her family's properties, and started there her publishing activity in 1653. Being steadily back to England with her husband in 1660 (following the Restoration), she continued her writing and publishing from their manor in Newcastle, where she died in 1673. In the course of her life, she wrote a twenty-three volumes corpus covering diverse topics, from auto-biography to natural philosophy and politics, and including literary pieces and novels. (Battigelli 1998, 1-5; Schiebinger 1999, 2-4).

An independent figure in the age of mechanical and experimental philosophy

As she did not attend university – as a consequence of the conditions of women at her time and of her temperament (Battigelli 1998, 7) –, and her participation to the Newcastle Circle did not bring her much contact with philosophers (Schiebinger 1999, 2), Margaret Cavendish was a self-educated thinker. Striving to develop her own philosophy, she engaged the main positions in natural-philosophy at stake in mid-seventeenth century. Besides Aristotelianism, she criticized the expounders of ‘mechanical philosophy’ and of ‘experimental philosophy’ proposing her own synthesis (Cavendish 2001, x-xv, 7-10; Lewis 2001). As a main tenet in natural philosophy, she argued for the identity of “Matter, Self-motion and Self-knowledge” (Cavendish 2001, 137; Schiebinger 1999, 4-8). On this basis, she could propose a natural-philosophical account alternative to Hobbes’ and Descartes’ and expounding a form of organicism or vitalism aligned with materialism (Hutton 1997; Cavendish 2001, xiv-xxxiii), capable to explain the stableness of nature itself (Cavendish 1668, 7; Michaelian 2009, 33-36), as well as its freedom (Detlefsen 2007), and requiring no active role of God on matter (Cavendish 1664a, 13-17; James 1999; Broad 2004, 46-49). Against Henry More’s and Jean Baptiste Van Helmont’s vitalism, on the other hand, she argued for the complete distinction of extension and spirit. The latter cannot be truly conceived by mind, which is material in itself (Cavendish 1664a, 526; Cuning 2006). Also, she criticized the expounders of the experimental philosophy, Robert Boyle and Robert Hooke, as for Cavendish philosophy is to be grounded on reason rather than on senses, insofar reason is more reliable than empirical evidences, and can ascertain the regularity of nature (Cavendish 1668, 56; Hutton 1999, 422-423; Schiebinger 1999, 4-8).

Naturalism and feminism

As to her views in moral philosophy and politics, these entail a natural-philosophical normative ideal: the highest ends to be pursued in life and society are stability and peace, just as nature tends to the same aims (Cavendish 1664b, 389-391; Cavendish 2001, 128; Boyle 2006, 253-259). In turn, self-preservation leads to the desire of recognition of the self by the others, as by writing itself (Boyle 2006, 262). Indeed, given the separation of natural and spiritual domains, no concept of afterlife can be used as a foundation of morality (Wright 2014). Also her views on the condition of women bear witness of this normative ideal, as chastity is regarded by Cavendish as the highest virtue for women, since it preserves peace and stability in society. Women, however, may find the way to political power by exercising influence on men and by their intellectual achievements (Cavendish 1664b, 27; Cavendish 1666, I, 93-96; Boyle 2006, 276). In politics, such normative ideal is reflected by her royalism and the rejection of social contracts as the foundation of the absolute sovereignty of the King, since democracy would lead to chaos (Cavendish 1662, 278-283; Boyle 2006, 282-283). Though, as considered as part of nature, for Cavendish all political bodies acts as a republic (Walters 2014, 159).

Cross-References (if there are any; please include a list of other entries in this encyclopedia that may be of further interest to your readers.)

Boyle, Robert

Descartes, René

Materialism

More, Henry

Spirit

Women writing

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