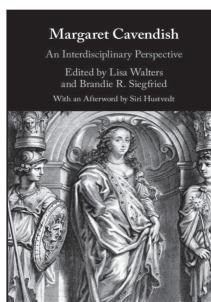


## THE COMPOSITIONIST IMAGINATION

Lisa Walters,  
Brandie R. Siegfried (eds.),  
*Margaret Cavendish.*  
*An Interdisciplinary Perspective,*  
Cambridge,  
Cambridge University Press, 2022



In the nearly one century since Woolf deplored the fate of Margaret Cavendish's writings, left to "moulder in the gloom of public libraries" (Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader. First Series*, New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1925, p. 70), the Duchess of Newcastle's richly textured scientific-literary oeuvre has spawned new life, whether in the form of biographic or fictional engagements with her self-professed singularity of vision (Margaret Cavendish, *New Blazing World and Other Writings*, edited by Kate Lilley, New York, New York University Press, 1992, p. 218), as in the novels of Siri Hustvedt and Danielle Dutton, or through readings grounded in culturally recuperative schemes that reveal, in Latour's terms, the *compositionist* patterns of her thought (Bruno Latour, "An Attempt at a 'Compositionist Manifesto'," *New Literary History*, 2010, 41, pp. 471-490). Driven, in her reflections on moral, political and natural philosophy, by the entwined impulse to separate and unite aspects of experience, both private and public, or to detect order and hierarchy in the material universe while also advocating a continuum of intelligent matter (Deborah Boyle, *The Well-Ordered Universe. The Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 66-67), Cavendish has, in recent decades, spurred compelling critical and theoretical approaches to a work shaped by an imagination that fuses, hybridizes and composts that which reason attempts to divide, segregate and parse out, illustrating, thus, the inextricable practices of *purification* and *hybridization* through which the early modern

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DOI: 10.24193/cechinox.2022.42.33

mind, as Latour reminds us, pulled apart and put together “nature-culture” assemblages (Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1993, pp. 106-107). Published in tandem with her philosophical *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* in 1666, the fictional *Description of a New Blazing World* (Cavendish, *op. cit.*) perhaps most clearly epitomises this *compositionist imagination*, which envisions complexly and coherently layered conduits, rather than firm delineations, between poetic and scientific lines of inquiry. With its conjoined cartographies of interior and exterior space, its generic eclecticism and its incongruous juxtapositions of the natural and the technological, the status of *The Blazing World* has, over the past few decades, shifted, in literary histories from that of a prose narrative revisiting and revising the utopian project of Bacon’s *New Atlantis* (see Paul Salzman, *English Prose Fiction 1558-1700. A Critical History*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1985, p. 292) to that of a text whose sympathetic attention to non-human others foreshadows an ecological sensibility (Sylvia Bowerbank, *Speaking for Nature. Women and Ecologies of Early Modern England*, Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004, p. 53) and whose framebreaking devices, enabling imaginative leaps between the real and the fictional, or between the corporeal and the spiritual, situate it not in the margins of an ostensibly hegemonic mimetic aesthetic of the novel (based, as Ian Watt claimed, on realistic representations of middle-class individualities) (Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel. Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*, Berkeley and Los

Angeles, University of California Press, 1964), but at the forefront of what Peter Boxall has recently defined as the novel’s prosthetic imagination: overlapping blueprints of personal and political anatomies and tapping into the “difficult suturing between consciousness and bodily form,” *The Blazing World* marks thus the “development of a protonovelistic imagination [that] is integral to the ways in which an emerging sovereign subject comes to recognise itself.” (Peter Boxall, *The Prosthetic Imagination. A History of the Novel as Artificial Life*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020, p. 17)

Whereas monographic research or volumes of essays with a more comprehensive analytical span have, of late, increasingly focused on Cavendish’s intellectual output, the protean facets of her thought – in the context of seventeenth-century literary and scientific culture – have now received a polyhedral examination, from angles that bridge normally discrete disciplinary and discursive boundaries, in the collection of studies edited by Lisa Walters and Brandie R. Siegfried, *Margaret Cavendish. An Interdisciplinary Perspective* (2022). Prefaced by a preliminary overview of Cavendish’s scientific undertakings as “an avid natural philosopher” and the experimentalist aesthetic of her poetic, dramatic and narrative works (Lisa Walters and Brandie R. Siegfried (eds.), *Margaret Cavendish. An Interdisciplinary Perspective*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2022, p. 11), the volume shapes a five-tiered, meticulously researched and closely argued survey of the writer’s body of works in different fields of inquiry, such as the history of science, philosophy, literature, and politics, while also outlining, in the

last section, new directions of research in Cavendish studies. For reasons pertaining to space limitations, I shall focus here on the first and third sections, largely devoted to detecting the stereoscopic reflexes of an imagination that forges multiple interconnections between the discursive realms of science and literature.

Refining and expanding, largely through a feminist lens, existing readings of Cavendish's self-managed insertion within the scientific paradigms of her time, the series of essays comprising the first set of studies outline her countless interventions in the burgeoning technoscientific culture of the Restoration period. The section starts off with Carolyn Merchant's assessment of the consistent participation of late seventeenth-century "writing ladies" in moulding the intellectual ethos of a time that also fostered endorsements of gender equality in the treatises of thinkers like François Poulain de la Barre or Mary Astell (Carolyn Merchant, "Margaret Cavendish: Natural Philosopher and Feminist," in Walters and Siegfried, *op. cit.*, pp. 20-23). Merchant's inquiry, sections of which are reproduced from an earlier study that consecrated Cavendish's image as a feminist natural philosopher (*ibid.*, p. 19), deftly delves into the writer's composite imagination, highlighting how the vitalist-materialist viewpoints articulated in her 1668 *Grounds of Natural Philosophy* buttressed the ontological and epistemological dominants of her thought and also provided the somewhat fluid conceptual props of her later body of literary works, including *The Blazing World*. This heteroclitite authorial imagination also holds centre stage in the next chapter, in which, echoing Sylvia Bowerbank and Sara

Mendelson's insightful reference to Cavendish's self-reflexive stance on her writings as "surrogate bodies that will keep her identity and ideas alive" (Sylvia Bowerbank and Sara Mendelson (eds.), *Paper Bodies. A Margaret Cavendish Reader*, Peterborough, Broadview, 2000, p. 11), Lisa T. Sarasohn explores the analogy between textual and sexual "conception, generation, and regeneration" (Lisa T. Sarasohn, "Margaret Cavendish Thinks about Sex," in Walters and Siegfried, *op. cit.*, p. 33) in works like *The Worlds Olio*, *Nature's Pictures* and *Philosophical Fancies*. Invalidating the Laquerian one-sex thesis of an alleged generalized belief, prior to 1800, in the "homologous", albeit "hierarchical continuum" between the men and women, which posited the "natural" social superiority of the former over the latter (*ibid.*, p. 37), Sarasohn cogently argues that Cavendish's reiterated insistence on the "interchangeability of gender" (*ibid.*, pp. 39-40) grounded in her growing suspicion against the potential of visual technologies to decipher the infinitesimal anatomical foundations of socially imposed gender roles, presaged a feminist dismissal of compulsory sexual procreation in favour of intellectual parthenogenesis, for, like the protagonists of fictions such as *The Blazing World*, or like "the natural instruments in her speculative works, Cavendish is both sexes and none. She is a generative and regenerative force needing no other partner in constructing natural philosophy or imaginary worlds" (*ibid.*, p. 50).

Cavendish's "counter-rhetoric of visuality," articulating a critique of Robert Hooke's and Henry Power's (aestheticized) "mechanical philosophy, while simultaneously establishing the authority of her own method of philosophizing," serves as

the focal point of Stephen Clucas's close examination of the woman philosopher's simultaneous fascination with and repudiation of microscopy as a technology of magnification that failed to prosthetically enhance comprehension of the empirical world, by contrast with what Cavendish extolled as the more authentic, as well as more ethical, deployment of the faculty of speculative reason (Stephen Clucas, "Margaret Cavendish and the Rhetoric and Aesthetics of the Microscopic Image in Seventeenth-Century England," in Walters and Siegfried, *op. cit.*, p. 52). As Clucas meticulously demonstrates, microscopic augmentations of outer surfaces were rejected by Cavendish in *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* because they posed the danger of relying on fallible perception and shaping an anamorphic imagination, which would treacherously distort, rather than support, the powers of rational comprehension: anticipating, to some extent, Donna Haraway's suggestion that only a relational gaze could displace the dynamics of domination that structure visual encounters between "the critter and the knower" (Donna Haraway, *Modest\_Witness @Second\_Millennium FemaleMan Meets\_OncoMouse: Feminism and Technoscience*, Routledge, 2018, p. xxxv). Cavendish thus defended, in Clucas's expertly conducted argument, "her philosophy of 'natural reason' [...] against the unqualified veridical claims of the new experimental philosophy" (Clucas, *op. cit.* p. 68). The first section concludes with a provocative thesis, advanced by Sara Mendelson, regarding the poetic and fictional reflexes of Cavendish's speculative insight into the concepts of infinity and limitless recursiveness, which would explain not only the

accretion of intercommunicating universes in her utopia as a "multiverse of infinite nested worlds" (Sara Mendelson, "Margaret Cavendish and the Nature of Infinity," in Walters and Siegfried, *op. cit.*, p. 75), but also the ontological variability-in-unity of the Duchess's self-referential alternatives in *The Blazing World*, as a nod to the boundlessness of the material mind and to Cavendish's prescient notion of distributed cognition (*ibidem*).

The seventeenth-century writer's compositionist imagination, which concurrently endorses notions of sovereignty and nonhierarchy, or of purity and hybridity, is further underscored in the third section of the collection, which maps the innovative ways in which Cavendish experimented with literary forms and genres and charted psychogeographies that permitted her to engage freely, albeit "fancifully," in the philosophical controversies of her age. In Brandie R. Siegfried's intricate reading, Cavendish envisaged imagination as a creative "exercise of thought particularly conducive to propositional reasoning" not only in her natural philosophy but also in volumes of verse, such as her sequentially edited *Poems and Fancies*, where fancy was deemed to function simultaneously towards "clarifying her theories" and "enhancing aesthetic pleasure through increased complexity and wit" (Brandie S. Siegfried, "Of Webs and Wonder. The Atomic Vitalism of Margaret Cavendish's *Poems and Fancies*," in Walters and Siegfried, *op. cit.*, p. 130). Providing a sophisticated analysis of *The Blazing World* as "arguably Europe's 'first' novel" (Mary Baine Campbell, "*The Blazing World*: History, Genre, and the Inner World," in Walters and Siegfried, *op. cit.*, p. 146), Mary Baine Campbell inevitably

touches upon Cavendish's compositionist imagination in her survey of the text's generic polymorphism, inverting, along somewhat similar lines with Peter Boxall, received teleological accounts of the rise of the novel out of the grit of realism, and valorising the projective imagination of the nascent science-fiction narrative as the progenitor of the novel: "The novel did not predate science fiction. It seems truer to say that science fiction was its host, its matrix. In Cavendish's lifetime, natural philosophy was faced with tasks almost as existentially critical as is science in ours. The nature of the real required reimagining against stiff and powerful resistance" (*ibid.*, p. 152). Enabling the self-reflexiveness attendant upon an inward, subjective turn, which is supplemented, however, by mise-en-abyme recursions and inter-subjective reverberations, the generic hybridity of Cavendish's novel is obliquely approached in Lara Dodd's exploration of several dramatic works, fragments of which were originally intended for inclusion in *The Blazing World* and condensed an aesthetic anchored in "openness and provisionality" (Lara Dodds, "Margaret Cavendish's Prudence; or, Preservation and Transformation in *Playes* (1662) and *Plays, Never Before Printed* (1668)," in Walters and Siegfried, *op. cit.*, pp. 170-172). Not least, as argued in the chapter outlining the growth of Cavendish's literary reputation beyond the mildly mouldy bookshelves to which Woolf saw it confined, the Duchess of Newcastle is now a "key figure in women's life writing and in the histories of philosophy and science" (James Fitzmaurice, "Lady Newcastle's "Unsoiled Petticoats" and the Literary Reputation of Margaret Cavendish, 1652-1985," in Walters and Siegfried, *op. cit.*, p.

186), no doubt as a sign that the polyphonic matrix of her wit is at last consonant with the compositionist tunes of our times.