

Contributi/3

A Philosophical and Sociable Critique in the Form of Public Letters

Margaret Cavendish and the Seventeenth-Century Intellectual Debates

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Although an increasing number of women have started to write and publish their works in the seventeenth century, patriarchal norms did not allow them to do so in all genres. It is now widely accepted that women wrote private and public letters to challenge their male contemporaries and to participate in intellectual debates. This paper aims to analyse Margaret Cavendish's *Philosophical Letters* and *Sociable Letters* as works in which the author engages with both the major philosophical issues of the day and the preconceived notion of women's inability to use reason. Through her critiques of Hobbes and Descartes, this essay will show how Cavendish was involved in the philosophical and intellectual debates of the time. Secondly, the essay will highlight her condemnation of the female condition, since according to her natural philosophy it is nature itself that allows her to write and confront her male contemporaries.

Introduction

In her *Philosophical and Physical Opinions*, a collection of philosophical reflections published in 1655, Margaret Cavendish lamented men's judgment of women, as people without rational souls who could not be educated. In a very sharp statement, Cavendish writes that women have become «like worms that live only in the dull earth of ignorance», that they are «kept like birds in cages, to hop up and down in our houses, and not permitted to fly abroad to see the several changes of fortune and the several humours, ordained and created by nature»¹. While men keep women at home to deny them even the slightest knowledge of the world on the grounds that they are inferior beings, Cavendish

¹ M. Cavendish, *The Philosophical and Physical Opinions, written by Her Excellency the Lady Marchionesse of Newcastle*, London 1655, *To the Two Universities*.

complicates this belief by highlighting the historical construction of women's inferiority. Men use the pretext of the allegedly natural – and therefore ahistorical – inferiority to keep themselves in power, even to the point of excluding women from «all power and authority»². Cavendish, on the other hand, shows that there is no natural principle that makes women inferior to men, but rather a principle of efficacy that hierarchises all creatures in order to preserve the natural order.

In this essay, I will show the connection of Cavendish's natural and political philosophy by analysing her epistolary writings, namely the *Philosophical Letters* and the *Sociable Letters*, both published in 1664, after the monarchical Restoration in England and Cavendish's return from exile in Europe. My first aim is to place the publication of Cavendish's letters in their historical context. In the wake of the English Civil War and the emergence of a wider public debate, women began to write and publish in increasing numbers, either for religious, political, or recreational reasons. The most widespread form of writing, however, continued to be the epistle, which by its very nature remained private, or at most semi-public. In this scenario, Cavendish is an exception, for she wrote her letters to publish them, thereby entering the philosophical and political debates of the century. I will then attempt to show how Cavendish asserts her authorship as a woman through the concept of nature that she develops in the *Philosophical Letters*. Starting from her critique of Descartes and Hobbes, I will argue how Cavendish's philosophy of nature is historically and socially rooted. Indeed, she tackles both Cartesian rationalism and Hobbesian materialism to inscribe sexual difference into the diversity of nature. Eventually, I will show how Cavendish's judgement of women in *Sociable Letters* is inconsistent because inconstant is their nature. In fact, according to Cavendish, all of nature is a moving matter that manifests itself in variety. This means that while there is a natural order in the ontology of men, women and animals, it is neither static nor stable. Therefore, once married, women are naturally subordinate to their husbands, and yet they can either choose not to marry or deceive their husbands to their advantage³, even going so far as to challenge the hierarchical foundations of the political order, as petitioners and preachers did during the Civil War. Against the threat of the monarchy's opponents, however, the impertinence of Cavendish's pen served to protect the royal order that allowed her to write. In short, as a woman, Cavendish was different from the women who opposed the monarchical order, and yet she participated with them in that historical ferment in which the definition of women's nature began to show its sociable character, insofar as it was crucial to the maintenance of the political order⁴.

² *Ibid.*

³ Although the author repeatedly states that politics is not a woman's business, in her romance *The Blazing World* and in some plays, for example in *Bell in Campo*, Cavendish stages a completely inverted reality in which women can rule and even wage war.

⁴ On 'woman' as a political concept, see P. Rudan, *Woman: History and Critique of a Polemical Concept*, Leiden 2023.

1. A Genre Suitable for Women

The English Civil War was an occasion for women and men, individually and collectively, to do something so unprecedented as the questioning of the ecclesiastical and political hierarchies. The direct relationship of men and women with God became a powerful solvent of the established order, insofar as many women evaded from the private sphere to interpret and disseminate the Holy Scriptures⁵. Since the king was the ultimate spiritual and temporal authority, the issues of power and religious freedom were closely related. The problem peaked with the beheading of Charles I. In this context, pamphlets and petitions were public instruments that both men and women employed to challenge the established power and, in opposition to political authority, help to create a public domain distinct from the state⁶. The disorder of the war allowed women to be part of the revolutionary process, both as agents and opponents of it. It was during the Civil War era that women first emerged as public subjects who questioned or affirmed the status quo.

Many royalist women actively participated in the war, by taking up arms to defend their property and land against the threat of parliamentarians. Other women acted as guards in besieged cities, or as brokers of diplomatic agreements or spies for one or the other faction⁷. Moreover, after the Protestant Reformation, women began to take on roles as preachers within religious sects. One of the most surprising phenomena, however, is that of petitioning. Women began to write petitions in 1641 when a group of tradesmen's wives protested against the adverse consequences of the Civil War. Significantly, these women mentioned the «insolencies» and «rapes» exercised upon the female sex in Ireland as a threat to all women. The «centlewomen» also drew a link between religion and war by recognising that the Catholic episcopate was to blame for the war. Additionally, they justified their public intervention as women by stating that «women are sharers in the Common calamities that accompany both Church and Commonwealth when oppression is exercised over the Church or Kingdome wherein they live»⁸. These women claimed their authority to write because

⁵ R. Trubowitz, *Female Preachers and Male Wives: Gender and Authority in Civil War England*, «Prose Studies», 14, 1991, pp. 112-133.

⁶ E. Cappuccilli, *Remarkable Women in a Remarkable Age. Sulla genesi della sfera pubblica inglese, 1642-1752*, «Scienza & Politica. Per una storia delle dottrine», 27, 2015, pp. 105-134; P. Crawford, *The Challenges to Patriarchalism: How did the Revolution affect women?*, in J. Morrill (ed.), *Regicide to Restoration: The Consequences of the English Revolution*, London 1992, pp. 57-76; K. Dunn, *Pretexts of authority: the rhetoric of authorship in the Renaissance preface*, Stanford 1994; D. Norbrook, *Women, the Republic of Letters, and the Public Sphere in the Mid-Seventeenth Century*, «Criticism», 46, 2004, pp. 223-240.

⁷ A. Hughes, *Gender and the English revolution*, Abingdon 2012, pp. 36-37.

⁸ *A true copy of the petition of the centlewomen, [sic] and tradesmens-wives in and about the city of London. Delivered, to the Honourable, the knights, citizens, and burgesses, of the House of Commons in Parliament, the 4th. of February, 1641. Together, with the reasons why their sex ought thus to petition, as well as the men; and the manner how both their petition and reasons was delivered. Likewise the answer which the honourable assembly sent to them by Mr. Pym, as they stood at the House-doore. Whereunto is added the prophesie of old Sybilla*, London 1642, p. 2. In a further

they participated in both church and state, and it was from their experience as women – mothers, daughters, and wives – that they sought to assert their political demands.

The examples above show how women began to make space for themselves in the public sphere in seventeenth-century England. By leading churches, ruling the family while their husbands were at war, and even petitioning, these women demonstrated that the practical act of writing could break down the assumption that women could not handle public affairs because they were naturally inferior to men. It is worth noting that all these women sought to give public relevance to their domestic and personal lives as women, refusing to be relegated to the private space⁹. One of the clearest examples of this change is that from 1649 onward¹⁰, more and more women started writing and publishing on religious, educational, and political topics.

Nevertheless, the fact that women had no political rights limited the areas of writing in which they could publish freely. A striking example is Dorothy Osborne's dismissive evaluation of Margaret Cavendish's poems: «The poor woman is a little distracted, she could never be so ridiculous else as to venture at writing books, and in verse too»¹¹. Contained in one of Osborne's many letters to William Temple, this scornful judgment reflected the common sense that it was acceptable for a woman to write letters but not books. During the seventeenth century, the letter became a useful means of communication to address the family, deal with commercial and political issues, and even discuss philosophical ideas. Due to their intrinsic private trait, letters, more than other genres, have allowed women to become correspondents of male writers and therefore to intervene in the public debates of the century. However, in most cases, these letters were private, and mainly familiar letters¹². Very few of the letters were intended to be published, as many remained in manuscript form, and others circulated only

passage, petitioners write: «It may bee thought strange, and unbecoming our sex to shew our selves by way of Petition to this Honourable Assembly» (ivi, p. 4).

⁹ J. Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (1962), Oxford 1992. For a critical reading, see C. Condren, *Public, Private and the Idea of the 'Public Sphere' in Early-modern England*, «Intellectual History Review», 19, 2009, pp. 15-28. According to Condren, feminist literature has failed in its critique of Habermas's conception of public sphere because it is not historically grounded: in the seventeenth century, the domestic was public and therefore did not overlap with the private.

¹⁰ J. Broad and K. Green, *A History of Women's Political Thought in Europe, 1400-1700*, Cambridge 2009, p. 144. Broad and Green acknowledge that during the English Civil War decade women published 112 political pamphlets, whereas in the previous forty years merely 42 pamphlets were written by women.

¹¹ D. Osborne, *The Letters of Dorothy Osborne to William Temple*, Oxford 1928, p. 37. See L. Dodds, *Reading and Writing in Sociable Letters; Or, How Margaret Cavendish Read Her Plutarch*, «English Literary Renaissance», 41, 2011, pp. 189-218.

¹² C. Bowden, *Women as intermediaries: an example of the use of literacy in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries*, «History of Education», 22, 1993, pp. 215-223. Women's involvement in correspondence existed long before the 17th century, and not only in England. See J. Daybell, *Medieval Women's Letters, 1350-1500*, in L. H. McAvoy, D. Watt (eds.), *The History of British Women's Writing, 700-1500*, London 2012, pp. 178-186.

with the author's permission¹³. Whether public or not, the political implications of these writings have not yet been fully explored¹⁴. Similarly, the ways in which women have challenged male authority through private or public letters to their contemporaries remain to be enquired.

Seventeenth-century British historian and royalist James Howell suggested that an oration should be dressed «like a man», while a letter «should be attir[e]d like a woman»¹⁵. He then proceeds to explain this simile by pointing out that an oration is allowed «large side robes, as long periods, parenthesis, similes, examples, and other parts of rhetorical flourishes», whereas a letter should be «shortcoated, and closely couchd»¹⁶. Therefore, Howell claims that the hungerlin – a short, furred robe – is more suitable for a letter than a male gown. Social costumes required women to wear tight and stiffened dresses, while men could enjoy comfortable, loose-fitting clothes¹⁷. On an ideological level, these restrictive dresses symbolised the social constraints on women's bodies and behaviour, as they were supposed to be chaste and pure to secure the family, and therefore property. As women began writing and asserting their claim to equality with men, they rejected these imposed rules. In this sense, although Howell did not directly blame women for the decline of English masculinity and thus to the fall of the English monarchy, he promotes the masculinisation of the literary genre – the epistle – most suited to women, to re-establish the old and legitimised monarchical order¹⁸.

However, a royalist like Margaret Cavendish¹⁹ did not act against the monarchical order when she claimed to write as a woman or addressed a fictional female friend in her two volumes of published letters. Both *Philosophical Letters* and *Sociable Letters* are a useful and endless source for seventeenth-century philosophical ideas and habits. Since they were meant to be published, the two volumes do not collect private letters, although the author repeatedly attempts

¹³ C. Pal, *Republic of Women: Rethinking the Republic of Letters in the Seventeenth Century*, Cambridge 2012, pp. 17-19. Many letters show that women were involved in family affairs. Through correspondence, they not only governed the household but also operated outside it. Moreover, family letters attest to the fact that women had an insight into what was happening in England during the war, making their own judgments and sometimes criticising the dictates of the men and the Commonwealth. Being head of the family gave them the authority to oppose the decisions of their husbands or fathers, even if they did not contest the patriarchal family.

¹⁴ D. Clarke, *The Politics of Early Modern Women's Writing*, London 2001.

¹⁵ J. Howell, *Epistolæ Ho-elianæ familiar letters domestic and forren divided into sundry sections, partly historicall, politicall, philosophicall, upon emergent occasions*, London 1650, p. 1.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ See C. Sponsler, *Narrating the Social Order: Medieval Clothing Laws*, «Clio», 21, 1992, pp. 265-283.

¹⁸ D. Barnes, *Epistolary Community in Print, 1580-1664*, Farham 2013, pp. 147-149.

¹⁹ The question of royalism in Cavendish has been debated in the literature. For another interpretation of her political thought, see M. Suzuki, *The Ambiguous Royalism of Margaret Cavendish*, in Id., *Subordinate Subjects: Gender, the Political Nation, and Literary Form in England, 1588-1688*, London-New York 2003, pp. 182-202; L. Walters, *Margaret Cavendish: Gender, Science and Politics*, Cambridge 2014.

to reproduce the intimacy of a real exchange²⁰, even explicitly mentioning the names of other authors and personalities of the time. As an aristocratic woman, the author met many philosophers of the seventeenth century who debated in the Newcastle Circle, founded by her husband William and his brother, Charles Cavendish. In this context, she was introduced to the philosophical views in vogue at the time. The Welbeck's salons, later reunited in Paris and Antwerp during her exile, became a crossroad for European intellectuals, writers, and patrons with whom the two brothers engaged in dense exchanges of correspondence.

However, the author chose to write letters not because they were the most appropriate genre for her sex but for strategic reasons. Apart from her explanation that letters were shorter and easier to write than a treatise²¹, Cavendish relied on the epistolary genre to avoid any form of male censorship of her philosophical views. At the very beginning of her *Philosophical Letters*, she assumes that if there are errors in her writings, they are due to the nature of her sex²². Nevertheless, what might appear to be a mere dismissive judgment about the nature of women turns out to be an attempt to prevent censorship. Women's thoughts and reflections are then highlighted in their importance, and it is precisely through the fictional correspondence between two ladies that Cavendish sought to «express the moods of mankind and the actions of man's life»²³.

2. A Sociable Philosophy

Despite these restrictions, Cavendish claims to be forced to publish her opinions, since her philosophy widely differs from the authors she appeals to²⁴. After the Restoration, intellectuals acted under pressure not to threaten the political order, because as they had learnt from the war, knowledge and forms of knowledge are rooted in the political community in which they are conceived and implemented²⁵. Many opinions could lead to many disputes, and these could break the peace of the state. Cavendish herself believes that wherever there is knowledge there are quarrels, and since everyone believes that they are more

²⁰ L. Dodds, *Reading and Writing in Sociable Letters*, pp. 189-218.

²¹ M. Cavendish, *Philosophical Letters: or, modest Reflections upon some Opinions in Natural Philosophy maintained by several Famous and Learned Authors of this Age, Expressed by way of Letters: By the Thrice Noble, Illustrious, and Excellent Princess, The Lady Marchioness of Newcastle*, London 1664; M. Cavendish, *Sociable letters* (1664), ed. by J. Fitzmaurice, New York 2012.

²² M. Cavendish, *Philosophical Letters*, p. 1: «if I should express more vanity than wit, more ignorance than knowledge, more folly than discretion, it being according to the nature of our sex, I hoped that my masculine readers would civilly excuse me, and my female readers could not justly condemn me».

²³ On friendship in Cavendish see A. Verini, *Utopian Friendships in Mary Wroth and Margaret Cavendish*, «SEL Studies in English Literature 1500-1900», 60, 2020, pp. 441-461.

²⁴ On the novelty of Margaret Cavendish's philosophy see S. James, *The Philosophical Innovations of Margaret Cavendish*, «British Journal for the History of Philosophy», 7, 1999, pp. 219-244.

²⁵ D. Barnes, *Familiar Epistolary Philosophy: Margaret Cavendish's Philosophical Letters* (1664), «Parergon», 26, 2009, pp. 39-64, here 52-53.

right than everyone else, the result is the formation of factions and the outbreak of Civil War²⁶. However, as she explains, her opinions cannot be accused of being an engine of pedantical quarrels, as she does not write to contradict these authors in anything «but what concerns and is opposite»²⁷ to her opinions. Moreover, as philosophers used to «contradict each other», Cavendish claimed to be acting as such by doing «what they have done themselves»²⁸. Cavendish tried to circumvent the censors and win her husband's support by appealing to the same principles as her male contemporaries, who benefited from the slow corrosion of the patronage system, which allowed more and more men to write and publish without the protection of a patron²⁹. If philosophical debates could be receptacles for civil wars, a woman who refused to play the role imposed on her by men could be even more dangerous to the established order.

On the contrary, Cavendish argues that it is not women's retreat from traditional habits that causes civil disorder, but rather men's misguided interpretations of nature that undermine the government. As a matter of fact, Cavendish repeatedly emphasises that she understands the order of nature as accommodating all sorts of varied phenomena rather than opposing disorder as such. Therefore, her philosophy is consistent with the order of nature and is incapable of producing disorder. It is not by chance that one of the major differences between Cavendish and her contemporaries is the concept of nature. As she states in letter II of *Philosophical Letters*, the ground of her philosophy is infinite matter, namely the infinite nature, while other philosophers create a confusion that «comes from their too nice abstractions, and from the separation of figure and motion from matter»³⁰. It is not difficult to see that Cavendish is referring here both to Descartes and to Hobbes, to whom she dedicates the first section of her letters.

In particular, Cavendish rejects the idea that motion is an essential mode of a thing. In letter xxx, which opens the series of letters in which the author discusses Cartesian philosophy³¹, Cavendish asks: «How can I conceive that which is not, nor cannot be in nature, that is, to conceive motion without

²⁶ M. Cavendish, *Margaret Cavendish: Political Writings*, ed. by S. James, Cambridge 2003, p. 88.

²⁷ M. Cavendish, *Philosophical Letters*, p. 3: «that controversies and disputations make enemies of friends».

²⁸ D. Barnes, *Familiar Epistolary Philosophy*, p. 51.

²⁹ The overcoming of the patronage system was due not only to the emergence of societies that came together with the aim of knowing the truth without undermining the political order but also thanks to a dense exchange of correspondence that contributed to the establishment of learned circles where concepts, ideas, and values could be discussed without being tied to one's sovereign. See M. Biagioli, *Etiquette, Interdependence, and Sociability in Seventeenth-Century Science*, «Critical Inquiry», 22, 1996, pp. 193-238.

³⁰ M. Cavendish, *Philosophical Letters*, pp. 12-13.

³¹ On Cavendish and Descartes, see L. E. Semler, *Margaret Cavendish's Early Engagement with Descartes and Hobbes: Philosophical Revisitation and Poetic Selection*, «Intellectual History Review», 22, 2012, pp. 327-353; E. Webster, *Margaret Cavendish's Socio-Political Interventions into Descartes' Philosophy*, in «English Studies», 92, 2011, pp. 711-728.

body?»³². Cavendish refers to Article xxv of the second part of the *Principiorum Philosophiae*, in which Descartes argues that motion is only a mode of the thing, that operates in the moved object and not in the motor³³. For Cavendish, nature – which is a woman – works through her motion³⁴, that is, nature is made up of material parts in motion, whose movement creates its own order. Therefore, it is not possible to think that movement is imprinted on matter from the outside. On the contrary, nature and motion are one and the same thing. This does not prevent her from acknowledging that matter is composed of both animate and inanimate matter, the latter having no movement of its own but being moved. Still, animate and inanimate matter are so closely interrelated that they are constantly moving within the body. A mind-body dualism³⁵, as Descartes would have it, therefore has no place in her theory of matter. She writes:

though the mind moves only in its own parts, and not upon or with the parts of inanimate matter, yet it cannot be separated from these parts of matter and subsist by itself, as being a part of one and the same matter the inanimate is of (for there is but one only matter, and one kind of matter, although of several degrees), only it is the self-moving part; but yet this cannot empower it to quit the same natural body whose part it is³⁶.

This is also why Cavendish cannot subscribe to the idea that the location of the soul is in the “glandula”. She mocks Descartes by saying that the mind or soul «sit [there] like a spider in a cobweb»³⁷, and affirms that matter is at one with the rational and the sensitive, so «we cannot assign a certain seat or place to the rational, another to the sensitive. [...] And this is the reason that sense and knowledge cannot be bound only to the head or brain»³⁸. Nevertheless, thoughts and perceptions act according to their nature in an orderly manner.

Although Descartes did not draw political consequences from his natural philosophy, his arguments have had political outcomes to this day³⁹. Dualism

³² M. Cavendish, *Philosophical Letters*, p. 97.

³³ Descartes, *Principia Philosophiae*, II. 54, AT VIII-1.

³⁴ M. Cavendish, *Philosophical Letters, A Preface to the Reader*: «That nature is infinite, and the eternal servant of God: next, that she is corporeal, and partly self-moving, dividable and composable; that all and every particular creature, as also all perception and variety in nature, is made by corporeal self-motion, which I name sensitive and rational matter, which is life and knowledg, sense and reason».

³⁵ Although the issue of dualism is much debated in the literature, for a reconstruction of the problem in the modern age see S. Plastina and E. M. De Tommaso, *Corpo Mente: il dualismo e le filosofe di età moderna*, Milano 2022.

³⁶ M. Cavendish, *Philosophical Letters*, p. 111.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ivi*, p. 112.

³⁹ See S. Bordo (ed.), *Feminist Interpretations of René Descartes*, University Park, PA 1999; M.-F. Pellegrin, *Cartesianism and Feminism*, in S. Nadler et al. (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Descartes and Cartesianism*, Oxford 2019, p. 565-579. On Descartes and politics see A. Negri, *Political Descartes, Reason, Ideology and the Bourgeois Project*, ed. by M. Mandarini and A. Toscano, London 2007; D. Antoine-Mahut, *Descartes, Politics, and “True Human Beings”*, in S. Nadler et al. (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Descartes and Cartesianism*, Oxford 2019, pp.

of mind and body – whether analytical or actual – has been used to assert the inferiority of women to men⁴⁰. But for Cavendish, since moving matter and moved matter are one and the same, the dualism between the mind – which moves – and the body – which is moved – is inconceivable. It is not only the body that is material, but also the mind and the reason. Therefore, there is no such given hierarchy between those who use reason more and those who use it less, nor between those who have reason and those who do not, such as animals. While her contemporaries thought that these hierarchies were based on a given and static inferiority of some parts of nature over others, Cavendish believed that hierarchies were possible because the ordering principle of nature has a rationality in itself. Cavendish's critique shows that dualism does not reckon with the differences between male and female bodies. It also proves that these differences affect women's position in public debates, as they are denied the use of reason. Since the mind and the body are united, the subordination of women to men cannot be justified on the basis of an alleged weakness of one or the other. The mind and the body, in fact, are part of the eternal movement of nature, which is in itself rational. In this sense, she denies that the physical difference of the body gives rise to a rational difference of the mind.

In the same section of *Philosophical Letters* Cavendish discusses the work «of that famous philosopher *Hobbes*, called *Leviathan*»⁴¹, in which the author poses the political problem of theorising the end of the Civil War. At the beginning of *Leviathan*, Hobbes deals with the concepts of perception and movement in order to explain what human nature is and how it works. He needs it to build a political machine – the State – capable of curbing the desiring nature of human beings⁴². It is precisely on the epistemological level that Cavendish's criticism of Hobbes' political science is so radical. Particularly, Hobbes affirms that «sense, in all case, is nothing else but original fancy, caused, as I have said, by the pressure, which is the motion of external things upon our eyes, ears and other such organs»⁴³. Cavendish opposes this assumption,

for perception is but the effect of the sensitive and rational motions, and not the motions of the perception; neither doth the pressure of parts upon parts make[s]

240-254. On Cartesian dualism see C. Chamberlain, *What Am I? Descartes's Various Ways of Considering the Self*, «Journal of Modern Philosophy», 2, 2020, pp. 1-30.

⁴⁰ For a recount of the debate, see J. Broad, *Women Philosophers of the Seventeenth Century*, Cambridge 2003, pp. 1-12.

⁴¹ On Hobbes and Cavendish see L. T. Sarasohn, *Leviathan and the Lady: Cavendish's Critique of Hobbes in the Philosophical Letters*, in L. Cottagnies and N. Weitz (eds.), *Authorial Conquests: Essays on Genre in the Writings of Margaret Cavendish*, Vancouver 2003, pp. 40-58. See also P. Rudan, *Una distanza civile e politica. Master Hobbes e Margaret Cavendish*, in M. L. Lanzillo, R. Laudani (eds.), *Figure del potere. Saggi in onore di Carlo Galli*, Bologna 2020, pp. 163-179.

⁴² On Hobbesian philosophy and the problem of order see M. Farnesi Camellone, *Indocili soggetti*, Macerata 2013, pp. 17-41; C. Galli, *Contingenza e necessità nella ragione politica moderna*, Roma-Bari 2009, pp. 38-71. See also Q. Skinner, *Visions of politics. Volume 3, Hobbes and civil science*, Cambridge 2002, pp. 177-208.

⁴³ T. Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651), London 2016, p. 4.

perception; for although matter by the power of self-motion is as much composable as divideable, and parts do joyn to parts, yet that doth not make perception⁴⁴.

All the perceptions are in the matter itself and that there is no external object that presses some sensitive feelings upon the body. This view also contains a critique of Hobbes' conception of movement. The thesis of self-moving nature brings to the conclusion that everything that exists is in motion since all things are material. Consequently, Hobbes's sentence quoted by the author that «when a thing lies still, unless somewhat else stir it, it will lie still forever» is for Cavendish false. Indeed,

though nature is all corporeal, and her actions are corporeal motions, yet that does not prove that the motion of particular creatures or parts is caused by the joining, touching, or pressing of parts upon parts; for it is not the several parts that make motion, but motion makes them; and yet motion is not the cause of matter, but matter is the cause of motion, for matter might subsist without motion, but not motion without matter, only there could be no perception without motion, nor no variety, if matter were not self-moving; but matter, if it were all inanimate and void of motion, would lie as a dull, dead, and senseless heap⁴⁵.

Cavendish disagrees with Hobbes on this point, for movement and matter, but also perceptions and senses, are inherent to nature. There is no external agent that produces something ex nihilo, but it is nature itself that through its movement produces the world and its varieties. Moreover, nature is in order, which means that all the humours, emotions, and passions of human beings regulate each other. This does not mean that there is no conflict since natural movement creates an order in which all opposites coexist in the form of a potential or actual conflict.

The philosophical opinions of Cavendish lead to two further political statements. First, since nature is ordered, the art of governing consists of dealing with the movement of nature to preserve that order. Second, since the movement of nature is restless, changes occur within its movement. This means that sexual difference is inscribed in the variety of nature, while its movement allows change for women. In other words, Cavendish and Hobbes agree that there is no natural justification for the exclusion of women from political government⁴⁶. Nevertheless, for Cavendish, the exclusion of women from state affairs is a matter that requires attention and cannot merely be relegated to the private sphere. Cavendish draws upon the conceptualisations of nature put forth by Descartes and Hobbes to illustrate that it is not nature that establishes a hierarchy between men and women. Instead, she posits that the inherent movement of nature opens unprecedented spaces of possibility for a woman in seventeenth-century

⁴⁴ M. Cavendish, *Philosophical Letters*, p. 18.

⁴⁵ Ivi, p. 22.

⁴⁶ See C. Pateman, *The sexual contract*, Cambridge 1988; Ead., 'God Hath Ordained to Man a Helper': Hobbes, *Patriarchy and Conjugal Right*, «British Journal of Political Science», 19, 1989, pp. 445-463.

Europe. For the author, nature itself is a woman, to whom she constantly refers with feminine pronouns. Against a philosophical and theological tradition that deliberately identified women with nature⁴⁷, whether good or evil, Cavendish positively rearticulated this association. Nature is nothing but a great substance in motion, which reveals itself in variety. This does not mean that there is no natural hierarchy, but that it is neither static nor fixed in the ontology of men, women, and animals. Because the power to do something is acquired through nature, natural movement allows her to confront and face man in the public space of writing, and so there is no usurpation.

3. An Inconstant Nature

Cavendish recurs to nature as a justification of her own opinions even when she states that a woman cannot speak about politics. This is exemplified by her opinion on the relationship between nature and politics presented in letter XIII of *Philosophical Letters*. Responding to her fictitious friend's question about whether it is possible to consider nature as the art of God, man as the art of nature, and political government as the art of man, Cavendish agrees, provided one acknowledges that «nature doth not rule God, nor man nature, nor politick government man». If at first glance, Cavendish shares with Hobbes the idea of political government as an artifice⁴⁸, then she asserts that it is not possible, however, for men to be ruled by government as «art cannot make unity» amongst men, «if [they] do not naturally agree». Finally, Cavendish states that «it is not the artificial form that governs men in a politick government, but a natural power, for though natural motion can make artificial things, yet artificial things cannot make natural power»⁴⁹. Therefore, political power is a natural power insofar as it consists in operating upon what exists, i.e., upon the infinite variety of nature's manifestations, in order to direct them.

As it has been made evident above, the natural world is characterised by a high degree of variety, and this is reflected in the variety of women. In fact, while Cavendish repeatedly asserts that women cannot talk about politics, she intervenes in debates about political government. On the one hand, it is precisely the understanding of natural power that allows her to meddle in political affairs. On the other hand, she has to discredit those women who have challenged the monarchical order by saying that they are not in harmony with the peculiar order of nature. In any case, as long as women are part of nature and its movement, their nature is a sociable issue, and thus debatable between individuals in the public sphere. The sociable nature of women and their involvement in

⁴⁷ On this topic, see M. E. Wiesner-Hanks, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge 2019, pp. 22-60.

⁴⁸ T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 1: «Nature (the Art whereby God hath made and governes the World) is by the Art of man as in many other things, so in this also imitated».

⁴⁹ M. Cavendish, *Philosophical Letters*, pp. 47-48.

political affairs is what Cavendish analyses in her *Sociable Letters*⁵⁰. Whereas in *Philosophical Letters* the authors set out her philosophical principles, in this book Cavendish shows how nature can be interpreted by men and women. In this sense, topics relating to seventeenth-century society are called sociable for they are generated by a polite exchange between two friends, bringing to the fore the tension between nature and custom that Cavendish explores in other works⁵¹.

In letter xvi of *Sociable Letters* Cavendish states that «for the matter of governments, we women understand them not, yet if we did, we are excluded from intermeddling therewith, and almost from being subject thereto»⁵². Overturning the petitioners' claim to be heard as part of the Commonwealth, for Cavendish women are not bounded to the State. «We are free» says the author, since «we be not citizens in the Commonwealth, I know no reason we should be subjects to the Commonwealth». Immediately afterward, Cavendish claimed that women are only subjects to their husbands. Apparently, Cavendish succumbs to rhetoric whereby women «are understood either married or to be married and their desires or subject to their husband»⁵³. But then, referring to nature, Cavendish says the opposite is true. Nature has been so generous with women that they can charm and persuade men to their will, and therefore rule them even when it seems that men are the ones who rule. In other words, nature gives them political power to the extent that it allows women – wives, daughters, sisters, and maids – to rule their men. Moreover, the very fact that both she and her correspondent are women allows them to remain friends and engage in this conversation, «for though there hath been a Civil War in the kingdom and a general war amongst the men, yet there hath been none amongst the women»⁵⁴. In other words, Cavendish distinguishes the nature of women from their historically entrenched political subjugation while simultaneously debating the possibilities of their freedom.

⁵⁰ On *Sociable Letters*, see S. Bergès, *Lucretia and the Impossibility of Female Republicanism in Margaret Cavendish's Sociable Letters*, «Hypatia», 33, 2018, pp. 663-680; G. Silvani, *La necessità di dire io: le lettere e l'autobiografia di Margaret Cavendish*, in L. Dolfi (ed.), *Le scritture dell'io. Corrispondenza, autofiction e autobiografia*, «Torre Di Babele: Rivista Di Letteratura e Linguistica», 2, 2004, pp. 13-27; W. Sperrazza, *Intimate Correspondence: Negotiating the Materials of Female Friendship in Margaret Cavendish's Sociable Letters*, «Women's Writings», 29, 2019, pp. 456-472; J. H. Wright, *Darkness, death, and precarious life in Cavendish's Sociable Letters and Orations*, in B. R. Siegfried and L. T. Sarasohn (eds.), *God and Nature in the Thought of Margaret Cavendish*, London 2016, pp. 43-57; J. H. Wright, *Margaret Cavendish's Sociable Letter #16: Women's Political Obligation and Independence*, in L. Walters and B. R. Siegfried (eds.), *Margaret Cavendish: An Interdisciplinary Perspective*, Cambridge 2022, pp. 219-230.

⁵¹ See for example M. Cavendish, *Bell in Campo*, ed. by M. G. Sestito, «Quaderni di Scienza & Politica», 14, 2024. On nature and custom see the introduction to the volume, M. G. Sestito, *La singolare politica di Margaret Cavendish nel turbine della storia*, pp. 64-70.

⁵² M. Cavendish, *Sociable letters*, p. 25.

⁵³ *The Lavves resolutions of womens rights: or, The lavves provision for woemen. A methodicall collection of such statutes and customes, with the cases, opinions, arguments and points of learning in the lavv, as doe properly concerne women. Together with a compendious table, whereby the chiefe matters in this booke contained, may be the more readily found*, England 1632, p. 6.

⁵⁴ M. Cavendish, *Sociable letters*, p. 26.

After discussing on monarchy and democracy, Cavendish says that «this is fitter for monarchs to consider, than for women to speak of»⁵⁵. Moreover, in replying to her friend's request to write a book of orations, Cavendish argues that she could not do so because as a woman she does not know state affairs⁵⁶. Even though she engages in public affairs, Cavendish does not spare a scornful judgment against women meddling in politics. Mostly, they wage wars instead of peace and are prone to disorder the state rather than ordering it⁵⁷. It is no secret that Cavendish had a low opinion of petitioners, sectarians, and preachers who, as women, spoke out against the royalist order⁵⁸. This was largely due to the fact that many women were already involved in politics within the Royalist faction, and Cavendish, in particular, served as a maid of honour the Queen Henrietta Maria, who has been an exemplary model of female strength and autonomy⁵⁹.

This emphasised distance from other women involved in politics, on the other hand, reveals a variety in women's nature and therefore a political hierarchy that must be consistent with her defence of monarchy. Cavendish says that «our sex is so various and inconstant»⁶⁰. A prime example of variety and inconstancy of women is Cavendish's account of marriage. Once married, the woman must always subordinate herself to her husband. To disobey one's husband is to break the marriage bond, and this must be punished. This happens, according to Cavendish, because women are exposed to violent passions, which is precisely why they need to be educated differently from the way they were brought up until now. The vicious or flattering nature of women can be changed if well domesticated. Rather than adorning their bodies, women should be educated with study and knowledge⁶¹. Besides the clear autobiographical echo, these remarks are relevant because they show a way out from marital domination for women, namely, to become accustomed to their role as wives in order to govern their husbands.

While confirming the patriarchal stance of wives' subordination to men, though overturning it in women's favour, Cavendish also recognized spinsterhood as a complete escape from this dynamic of subordination. In the well-known letter written to her sister Ann, Cavendish suggests that she should not marry. «There is so much danger in marrying, as I wonder how any dare venture», and

⁵⁵ Ivi, p. 78.

⁵⁶ Ivi, p. 187.

⁵⁷ Ivi, pp. 18-19.

⁵⁸ See P. Rudan, *L'oratore perfetto è una donna. Margaret Cavendish e la politica di un tempo nuovo*, in M. Cavendish, *Orazioni di diverso tipo, adeguate a luoghi diversi. Scritte dalla principessa, nobilissima, illustrissima ed eccellentissima, Lady Marchesa di Newcastle*, ed. by P. Rudan, Napoli 2024.

⁵⁹ On royalist women and politics, see C. Gallagher, *Embracing the Absolute: The Politics of the Female Subject in Seventeenth-Century England*, «Genders», 1, 1988, pp. 24-39. On Henrietta Maria's influence on Cavendish see K. Stanton, 'An Amazonian Heroickess': *The Military Leadership of Queen Henrietta Maria in Margaret Cavendish's Bell in Campo* (1662), «Early Theatre», 10, 2007, pp. 71-86.

⁶⁰ M. Cavendish, *Sociable letters*, p. 199.

⁶¹ Ivi, pp. 36-37.

this applies both to women and men. The risk of adultery, discontent, and vices in general should lead a woman not to get married unless she finds a worthy man. This is the only kind of marriage that Cavendish approves of, to the extent of being compliant with her role as «servant to a worthy husband». However, concludes the author, «where there is a hazard in the choice, and a security in not choosing, the best is to be mistress of your self, which in a single life you are»⁶².

Cavendish recognises that women constitute a difference in the natural order. As their disordered nature could put the state in turmoil, women's natural differences should sometimes justify their subjection to men. At other times, the variety is moved against those who would like to define women's nature as unique and unchangeable. In fact, in a long poem to her friend in letter CXCVIII, Cavendish defends women against the accusations of a man who sees them as artificial rather than natural creatures, all out to beautify themselves, by saying that «art and nature do so well agree, / like man and wife, they propagators be, / and therefore scholars, as grammarians, miss / when they say both the female gender is»⁶³. Defining what a woman is proves difficult, and Cavendish seems to mock men who think they can answer the question once and for all. Art and nature both suit women, and yet it is difficult to come up with a unique definition. According to Cavendish, women are a «sociable» subject – something everyone talks about but finds «as difficult to be known and understood as the universe»⁶⁴.

To sum up, Cavendish raises the problem of reason, which is always embodied and thus material, so the Cartesian assumption that all human beings are rational allows her to claim that women are also rational. Moreover, she challenges Hobbesian politics, which disregard the natural power of subjects as if there were no difference between individuals. Without taking into considerations the different conditions of its subject, any political government simply collapses. In this sense, women are «sociable» but not political subjects, and therefore they can at any time disorder the state, undermining the political order that subjugated them with their «impertinencies of pen». Like her contemporaries, Cavendish speaks of women from her experience in order to be recognised as a subject who is publicly engaged in political and philosophical debates. To assert that discussing women is a «sociable» argument is to acknowledge that the political subordination of women is made possible by the customary recognition of an alleged natural inferiority to men. However, Cavendish shows that this natural subordination can not only be overturned, or at least circumvented, but also philosophically dismantled. Her strategic approach is to seek sexual differences in nature, and thus justify her claim to writing on the basis of the natural power that each person possesses.

⁶² Ivi, pp. 216-217.

⁶³ Ivi, p. 209.

⁶⁴ Ivi, p. 120.

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