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Experience, Authority, and the Alchemy of Language: Margaret Cavendish and Marie Meurdrac Respond to the Art

SANDY FEINSTEIN

By the time Marie Meurdrac published *La Chymie Charitable & Facile, en Faveur des Dames* (1666) and Margaret Cavendish published the *Philosophical Letters: Or, Modest Reflections Upon some Opinions in Natural Philosophy* (1664), the controversy surrounding the field of applied chemistry in France — where both lived mid-century — had become primarily an academic one.¹ It was not, however, “academic” to Margaret Cavendish and Marie Meurdrac, who would have been excluded from the knowledge communities of universities and natural philosophers who took sides in this debate. They, nevertheless, contributed to arguments on the subject, despite assuming that their contributions would be negatively received. Each begins with a prefatory defense against anticipated male criticism, though the reader to whom they direct their words is explicitly identified as female. Their conscious use of a double audience — of women exchanging ideas and men condemning their efforts — previews the rhetorical skills they exhibit in later chapters arguing for and against specific practices, practitioners, and theorists of applied chemistry, an area encompassing alchemy and medicine.

Both authors were in the right place at the right time to be exposed to the controversies and recipes popularized in print, exercised in kitchens and nascent laboratories, and presented publicly, most famously at the Jardin du Roi in Paris.² Cavendish resided in Paris from 1644 to 1648; Meurdrac was born in the city

¹ Antonio Clericuzio, “‘Sooty Empiricks’ and Natural Philosophers: The Status of Chemistry in the Seventeenth Century,” *Science in Context* 23, no. 3 (2010): 338–47.

² Clericuzio, “‘Sooty,’” 338, 346–47.

and resided on its outskirts. Though we do not know if they attended public lessons and laboratory demonstrations of chemistry, they could have been aware of their existence. The English king-in-exile, Charles II, also in France during this time, certainly knew about them, for upon being restored to the English throne he returned to the court with Nicaise Le Fèvre, a participant in demonstrations at the Jardin du Roi, and made him “professor of chymistry and apothecary-in-ordinary” to the royal family, with his laboratory set up in St. James’s Palace.³ Also well known in the Netherlands, where Margaret Cavendish and her husband, William, Duke of Newcastle, would spend a great part of their self-exile, was Jan Baptist Van Helmont, a Paracelsian theorist and practitioner, who would have his work translated into English in 1650 by Charles II’s physician, Walter Charleton, their personal friend.

In the *Philosophical Letters*, Cavendish takes aim at the work of applied chemists, especially Van Helmont, thereby challenging the theories and practices of alchemy and medical chemistry.⁴ Meurdrac, whose specific sources are harder to ascertain, focuses her attention primarily on the materials, tools, and methods required for the chemistry she teaches, rather than on individual philosophers or practitioners of her time. Though both writers approach the field in distinct, even contrary ways, one challenging the theories behind the practice, the other defending and disseminating the practice itself, they share key concerns about the “Art”: namely how it served practitioners and the community. They use the word “Art,” as I do, to reflect a range of practices that include alchemy, chemistry, and iatrochemistry; this word also encompasses positive and negative attitudes to those disciplines. Both Cavendish and Meurdrac pointedly direct their discussion to a female audience, a transgressive act in itself, considering the Art was created by men for men. Assuming a pedagogical role, each writer adeptly addresses the exclusivity that implicitly judges those who would challenge male practitioners, from canonical medieval alchemists to their contemporaries, including Van Helmont and his adherents.

³ Andrew J. Mendelsohn, “Alchemy and Politics in England, 1649–1665,” *Past and Present* 135, no. 1 (1992): 30.

⁴ For details, see Jacqueline Broad, “Cavendish, van Helmont, and the Mad Raging Womb,” in *The New Science and Women’s Literary Discourse: Prefiguring Frankenstein*, ed. Judy A. Hayden (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 47–46; and Stephen Clucas, “Margaret Cavendish’s Materialist Critique of Van Helmontian Chymistry,” *Ambix* 58, no. 1 (2011): 1–12.

Though curious about the Royal Society's experimental work in "chymistry," Cavendish wrote that she was not interested in performing it. As she explains,

I should almost have an ambition, to become an Artist in Chymistry, were I not too lazie and tender for that imployment; but should I quit the one, and venture the other, I am so vain as to perswade my self, I might perform things worthy my labour upon the ground of my own Philosophy, which is substantial Life, Sense, and Reason; for I would not study Salt, Sulphur, and Mercury, but the Natural motions of every Creature, and observe the variety of Natures actions. But, perchance, you will smile at my vain conceit, and, it may be, I my self, should repent of my pains unsuccessfully bestowed, my time vainly spent, my health rashly endangered, and my Noble Lords Estate unprofitably wasted, in fruitless tryals and experiments; Wherefore you may be sure, that I will consider well before I act; for I would not lose Health, Wealth, and Fame, and do no more then others have done, which truly is not much, their effects being of less weight then their words.⁵

Cavendish criticizes "chymists" for privileging "observation of the actions of their Art" over the study "of Natures substantial body" that would accord them greater understanding of Nature herself.⁶ Indeed, it is her respect for nature, in contrast to what she sees as the Chymists' lack of it, that could make her "almost have an ambition, to become an Artist in Chymistry."⁷ That she does not have such ambitions she attributes to her temperament, not exclusion. True or not, she recognizes, accurately as it happens, the limitations of studying salt, sulphur, and mercury. She also notes the cost of doing so, especially in terms of money and time, for a vain, futile endeavor of "fruitless tryals and experiments."⁸ Such work, she concludes, generates more words than substance, an assertion so direct and

⁵ Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, *Philosophical Letters: or, Modest Reflections upon some Opinions in Natural Philosophy* (London, 1664), III.xiii, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/53679/53679-h/53679-h.htm>. All quotations are from this edition and will hereafter be cited by section and letter.

⁶ Cavendish, *Philosophical Letters*, III.xiii.

⁷ Cavendish, *Philosophical Letters*, III.xiii.

⁸ Cavendish, *Philosophical Letters*, III.xiii.

confident as to reveal a temperament and capacity quite capable of challenging male ambition whatever her disposition for the practice itself.

Meurdrac, by contrast, has studied “salt, sulphur, and mercury,” among other ingredients, and offers to teach what she has learned to women: “for those who fear failure and do me the honor of contacting me, I will myself explain and carefully demonstrate in person whatever she desires to learn.”⁹ She eschews the obscurity of the field’s language specifically intended to exclude. The title of her text itself is a retort to the exceptionalism identified with the Art: colloquially in English, *Free and Easy Chemistry for Ladies*. As has been noted, her chemistry is not always easy to do, but the words describing the process, and her directions, are easy to follow (“facile”).¹⁰ Her choice of words is neither allusive nor arcane, for its purpose is to expose what has been kept secret and reserved for the initiated and select.

Similarly, Cavendish targets the language of natural philosophers:

But many great Philosophers conceive Nature to be fuller of Intricacy, Difficulty, and Obscurity, then she is, puzzling themselves about her ordinary actions, which yet are *easie and free*, and making their arguments hard, constrained, and mystical, many of them containing neither sense nor reason; when as, in my opinion, there is nothing else to be studied in Nature, but her substance and her actions. But I will leave them to their own Fancies and Humors, and say no more.¹¹

⁹ “ou qui craindront de ne pas reüssir, je m’expliqueray de vive voix quand on me fera l’honneur de m’en communiquer, & prendray soin de faire moy-mesme ce que l’on pourra souhaiter de ce que j’enseigne”; Marie Meurdrac, “Avant-propos,” *La Chemie Charitable & Facile, en Faveur des Dames* (Lyon, 1680), n.p., makes this offer in the first edition (Paris, 1666) through the 1680 edition, where it is reiterated in the concluding preface as well (253). It is omitted from the modern French edition of 1666, edited by Jean Jacques (Paris: CNRS, 1999) and the 1687 edition. Translations from the French are my own. All subsequent quotations are from the 1680 edition and will hereafter be cited by page number. The printed “medial s” only has been replaced with “s” in the quotations.

¹⁰ Sarah Gordon, “Chemistry, Medicine, and Beauty on the Edge: Marie Meurdrac,” in *Women on the Edge in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Lisa Hopkins and Aidan Norrie (Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam Press, 2019), 47.

¹¹ Cavendish, *Philosophical Letters*, IV.xxvii (italics mine).

Her words describing nature's actions—"easy and free"—antedate Meurdrac's title offering a chemistry that is "facile et charitable" to women.¹² These are characteristics, whether of Nature or the Art, that matter to both women writers voicing concerns about male natural philosophers: they know free and easy access matters. For Cavendish, such philosophers make nature seem overly intricate, difficult, obscure; similarly, for Meurdrac, male practitioners do much the same thing. Both offer a corrective.

In their prefaces, Cavendish and Meurdrac address their rhetorical abilities and the prevailing attitudes toward aspirational women in the 1650s and 1660s. By drawing attention to their limits in formal education and rhetoric, they make a virtue of necessity in their challenge to the customary discourse of natural philosophy at the time—in Latin and informed by the ethos of formal logic. For instance, Cavendish makes clear in "A Preface to the Reader" that she is offering her "opinions" in a style that is "common," but one that authentically represents her own ideas: the intended audience as insistently denoted—"Madam" for Cavendish, "des Dames" for Meurdrac—is, like the authors, less likely to read Latin or to have internalized the expectation for conventional forms and authorities.¹³ Though Cavendish calls her style common, she also acknowledges that it is not always "plain" because, as she reiterates, her ideas "are new, and never vented before," being "original merely from my own conceptions," and "not taken out of other Philosophers."¹⁴ Ironically, by acknowledging what men would call weakness—using the vernacular and striving for clarity that undermines exclusivity—she accentuates the strength of her ideas and reinforces her credibility.

Meurdrac's expressed intention to teach women the secrets of the profession reserved for the privileged (i.e., men and initiates) is also transgressive. In the preface, she describes the conflict she needed to resolve before publishing:

I argued with myself that it wasn't a woman's job to teach; that she must live in silence, listen and learn, without showing what she knows . . . since men always scorn and impugn the offspring of a woman's mind. Moreover, secrets would be divulged; and, finally, certain things that need revision in my writing style would, perhaps, be

¹² Cavendish, *Philosophical Letters*, III.xiv; Marie Meurdrac, *La Chemie Charitable & Facile, en Faveur des Dames*, "Avant-propos," n.p.

¹³ Cavendish, "A Preface to the Reader," *Philosophical Letters*, n. p.

¹⁴ Cavendish, *Philosophical Letters*, IV.xxvii.

exposed. . . the mind has no sex; and that, if women were educated as men are, with as much time and money devoted to their instruction, they could equal them. . . Furthermore, this work is useful. . . What is new is that it teaches how to do them with ease, accurately and freely. . . This is my sole motive that made me resolve to let this book leave my hands.¹⁵

In short, Meurdrac says her aim is to expand the audience and practitioners of chemistry to include women. To that purpose, her lessons, in vernacular French, serve as a textbook, loosely defined, one in the tradition of male French chemists beginning with Jean Béguin. Béguin wrote his textbook at the request of his students; reversing that order, Meurdrac offers face-to-face lessons to those after they read her work. The impulse to publish textbooks, according to both, consisted less in any interest to establish the field than in practical utility, potential profitability, and varied applications.¹⁶ The achievement of Meurdrac's work, then, is not in the recipes themselves nor in the form chosen for them; it is the orientation of her expressed pedagogic intention and rhetoric that sets it apart. And it is the privileging of pedagogy, an applied approach, that contrasts with Cavendish.¹⁷

In her work, Meurdrac does not use the kind of arcane terminology of alchemy that reaches an apogee with Van Helmont: there is no "blas," a word original to him or "gas" with meanings unique to him, or the Paracelsian "archeus"

¹⁵ "je m'objectois à moymesme que se n'estoit pas la profession d'une femme d'enseigner; qu'elle doit demeurer dans le silence, écouter & apprendre, sans tesmoigner qu'elle sçait: qu'il est au dessus d'elle de donner un Ouvrage au public, & que cette reputation n'est pas d'ordinaire avantageuse, puisque les hommes méprisent & blasment toûjours les productions qui partent de l'esprit d'une femme. D'ailleurs, que les secrets ne se veulent pas divulguer; & qu'enfin il se trouveroit, peut-estre, dans ma maniere d'écrire bien des choses à reprendre . . . les Esprits n'ont point de sexe, & que si ceux des femmes estoient cultivez comme ceux des hommes, & que l'on employast autant de temps & de dépense à les instruire, ils pourroient les éгалer. . . De plus, que cet Ouvrage est utile, qu'il contient quantité de remedes infaillibles . . . ; qu'il est curieux, qu'il enseigne fidellement & familièrement à les pratiquer avec facilité; & que ce seroit pecher contre la Charité de cacher des connoissances que Dieu m'a données, qui peuvent profiter à tout le monde. C'est le seul motif qui m'a fait resoudre à laisser sortir ce Livre de mes mains"; Meurdrac, *La Chemie*, "Avant-propos," n.p.

¹⁶ T. S. Patterson, "Jean Béguin and His *Tyrocinium Chymicum*," *Annals of Science* 2, no. 3 (1937): 254–56; see also Antonio Clericuzio, *Elements, Principles and Corpuscles: A Study of Atomism and Chemistry in the Seventeenth Century* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2000), 42.

¹⁷ Justin Begley, "Margaret Cavendish, The Last Natural Philosopher" (PhD diss., Oxford University, 2016), 94, 127, discovered and discusses the recipes compiled and tested by the Duchess and her husband.

or its French “translation” as “archee.”¹⁸ Meurdrac’s use of the phrase “esprit de vie” or “spirit of life” is not a translation of “archeus” or “archee,” as it becomes in a later English translation.¹⁹ In Meurdrac, “esprit de vie” appears only twice, both in the introduction to mercury, an ingredient she notes an “infinite number of philosophers” have written about, “each one following his particular inclination rather than reason,” a rather bold implied criticism.²⁰ The infinitude is represented by a singular, rather than plural, masculine pronoun (“son” rather than the degendered pronoun “leur”), which, while grammatically as it should be, is nevertheless telling. While her remark likely alludes to Paracelsus, contemporary philosophers, like Van Helmont, constitute the infinitude.

Rather than belabor Van Helmont’s unique jargon, which is explicitly disparaged by Cavendish, it is worth examining his view on the efficacy of one ingredient commonly used in medical prescriptions — namely, wine.²¹ Though reaching different conclusions, both Meurdrac and Cavendish skillfully set up and structure their arguments to challenge male authority on the subject. Meurdrac, unlike Cavendish, offers a general historical context for wine as an important ingredient: she refers readers to John of Rupescissa, whom Lawrence Principe credits for having “extended alchemy into a new area — [that of] medicine.”²² She also mentions two other medieval authors, Raymond Lulle and “the Queen of Hungary,” as exalting the virtues of wine, though without offering specific support for their views.²³ She refers readers to the several, albeit unnamed, authors

¹⁸ Sietske Fransen, *Exchange of Knowledge through Translation: Jan Baptista Van Helmont and his Editors and Translators in the Twentieth Century* (London: Warburg Institute, 2014), 64.

¹⁹ Fransen, “Exchange of Knowledge,” 179.

²⁰ Meurdrac, *La Chemie*, 6: “Vn nombre infini de Philosophes ont écrit du Mercure selon leur sentiment, & chacun en particulier a plûtost suivi son inclination que la raison.”

²¹ Cavendish, *Philosophical Letters*, I.xvi, III.i; Jean Baptiste Van Helmont, “The Nativity of Tartar in Wine,” in *A Ternary of Paradoxes*, trans. Walter Charleton (London: James Flesher for William Lee, 1650; Ann Arbor: Text Creation Partnership, 2011), 111–19.

²² Lawrence Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 63–65, 69–70.

²³ Meurdrac, *La Chemie*, 51–52. See Christopher Mielke on the tangled history and possible identity of the Queen of Hungary accredited with the recipe made popular in the seventeenth century, “Every Hyacinth the Garden Wears: the Material Culture of Medieval Queens of Hungary (1000–1395)” (PhD diss., Central European University, 2017), 156; he identifies Queen Elizabeth of Poland as the queen to which the recipe has been attributed. The attribution is typically generalized in the early modern period.

who have written on wine, which she says merits an entire volume.²⁴ Her concerns are less with those merits that she suggests have long been established, than, as she makes clear, with the method of extracting the spirit of wine, its process and production, as well as its applications.²⁵ Her argument transfers control from the traditions of the past to the available technologies of the present and the potential rewards for new practitioners.

By contrast, Cavendish specifically addresses Van Helmont's views on wine, which contemporary physicians had embraced in their treatments.²⁶ Moreover, she does so with rhetorical misdirection, beginning by seeming to agree with him while her word choice and qualifiers have the ring of condescension: "well approving" the "opinion" of what she calls "your Author" that "The Drink ought not to be forbidden in Fevers."²⁷ Then she directly asserts the contrary with the conjunction "But," followed by an unequivocal rejection of his moderate allowance for "The drink," referring to wine: "I am utterly against it."²⁸ While "your author" — Van Helmont — she suggests, does not offer evidence for his recommendation regarding wine, Cavendish bases her argument against its use on personal experience and actively questioning authority. She claims that she has consulted a "Doctor of Physick" when she was "once sick beyond the Seas," an Irish physician who, apparently, was "not successful in his Cures . . . his patients most commonly died."²⁹ She recalls asking him "what he used to prescribe in such or such diseases."³⁰ When told that he prescribes wine for fevers, she tells him he "was in a great error" and, like Meurdrac, cites her source, though hers is considerably more contemporary; her authority on the matter is "another famous Physician in France, Dr. Davison."³¹

Cavendish also demonstrates her practical knowledge with a recipe to treat disease that does not include wine. She identifies the symptom she is treating, "continual Fevers," and suggests a tisane "made of a little Barley, and a great quantity of Water, so thin as the Barley was hardly perceived, and a spoonful of syrup

²⁴ Meurdrac, *La Chemie*, 51.

²⁵ Meurdrac, *La Chemie*, 48–52.

²⁶ Antonio Clericuzio, "From van Helmont to Boyle, A Study of the Transmission of Helmontian Chemical and Medical Theories in Seventeenth-century England," *British Journal of History of Science* 26, no. 3 (1993): 304–5.

²⁷ Cavendish, *Philosophical Letters*, III.xxxvi.

²⁸ Cavendish, *Philosophical Letters*, III.xxxvi.

²⁹ Cavendish, *Philosophical Letters*, III.xxxvi.

³⁰ Cavendish, *Philosophical Letters*, III.xxxvi.

³¹ Cavendish, *Philosophical Letters*, III.xxxvi.

of Limmon put into a quart of the said Ptisan.”³² She offers another recipe for a fever with added symptoms (e.g., flux), too, one that is a follow up treatment to be taken twenty-four hours later, after two-hour fasting of meat and drink, and with two grains of laudanum.³³ The specificity of the recipes shows Cavendish’s familiarity with ingredients, mixing and measuring them (a quart, a grain), the timing of treatment (defined periods), and the effects of ingestion. Segueing from her remedy to Dr. Davison’s “advice and Practice” she says she communicated “with several others,” although she does not reveal the responses she may have received from those “others.”³⁴ Nevertheless, the result, we are told, is that the Irish Doctor changed his ways, cured many, and recovered his reputation. From her anecdote made credible by describing a personal experience and naming the doctor, Cavendish proceeds to challenge what she sees as the underlying fallacies of theories used to support diagnoses and treatments using wine. In short, she dismisses the binary arguments regarding “death” and “life,” asserting that “neither is death more cold then hot, nor life more hot then cold.”³⁵ Her argument, like Van Helmont’s, does not stand up to modern medical science, except that she is right: alcohol is not good for a fever, though liquids are.

Meurdrac, by contrast, focuses more on how to use wine, demonstrating her knowledge, and, in so doing, asserting her authority. In her discussion of wine, *aqua vitae*, and its residue, she begins with the process and then addresses its applications. Part 2 of her work opens with a generalization that is consistent with Van Helmont, or Cavendish’s reading of his work: “I begin with the most perfect plant and the most essential to human life, namely the grapevine.”³⁶ She follows this claim about grapevines and their fruit with a discussion on the basics of distillation: the kind of vessel to use (glass), where it should be done (a *bain marie* or “water bath”) and why (its spirits of vitriol).³⁷ She discusses its “sympathies” with metals, a claim she supports by citing a “philosopher” who warns against the use of salt of tartar in metal or lead vessels.³⁸ Her recommendation to

³² Cavendish, *Philosophical Letters*, III.xxxvi.

³³ Cavendish, *Philosophical Letters*, III.xxxvi.

³⁴ Cavendish, *Philosophical Letters*, III.xxxvi.

³⁵ Cavendish, *Philosophical Letters*, III.xxxvi.

³⁶ “Ie [Je] commence par le Vegetal le plus parfait & le plus necessaire à la vie de l’homme, qui est la vigne”; Meurdrac, *La Chemie*, 48.

³⁷ Meurdrac, *La Chemie*, 48.

³⁸ Meurdrac, *La Chemie*, 48.

avoid metal containers is practical, apart from the instability of vitriol, namely in cost, access, and reactivity. The rest of the entry focuses on the process of distillation, the vinegars produced, and how to modulate their strength.³⁹

Meurdrac's instructions are direct, omitting, for instance, references to astrological conditions that often characterize alchemical recipes. She also dismisses steps related to process typically included, and she explicitly questions their utility, as she does when noting that the lees or dregs (the feces) are of little worth because the resulting oil is "not indispensable to medicine," a claim borne out, she says, by the fact that no authors have argued otherwise.⁴⁰ Her directions are confidently in the imperative (put, distill, make); she also implicitly acknowledges that her readers may need to review a specific technique (circulation) and refers to the section to be consulted. Her directions are clear, though longer than usual for her: they include the necessary vessels (lutes, *bain marie*, capital, recipient); actions (pour, replace, heat, cover, etc.); measures (pints); results (vinegar); and an interjection. They are at once methodical while also personal and reassuring.

Meurdrac embraces her role as teacher of the Art. In a sense, so, too, does Cavendish. For Cavendish provides examples of how *she* has literally taught practitioners, suggesting that though her explicit address is to the anonymous "Madam," her purpose is to challenge the presumptions of the readers she is actually targeting, men. Both Cavendish and Meurdrac cite male authorities for support but also to correct, devalue, and diminish them. In so doing, they assert their own authority. In short, Meurdrac and Cavendish self-consciously deploy their "common" rhetoric and plain-speak to imagine, or reimagine, the doing, teaching, and theorizing of the Art and who may speak to whom about it.

³⁹ Meurdrac, *La Chemie*, 48–52.

⁴⁰ "Pour l'huile elle n'est point necessaire à la Medecine, & je n'ay point trouvé d'Auteur qui traite de ses vertus"; Meurdrac, *La Chemie*, 50.