Part III

Challenging Representations
8. **Thinking Beings and Animate Matter**

Margaret Cavendish's Challenge to the Early Modern Order of Things

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**Abstract**

This essay argues that Margaret Cavendish challenged early modern culture's dominant conception of the relationship between humans and non-humans, humans and their environment, and the inanimate nature of matter. In her poems that dramatize a dialogue among birds and between a tree and a man, Cavendish argues against the unquestioned assumption among her contemporaries that non-human beings exist for the use of man, anticipating recent findings about the intelligence and emotional capacity of birds and the sentience of trees. In other poems, Cavendish anticipates twenty-first-century understandings of humans' destructive effect on the environment. In addition, her representation of the animation and activity of atoms shows congruence with Jane Bennett’s concept of ‘vibrant matter’.

**Keywords:** Cavendish, Margaret; animals; plants; environment; materialism

In *Poems and Fancies* (1653), Margaret Cavendish challenged early modern epistemological frameworks, in particular, contemporary understandings of animals, plants, and matter, and the ascription of uncontested human superiority over all other living beings and the environment (Figure 8.1). In taking these extraordinary positions for a thinker of

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Figure 8.1: Margaret Cavendish, Poems, or several Fancies in Verse. With the Animal Parliament, in Prose (London: A. Maxwell, 1668), frontispiece. Engraving by Abraham von Diepenbeeck. 720.h.28. ©British Library Board.
her time, Cavendish anticipates many of the writings of twentieth- and twenty-first-century writers on these subjects. In comparing Cavendish and Lucy Hutchinson's representation of animals, I have previously discussed Cavendish's two poems on hunting—one involving a hare and the other a stag—that call attention to the animals' capacity for emotion, especially fear. I concluded that Cavendish considers the relationship between humans and animals as a political one, which she explicitly characterizes as 'tyranny'.

In this essay I extend my earlier analysis to Cavendish's innovative challenge to the existing and accepted relationship between humans and birds and between humans and plants. Moreover, I will demonstrate the hitherto unnoticed close connection between Cavendish's calling for an ethical treatment of non-human beings on the one hand, and her atomism and vitalist materialism, on the other, which leads to an understanding of the animate nature of the material environment. Finally, I will suggest that the relationship between Cavendish's challenge to the accepted chain of being—or the order of things—and her challenge to patriarchy and the subordination of women derives from her understanding of intersectionality between the two systems of hierarchy, rather than an essentialist identification of women with nature. In this, Cavendish anticipates recent ecofeminist scholars who go beyond an earlier generation of ecofeminists who tended to equate women and nature. While Cavendish was ridiculed not only by her contemporaries but even by Virginia Woolf, a relatively modern feminist, recent scholarly developments in animal studies, materialist theory, and environmental humanities provide us with the necessary perspective to recognize the importance of her thinking; such recognition three and half centuries later confirms her conviction of the afterlife of her writings: ‘But say the Book should not in this Age take, / Another Age of great esteem may make; / [...] / For who can tell but my poor Book may have / Honour’d renown, when I am in the Grave.’

Wilson also states that ‘probably uniquely amongst seventeenth-century philosophers’ in protesting ‘against not only an authoritarian God, but the supposition of human superiority over the rest of creation’, Cavendish's positions ‘were anything but conducive to fame and fortune’ (‘Two Opponents’, p. 48).

Suzuki, ‘Animals and the Political’.

One of three frontispieces that Cavendish used for different copies of her various volumes, this one is particularly appropriate for my argument in its inscription's emphasis on her originality: ‘Scorning dead Ashes without fire / For her owne Flames do her Inspire’.

Cavendish, Natures Pictures, p. 390 (mispaginated).
The genius of birds

While Cavendish’s poems on the hunting of the hare and stag were focalized through the victims of the hunt, her ‘Dialogue betwixt Birds’, a poem that appears among others concerned with animals, goes even further to present a non-human perspective through birds who discuss their species-specific mistreatment qua birds by humans. In this, Cavendish’s poem diverges from other poetic representations of speaking birds, who function as stand-ins for humans, such as the most well-known predecessor in the genre, The Parlement of Fowles; in Chaucer’s poem, the interlocutors discuss love in ways that do not center on the speakers’ status as birds.

Two contemporary texts, one in French (Cavendish wrote Poems and Fancies in France) and the other in English, are more comparable to her version. In the ‘Histoire des oiseaux’ Cyrano de Bergerac refuted Descartes’s contention that birds’ imitation of human speech was mechanical and did not bespeak their possession of reason, a refutation also evident in Cavendish’s ‘Dialogue’. However, representing the birds as inverting the existing social hierarchy among humans—so that the king of birds is not the eagle, the strongest, but the dove, the weakest—Cyrano thereby produces a satiric allegory of human society, by contrast with Cavendish, who represents the birds as themselves. At the same time, Cyrano shares Cavendish’s challenge to the accepted human mistreatment of birds in having the lawyer for the birds plead for equality with humans, while voicing a bitter critique of human arrogance. While Cyrano’s ‘Histoire’ was not published until 1662, though it circulated in manuscript, John Ogilby’s Fables, published in England two years before Poems and Fancies, includes ‘A Parliament of Birds’ in which different species of birds represent humans of different rank, such as Kitish Peers and Bussard Lords. Unlike both her contemporaries Cyrano and Ogilby, Cavendish represents birds in their own right, not as satiric versions of humans; she is closer to Cyrano, however, in calling attention to the plight of the birds at human hands.

6 Cavendish, Poems and Fancies, pp. 160–163. Further citations (by page and line number) will be provided in the text. Siegfried bases her text on the third, 1668 edition. See also Liza Blake’s digital critical edition that collates all three editions of Poems and Fancies.

7 Harth, Cyrano, p. 173. ‘Histoire des oiseaux’ was embedded in the Estats et empires du soleil. In ‘Political Writing across Borders’, I argue that Cavendish was steeped in the political and literary culture of mid-seventeenth-century France, noting the connection between Cyrano’s utopia, L’autre monde, and Cavendish’s Blazing World. In an epistolary exchange with Descartes, Cavendish’s husband William registered his disagreement with Descartes’ notion of animals as machines. See Suzuki, ‘Animals and the Political’, p. 231.

8 Ogilby, Fables, p. 45.
In mounting her challenge to the assumption of human dominion over other beings, Cavendish draws on the poetic tradition of complaint—associated with abandoned women ever since Ovid’s *Heroides*, and deployed more recently by George Gascoigne to voice the perspective of hunted animals. Perhaps avoiding what Gascoigne had already done, in her poems about hunting a hare and a stag Cavendish vocalizes the emotions of the animals rather than having them speak for themselves. But here, she deploys the genre of complaint to give voice to birds and an oak (in ‘A Dialogue between an Oak, and a Man Cutting it down’), as well as to Earth (in ‘Earth’s Complaint’), advancing an understanding of their plight not available to her contemporaries.  

The extensive account of the specific examples of human abuse by different bird species in the ‘Dialogue’ indicates Cavendish’s wide-ranging knowledge of the multitude of ways in which birds were made to suffer at the hands of the humans. Many of these examples concern tortures the birds undergo to satisfy man’s gratuitous desire to have them approximate human speech. The Magpie states, ‘they our tongues do slit, their words, to learn; / And with this pain, our food we dearly earn’ (ll. 51–52). The Parrot explains that she, the Jay, the Daw, and the Pie are captured ‘[o]nly to talk and prate, the best we can, / To imitate, to th’ life, the speech of man’ (ll. 123–24). She concludes by defending their right to use their own ‘[t]ongues giv’n us, like to Men, our Lives to save’ (l. 130).

Some birds, who are consumed as food, are not so fortunate. While the ‘smaller Lark, they eat all at one bite’, some species are prized only for certain parts of their body: ‘[m]en of our Flesh do make such cruel waste, / That but some of our limbs will please their taste. / In Woodcocks’ thighs, they only take delight, / And partridge wings, which swift were in their flight’

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9 Gascoigne’s *The Noble Arte of Venerie or Hunting* (1575), a translation of Jacques du Vouilloux’s *La Vénerie* (1561), includes complaints by hunted animals, including a hare and a fox. See Suzuki, ‘Animals and the Political’. Smith, O’Callaghan, and Ross, ‘Complaint’, identify three kinds of complaint: erotic, religious, and political. While the authors do not discuss Cavendish, her use of the genre most closely approximates the political: ‘complaint offered a widely used, emotionally charged, nuanced vehicle for expressing powerlessness and protest in response to loss and grievance’ and therefore constituted a ‘crucial mode for the formation of the early modern political subject’ in early modern England (p. 339). They remark that ‘tension between resignation to loss and the possibility of redress [...] continues to underwrite the mode throughout the early modern period’ (p. 340). As the authors point out, during the Civil War period, complaint became a vehicle for royalists to express their loss and dispossession; for example, Hester Pulter expressed her distress over the imprisonment of Charles I in ‘The Complaint of Thames, 1647’ (p. 349). By contrast to Pulter, Cavendish uses the genre to imagine birds, an Oak, and the Earth voicing their own suffering rather than as a vehicle to express her own.
(ll. 73–76). The rapacious appetite of humans who ‘eat until their bellies burst’ sharply contrasts with that of the birds whom they kill with ‘guns and bows [...] / And by small-shot [...] / Because we pick a cherry here and there’ (ll. 39, 35–37).

In an example puzzling to modern readers, Cavendish’s Swallow complains that ‘[men] will take us, when alive we be, / (I shake to tell, O horrid cruelty!) / Beat us alive, till we an oil become’ (ll. 95–97). Through their research on seventeenth-century recipe books, Michelle DiMeo and Rebecca Laroche have shown that the concoction of a topical ointment, ‘Oil of Swallows’, called for a large number (as many as 40) live swallows to be beaten or ‘cut [...] to pieces feathers and guts’. As ecofeminist critics, DiMeo and Laroche find disturbing that women were often the purveyors of such recipes.10 While men were presumably the perpetrators of violence in the hunting poems, here Cavendish implicitly acknowledges those perpetrators, in this case towards birds, were not limited to men, though she clearly diverges from her female contemporaries’ apparently routine acceptance of such use of swallows for medicinal purposes. Laroche and DiMeo importantly note that in the recipes, the treatment of the swallows is verbally assimilated to the processing of plants in herbal medicine, with the implication that while such violence may give twenty-first-century readers pause, it was not considered extraordinary to seventeenth-century women.11 By calling attention to the perspective of the Swallow, who irrefutably claims, ‘O man! O man! if we should serve you so, / You would, against us, your great curses throw’ (ll. 99–100), Cavendish turns the tables and challenges the routine and normalized nature of such violence that would presumably not elicit a second thought from those who followed the recipe to create the ointment.

These numerous examples of the human abuse of birds are explained as the result of ‘[c]orrupted manners’: ‘No creature doth usurp so much as man, / Who thinks himself like God, because he can / Rule other creatures, and make them obey. / Our souls did never Nature make, say they, / Whatever comes from Nature’s stock and treasure, / Created is, only to serve their pleasure’ (ll. 109–114). Cavendish thereby indicts man’s arrogation of superiority over the rest of creation as usurpation, and the wrongheaded assumption that other creatures exist for human use. The language of usurpation, like the language of tyranny in ‘The Hunting of the Hare’, indicates that Cavendish understands the relationship between humans, and, in this instance, birds

10 DiMeo and Laroche, ‘On Elizabeth Isham’s “Oil of Swallows”’, p. 88.
11 Ibid., pp. 96–98.
to be a political one. In a striking passage, Cavendish ascribes this human ability to dominate birds not to the humans’ superior intelligence. The birds assert:

Alas! Alas! We want their shape; for they
By it have power to make us all obey.
They can lift, bear, strike, pull, thrust, turn, and wind,
What ways they will; which makes new arts they find.
‘Tis not their wit that doth inventions make;
But ‘tis their Shape, which height, breadth, can take.
[…]
What Creature else has arms, or goes upright,
Or has all sorts of motion, so unite,
Man, by his shape, can Nature imitate;
Can govern, rule, and can new arts create. (ll. 145–50, 153–55)

Cavendish reiterates this acknowledgment that man's dominion over other beings is accidental in the chapter ‘Of Man's Shape and Speech' in *Grounds of Natural Philosophy*:

The Shape of Man's Sensitive Body, is [...] singular in this, That he is of an upright and straight Shape; of which, no other Animal but Man is: which Shape makes him not only fit proper, easie and free, for all exterior actions; but also for Speech: [...] Whereas other Animal Creatures, by reason of their bending Shapes, and crooked organs, are not apt for Speech; [...] Man's shape is so ingeniously contrived, that he is fit and proper for more several sorts of exterior actions, than any other Animal Creature; which is the cause he seems as Lord and Sovereign of other Animal Creatures. (ll. 49–50)

This passage confirms in Cavendish's own voice her birds’ emphasis on man's ‘shape’, rather than any other quality, as enabling his dominion over them.

Ovid in his *Metamorphoses* also distinguished man's upright shape from that of animals, who ‘are prone, and fix their gaze upon the earth'. Yet in celebrating man’s ‘uplifted face’, his ability to ‘stand erect and turn his eyes to heaven’, Ovid’s view that god created man ‘of his own divine substance’ (which of course parallels the Judeo-Christian creation story in *Genesis*) contrasts with Cavendish’s. Ovid also states that man's kinship with the gods in his capacity for intelligence gives him dominion over the rest of creation (Book 1, ll. 76–88)—although his later stories of the transformation
of humans into animals while retaining their understanding and emotions certainly complicates this view.

Cavendish pointedly declines to endow such significance to man's shape, or to affirm man's ability to reason as exceptional or superior to that of non-human creatures. When the birds complain that it is man's 'shape' rather than his 'wit' that gives him dominion, Cavendish boldly implies that birds do not in fact lack 'wit'. In 'Of Birds', also in *Poems and Fancies*, she makes a similar claim: 'Who knows but birds, which under th'azure skies / Do fly, know whence the blustering winds do rise; / May know what thunder is, which no man knows.' The list of what birds may know continues, until she concludes the lengthy question: 'The birds perhaps might tell, could we inquire' (p. 207). Cavendish thereby suggests that birds have access to multitudes of knowledge not available to humans, and that we are simply ignorant of their abilities because we have been incurious, assuming that humans are the only ones with access to knowledge. These assertions, which must have seemed outlandish to Cavendish's contemporaries, have now been confirmed by recent findings on avian intelligence by Jennifer Ackermann and Nathan Emery. Moreover, Cavendish's representation of birds as experiencing pain and emotion throughout the 'Dialogue' has been supported by Irene Pepperberg's chronicling of her close emotional bond with Alex, a grey parrot.

Finally, in the dedicatory letter to *Philosophical and Physical Opinions* (1655), 'To the Two Universities', Cavendish strikingly compares women to birds:

> for we are kept like birds in cages to hop up and down in our houses, not suffered to fly abroad to see the several changes of fortune, and the various humours, ordained and created by nature; thus wanting the experiences of nature, we must want the understanding and knowledge and so consequently prudence, and invention of men.\(^{12}\)

This passage articulates Cavendish's understanding of the equivalence between birds and women vis-à-vis their relation to men: just as humans confine birds in cages, 'to hop up and down' instead of freely taking flight, so men confine women to their homes, constraining their natural desire to experience, understand, and know. Here, as in her hunting poems, we see evidence of Cavendish's 'understanding' of the intersectionality of the political subjection of animals and women, as victims of the 'tyranny' of

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men. Anticipating arguments made by scholars of the recently ascendant plant studies, Cavendish would extend such intersectionality not only to animals, but also to plants.

The hidden life of trees

While Cavendish may agree with her contemporaries who assimilate birds to plants, she would reach the opposite conclusion from those who would subject both birds and plants to human use: she believes that they both equally deserve not to be sacrificed to such instrumental use. In ‘A Dialogue between an Oak, and a Man Cutting it down’, one of the poems she groups among her dialogues, Cavendish stages an exchange between tree and man, in which the tree appears more reasonable than the man at every turn (pp. 155–160). In addition to the complaint, which I have already mentioned, Cavendish makes reference to pastoral by casting her poem in the form of dialogue taking place away from the city. It is far from a conventionally bucolic one between shepherds (as in Spenser’s *Shepheardes Calendar*), however, but one in which an oak pleads for his life to a man about to cut him down. Pastoral was a genre that claimed to challenge the ideology of epic, whose goal was the founding of cities, entailing violence; Cavendish repurposes and demystifies the pastoral in this poem by calling attention to human violence against other beings in service of mercantilism and colonialism.

In identifying the tree as an oak, Cavendish may have been thinking of the groves sacred to Zeus in Dodona, where the oaks, as Herodotus relates, rustled their leaves to communicate prophecies to the priests who interpreted them. The prophetic ability of the oaks endows them with a numinous status, and Cavendish’s oak may derive his impressive dignity from this classical antecedent. The most famous post-classical example of a talking plant is, of course, Dante’s Pier delle Vigne, whose descendants include Spenser’s Fradubio; both exclaim and bleed sap when their boughs are broken and his leaves are plucked. Less well known but closer to Cavendish’s time is James Howell’s *Dendrologia: Dodona’s Grove, or The Vocall Forrest* (1640), a historical allegory of Stuart England and contemporary Europe that makes extensive use of tree lore. And in ‘Of the Husband-man, and the Wood’, in

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13 See Marder, ‘To Hear Plants Speak’. As examples of ‘Talking Trees’, Marder discusses Herodotus, Dante, and Howell, but not Cavendish. The example he gives that most resembles Cavendish is from the Warring States period in China (third century BCE.). In Master Zhangzi’s
Ogilby’s *Fables*, the ‘Royall Cedar’ meets his demise at the hands of a ‘Swain’ who becomes the instrument of the Cedar’s rebellious subjects, such as the ‘rotten-hearted Elms’, who accuse him of tyranny. Cavendish’s striking innovation lies in her interest in the oak *qua* oak, rather than as a vehicle of prophecy, a suicide punished by being turned into a plant, or a vehicle for an allegorical political narrative.

Finally, two important historical and political referents for Cavendish’s tree are the ‘Parliament Oak’ under which Edward I met Parliament in 1290 and the Oak of Reformation—in both senses of ‘Reformation’, the religious and the political—under which Robert Kett and his followers, who rose against aristocratic enclosures, dispensed justice during Kett’s Rebellion in Norfolk of 1549. More generally, Sylvia Bowerbank has argued for the deforestation of Sherwood Forest as a context for Cavendish’s lament in *The Blazing World* for the ‘diminishing population of English trees as trade increases’, blaming ‘the civil war for destroying the ancient forests and castles of the kingdom’.

In her *Life* of her husband William, Cavendish recounts his reaction to the destruction of trees on his property as a result of the civil war:

> And although his patience and wisdome is such, that I never perceived him sad or discontented for his own Losses and Misfortunes, yet when he beheld the ruines of that Park, I observed him troubled, though he did little express it, onely saying, he had been in hopes it would not have been so much defaced as he found it, there being not one Timber-tree in it left for shelter [for the wildlife]. (Cavendish, *Life*, 92)

Although Bowerbank considers Cavendish’s critique of deforestation to be nostalgic and conservative in seeking to shore up feudal and aristocratic
tale, an oak appears to a carpenter in his dream, and challenges him concerning the utility of trees: ‘The lesson of the tree is that all existence is worthless from the standpoint of instrumental rationality [...] human beings cannot presume to know that their scales of value extend to all creatures, including plants’.  

15 ‘The Hunting of a Stag’ includes a twenty-line catalogue of trees, which grow in the ‘shady wood’ where the stag dwells (p. 217). Unlike the trees in Ogilby’s *Fable*, these trees—‘straightest pines’, ‘tallest cedars’, ‘Olives upright’—are not placed in hierarchical relation to one another, nor do they together represent an allegorically ominous ‘shadie grove’ where the trees ‘heavens light did hide’ as they do in Spenser’s catalogue of the trees in Book 1 of the *Faerie Queene* (cantos 7–9).  
16 Bowerbank, *Natural Philosophy*, p. 53. Bowerbank points out that ‘Parliament Oak’ was located five miles from Welbeck Park, the private park of the dukes of Newcastle, known for its oaks (pp. 56–57). See also Nardizzi, *Wooden Os*, on the way the representations of trees and wood in the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries address the ecological crisis of deforestation.
privilege, this passage indicates that even her husband was not simply concerned with the war’s effect on his feudal privilege, but on the ecological relationship between forests and wildlife. Even so, the contradictory political valences of the two references, one that commemorates a popular uprising, and the other that laments the passing of feudal privilege, is characteristic of Cavendish’s use of equivocation in other respects, as we shall see.

Indeed, in Cavendish’s ‘Dialogue’, the Oak pleads with Man to refrain from cutting him down, describing that action as a taking of his ‘life’, and killing of his ‘body’ (l. 18). Cavendish calls attention to the embodiment of the Oak, emphasizing the equivalence between the body parts of human and tree: ‘you do peel my bark, and flay my skin, / Chop off my limbs, and leave me naked, thin: / With wedges you do pierce, my sides to wound; […] / I minced shall be in chips and pieces small’ (ll. 23–25). Thus Cavendish presents as utterly reasonable the Oak’s plea to ‘let me live the Life that Nature gave’ (l. 65).

By contrast, Cavendish presents as specious and self-serving the reasons Man gives to justify his intent to cut down the Oak. To his exhortation that as a ship, the Oak will gain ‘knowledge’—‘Thus shall you round the world, new land to find’ (l. 79)—the Oak dryly responds that he will no longer be alive: ‘I am contented well, / Without that knowledge, in my wood to dwell; / For I had rather live, and simple be / […] / I am contented with what Nature gave’ (ll. 81–83, 101). Moreover, the Oak demystifies Man’s attempt to entice him by describing how he will majestically ‘cut the seas in two, / And trample down each wave as you do go’ (ll. 71–72), by characterizing his transformation into a ship as subjection: ‘With sails and ropes, men will my body tie; / And I, a prisoner have no liberty’ (ll. 93–94). Similarly, to Man’s celebration of the ‘stately house / […] Wherein shall princes live of great renown’, that will be built after the Oak is ‘cut […] down’, the Oak responds with bitter irony: ‘Both brick and tiles upon my head are laid; / Of this preferment, I am sore afraid. / With nails and hammers, they will often wound, / And pierce my sides, to hang their pictures round’ (ll. 104–105, 116–118). Rather, he avers, ‘More honor ‘tis, my own green Leaves to bear. / More honor ‘tis to be in Nature’s dress, / Than any shape that men, by art, express’ (ll. 126–127). By claiming that courtly ‘preferment’ would entail

17 In ‘A Moral Discourse of Man, and Beast’ (Poems and Fancies, pp. 197–203) Cavendish again couples the human ingenuity that surpasses that of beasts to build and navigate ships and the human capacity for violence that exceeds that of animals: ‘And with his ships, the world he’ll circle round; / What beast or bird, that doth so, is yet found? / He’ll fell down woods, with axes sharp he’ll strike; / Whole herds of beasts can never do the like’ (ll. 185–88).
subjection and asserting the superiority of ‘Nature’ to man’s ‘art’, the Oak overturns conventionally accepted values.

Finally, the Oak refutes man’s assertion of his own superiority, ‘I am happier far (said th’ Oak) than you, Mankind; / For I content, in my condition find. / Man nothing loves, but what he cannot get; / [...] / And, as his mind is restless, never pleased, / So is his body sick, and oft diseased’ (ll. 136–38, 142–43). Here the Oak challenges the early modern ‘order of things’ by demystifying the striving and mobility that was the hallmark of the humanist celebration of man—and of colonialism and mercantilism, which Cavendish not so subtly criticizes in the poem—and by flatly proclaiming it to be pathological in its insecurity and arrogance. Cavendish suggests that this pathology, not man’s superior uniqueness, leads him to assert dominion over and seek to subjugate the rest of creation. Its contrast, the contentment and self-sufficiency of the Oak, without pride clouding his vision, overturns the conventional hierarchy that subordinates tree to man.

By having the man respond that ‘[y]ou do not know, nor can / Imagine half the misery of man’ (ll. 146–47), Cavendish ironically calls attention to man’s inability to ‘imagine’ the ‘misery’ of other creatures. Moreover, his assertion that ‘man has something more, which is divine, / He hath a mind, and doth to heav’n aspire’ (ll. 149–50) indicates his failure to comprehend the ‘mind’ that has been evident in the Oak’s eloquent self-defense. The concluding couplet—‘If you, as man, desire like Gods to be, / I’ll spare your life, and not cut down your tree’ (ll. 162–63)—demonstrates that while Man seeks to present himself as magnanimous, he in fact has completely missed the point of his ‘Dialogue’ with the Oak. His self-satisfaction coupled with his failure to understand any of the Oak’s arguments enables him to maintain the illusion of his own superiority and to insist on subjecting to his power the rest of creation. While maintaining that trees still speak to man (unlike Howell who states that the oaks spoke once, but do so no longer), Cavendish concludes her ‘Dialogue’ by indicting the inability of man to understand the language of the Oak, and the perspective from which he speaks.

Cavendish’s extraordinary representation of the Oak, who eloquently expresses his completely reasonable desire for self-preservation, proves to be prescient, in light of recent findings concerning ‘the hidden life of trees’—the title of the book by Peter Wohlleben, with the subtitle, *What They Feel, How They Communicate*. According to Wohlleben, trees experience pain and have memories; communicate with each other in forests, warning one another of impending danger; and sustain the wounded or diseased among their number by sharing nutriments. Strikingly recalling Cavendish’s ‘Dialogue’, Wohlleben emphasizes the status of trees as living beings and their embodied
nature: ‘When logs in the fireplace crackle merrily, the corpse of a beech or oak is going up in flames.’ He concludes, ‘I for one, welcome breaking down the moral barriers between animals and plants. When the capabilities of vegetative beings become known, and their emotional lives and needs are recognized, then the way we treat plants will gradually change, as well. Forests are not first and foremost lumber factories and warehouses for raw material, and only secondarily complex habitats for species [...] Completely the opposite, in fact.’

Noting that oaks can live for over five hundred years, Wohlleben argues that at least some trees ‘should be allowed to grow old with dignity and finally die a natural death.’ Wohlleben’s statement resonates with that of Cavendish’s Nature (in ‘A Dialogue betwixt Man, and Nature’, pp. 146–48), who claims her ‘Tree’ as her own and who indicts Man’s arrogant presumption in destroying it:

May not I work my will with what’s my own?  
But men among themselves contract and make  
A bargain for my tree; that tree they take:  
Which cruelly they chop in pieces small,  
And form it as they please, then build withal.  
Although that tree by me, to stand, was graced.  
Just as it grows, by none to be defaced. (ll. 20–27)

When the English translation of Wohlleben’s book was published, it attracted a great deal of media attention because it overturned the prevailing understanding concerning the nature of trees, just as Cavendish’s poem did in her own time.

Another recent example of the reassessment of humans’ relationship to trees is the bestselling winner of the 2018 Pulitzer Prize, Richard Powers’s novel *The Overstory*, which takes as its subject the heroic but failed effort of environmental activists to prevent the logging of California redwoods. As Cavendish does in her dialogue, Powers’s novel endows trees with speech, though not understood by most humans: ‘Trees used to talk to people all the time. Sane people used to hear them’. Echoing the concerns of Cavendish’s poem, one of Powers’s characters asks, ‘What’s crazier? Believing there might be nearby presences we don’t know about? Or cutting down the last

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18 Wohlleben, *Hidden Life of Trees*, p. 244.
19 Ibid., p. 245.
few ancient redwoods on Earth for decking and shingles’. 21 And another: ‘the world is not made for our utility. What use are we, to trees?’ 22 Finally, ‘Should trees have standing? [...] What can be owned and who can do the owning? What conveys a right, and why should humans, alone on all of the planet, have them?’ 23

In challenging her contemporaries’ unquestioning assumption of man’s entitlement to make use of trees as commodities, Cavendish anticipates not only Powers’s question concerning whether trees have standing, but also Michael Marder’s question, ‘Should plants have rights?’, which he answers in the affirmative: ‘they possess intrinsic worth, pursue a good of their own, and thus merit respect. Plants do not exist exclusively for animal and human consumption’. Marder asserts that plants have ‘the right to flourish’ and ‘the right to be free of arbitrary violence and total instrumentalisation’ 24—a position that is clearly articulated in Cavendish’s poem. 25

Cavendish stages a dialogue and a confrontation between man and oak, but not between man and any of the non-human animals of which she writes—birds, hare, and stag. Jeffrey Nealon has recently argued that plants, rather than animals, represent the ‘forgotten other’ for humans, and the dialogical form of Cavendish’s poem calls attention to the nature of this relationship. 26 Understanding plants as the ‘other’ for humans clarifies the intersectionality between plants and women as objects of domination by male humans, and Cavendish’s clear-eyed ability to analyze the exploitative dominion that man assumes is his right in relation to the oak. Indeed, Cavendish’s extension of empathy to the oak as well as to the hare, stag, and birds, finds its modern equivalent in critical ecofeminism, as articulated by Greta Gaard, which acknowledges the embodiment and agency that humans share with non-human animals and the intersectionality among animals, plants, and human women, as objects of dominion by human men. 27 Thus

21 Ibid., p. 178.
22 Ibid., p. 222.
23 Ibid., p. 249. See also Christopher Stone, ‘Should Trees Have Standing?’ Extending his discussion to the legal standing of bodies of water, Stone proposes that the legal interests of such entities could be represented by guardians.
24 Marder, ‘Should Plants Have Rights?’, p. 50.
25 By contrast, the Enlightenment materialist La Mettrie’s Man a Plant begins by comparing ‘the parts of plants with those of man’ (e.g., the lungs to the leaves), but concludes by affirming man’s superiority, for plants are immobile and therefore ‘lack intelligence and even feeling’ (pp. 78, 85).
26 Nealon, Plant Theory, p. 11
27 See Gaard, Critical Ecofeminism, especially Chapter 2, ‘Plants and Animals’. See also Donovan, ‘Animal Rights’, for discussion of the feminist understanding of the permeability between the
these poems by Cavendish anticipate the tenet of posthumanism, which challenges the humanist celebration, since the Renaissance, of man as the measure of all things.

**Environmental ruin**

The political implications of Cavendish’s atomism and materialism have already been discussed in previous scholarship, for example by John Rogers and Lisa Walters, but her understanding of earth and the environment as a vibrant actant, to combine the terminology of Jane Bennett and Bruno Latour, has, to my knowledge, yet to be examined.\(^{28}\) In ‘Earth’s Complaint’ (pp. 207–208), Cavendish has Earth describe the ravages wrought by man’s actions, such as agriculture, characterizing his treatment of her as filial ingratitude: ‘My children, which I from my womb did bear, / Do dig my sides, and all my bowels tear. / They plow deep furrows in my face’ (ll. 3–5). While again deploying the genre of complaint, she diverges from her poems on the birds and the oak by representing Earth as the mother of the human race in a manner veering toward the allegorical; at the same time, in her indictment of the destructive consequences of human action, her Earth speaks \textit{qua} Earth.\(^{29}\) Here, Cavendish recalls Christine de Pizan’s \textit{Christine’s Vision} (1405), which features prominently the maternal lament of Libera (France) whose body has been torn apart by her children in civil war; the destruction of Earth in Cavendish also derives, at least in part, from civil war—in the felling of trees, as we have seen. In gendering this destruction of the environment, Cavendish anticipates Carolyn Merchant’s \textit{The Death of Nature}, which indicts the mechanistic cosmology that considered nature to be passive and inert, available for human exploitation.

But perhaps more significantly, in the two poems ‘A Description of an Island’ and ‘The Ruine of this Island’, which follow the two hunting poems in the same section, Cavendish describes a flourishing ‘Island’—in reality a worlds of humans, animals, and plants, so that ‘we exist in the same unified field continuum’ (p. 183). Donovan briefly discusses Cavendish along with Anne Finch as critics of Cartesianism (p. 178).


\(^{29}\) See Hanlon, ‘Margaret Cavendish’s Anthropocene Worlds’, on Cavendish’s anthropomorphism in \textit{The Blazing World} and in \textit{Observations of Natural Philosophy} as a distinct method for acknowledging and describing the ways in which nature is already animated; Hanlon sees this method as ‘highly relevant to our contemporary studies of […] the Anthropocene’ (p. 63).
planet—without humans, and the ‘Ruin’ it experiences as a result of human arrogan
cce (pp. 221–25). As in ‘Earth’s Complaint’, Cavendish personifies the
‘Island’ as a woman and includes a mythological framework with Apollo (the
sun) and Cynthia (the moon). Yet, as in ‘Earth’s Complaint’, the environmental
destruction does not remain in the allegorical register. In the shift from the
first poem to the second, Bruno Latour’s recent call for recognizing Earth
‘as active without endowing it with a soul’ and for understanding how Earth
responds to the collective actions of humans is strikingly relevant. 30 In the
‘Description’, the ‘Island’ is an harmonious and stable network:

All this Place was fertile, rich, and fair;
Both woods, and hills, and dales, in prospects were.
Birds pleasure took, and with delight did sing;
In praises of this isle, the woods did ring.
Trees thrived with joy, for she the roots well fed;
And tall with pride, their tops did overspread.
Danced with the winds, when they did sing and blow. (ll. 21–27)

However, in the second poem, Cavendish explains the Island’s ‘Ruin’ as
the result of her prideful self-adoration, which angers the ‘gods’, another
personification that represents the disruption of the harmonious network
described in the first poem. Although the nature of this pride is not specified
in this poem itself, the hunting poems that precede it, as well as the two poems
I have previously discussed, suggest that the pride is coterminous with human
arrogance that transgresses and disrupts the harmonious network of the
Earth. The gods accordingly take revenge on the Island by wreaking havoc:

the Planets drew, like with a Screw,
Bad vapors from the Earth; and then did view,
What place to squeeze that poison on, which all
The venom had got from the world’s great ball.
Then through men’s veins, like molten lead it came,
And did, like oil, their spirits all inflame.
Where malice boiled with rancor, spleen, and spite;
In war and fraud, injustice took delight. (ll. 39–45)

Cavendish innovates on Ovid’s account of the devolution of human soci-
ety from the age of gold to the age of iron as a result of human lapses by

30 Latour, Facing Gaia, p. 86.
emphasizing the systemic link between the physical and moral/ethical; human arrogance gives rise to the poisonous vapors rising from the Earth that in turn lead humans to commit ‘thefts, rapes, murders, at their will’ (l. 48). Responding to these outrages in their turn, the gods ‘unbound the winds’ (l. 55) and unleash weather deadly to humans. Here again, as in the ‘Description’ that portrayed the Island’s flourishing, Cavendish represents the Island as a system—but this time emphasizing its disorder.

‘Earth’s Complaint’ and the two ‘Island’ poems are examples of what Timothy Morton calls ‘thinking big’, which he recommends in contradistinction to ‘[t]erms such as the local, the organic, and the particular’. Although Morton celebrates Milton’s description of earth from space as ‘the beginning of ecological thinking’, unlike Cavendish, Milton only provides a view of earth as pristine, not having been ravaged by human habitation.31 In this, Cavendish’s poems constitute examples of Morton’s ‘dark ecology’—in contradistinction to overly affirmative ‘utopian eco-language’—which he promotes as ‘a new ecological aesthetics’ that foregrounds ‘negativity and irony, ugliness and horror […]’ which compel our compassionate coexistence to go beyond condescending pity’.32 While Morton claims that ‘the ecological thought is modern’—and he dates ‘modern’ to the late eighteenth century—these poems by Cavendish indicate that she was thinking ecology in the mid seventeenth century.

In Facing Gaia, Latour argues that the distinctions between Nature and Culture, as well as human and nonhuman, are oversimplifications in which ‘we […] designate some as animate and others as inanimate’, so that we deanimate ‘material’ protagonists and overanimate humans ‘by credit- ing them with admirable capacities for action—freedom, consciousness, reflexivity, a moral sense, and so on.’33 As we have seen, Cavendish was already seeking to demystify this distinction, in her poems on birds, the tree, and the catastrophic response of earth and the material environment to human arrogance and transgression.

**Vibrant matter**

Cavendish’s levelling of the hierarchy between humans and other beings as well as ‘Nature’ and the environment, I suggest, derives from her vitalist

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31 Morton, The Ecological Thought, pp. 20–23.
32 Ibid., pp. 16–17.
33 Latour, Facing Gaia, p. 68. Morton similarly maintains that ‘the ghost of “Nature” […] inhibited the growth of the ecological thought’; see The Ecological Thought, p. 5.
materialism. She, like Hobbes, and unlike Descartes, maintained that everything was material and that incorporeal substances did not exist. Her poems on atoms that comprise Part I of Poems and Fancies, preceding those on plants, animals, and the environment, represent atoms as the foundational material of all creation. In ‘A World Made of Atoms’ (pp. 81–82), she states:

Small atoms of themselves a world may make,
For being subtle, every shape they take.
As they dance about, they places find;
Of forms that best agree, make every kind. (ll. 1–4)

Cavendish assigns not only motion, but also agency, to matter, characterizing the atoms’ movement as dancing and purposeful. In this respect, she diverges from Hobbes, whose mechanist materialism understood the motion of matter to be passive. In the dedicatory letter of Philosophical Letters (1664) to her husband William, Cavendish states that ‘there is not only a Sensitive, but also a Rational Life and Knowledge, and so a double Perception in all Creatures’, characterizing this ‘Opinion in Philosophy’ as ‘new, and never thought of, at least not divulged by any, but my self, [...] [and] quite different from others’. In his entry on Cavendish in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, David Cunning confirms her assertion: ‘Cavendish is working within a philosophical tradition in which the doctrine that matter is self-moving and intelligent is almost completely unintelligible.’ Cavendish’s likening of atoms to ‘workmen’ who consult and collaborate with one another—‘Thus, by their forms and motions they will be / Like workmen which amongst themselves agree’ (ll. 15–16)—indicates that she considers atoms to possess communal agency and identity. Indeed, this

34 In Philosophical and Physical Opinions (1655), published the same year as Poems and Fancies, Cavendish repudiates atomism to argue for continuous matter. This shift, which may have been motivated by the strong association in the Renaissance of Epicurean atomism with atheism (see Palmer, Reading Lucretius, Chapter 1), does not impact her vitalist materialism. Moreover, Cavendish does not repudiate other aspects of her metaphysics that challenged creationism, such as the infinity and eternity of matter. Sarasohn argues that Cavendish’s repudiation of atomism was directed against ‘the general opinion of atoms’, not her own ‘particular opinions’ expressed in Poems and Fancies. (Natural Philosophy, pp. 64–65). She also points out that Cavendish’s defensive response to charges of atheism immediately precedes her condemnation of Epicurean atomism (p. 67).
36 Cavendish, Philosophical Letters, sig. a.
37 For further discussion on ‘Thinking Matter’, see Cunning, Cavendish, Chapter 2.
38 In ‘What Atoms Make Change’, Cavendish further develops this notion of the communal or group identity of atoms, by positing them as either ‘sympathiz[ing]’ and ‘agree[ing]’ with one
creative agency of atoms is in keeping with her comparison of herself to an atom in one of her prefaces to Poems and Fancies, ‘To Natural Philosophers’: ‘and so shall I remain an unsettled atom, or a confused heap, ‘til I hear my censure’ (p. 67).39

In the final couplet of the poem, Cavendish equivocates on whether the resulting creation occurs by chance or follows a design: ‘And so, by chance, may a new world create, / Or else, predestinate, may work by fate’ (ll. 17–18). The former possibility, ‘by chance’, is the more radical one, but even the latter, which may appear to be acknowledging divine creation, in fact assigns the source of the ‘predestination’ to ‘fate’—associated with Jupiter’s speech (fatum), rather than with that of the Christian divinity. In this, Cavendish decidedly departs from Descartes’ acknowledgment of divine design at the conclusion of the Discourse of Method.40

Cavendish elaborates on her notion that all creatures as well as matter share atoms as their basic material foundation in ‘What Atoms Make Vegetables, Animals, and Minerals’ (p. 96). The differences among the three derive from the different shapes of the atoms. The ‘branched atoms’ make up plants; ‘square and flat’ atoms make stones and minerals; in both, ‘sharp points’ cause vegetables and minerals to ‘grow’ (ll. 1, 5, 8, 9).41 Cavendish’s concept of the common material foundation of plants and minerals enables her to consider minerals in their crystallization to be just as vibrant as plants another to ‘join together’ or to ‘meet […] / Without all order, running in and out’ in a ‘rabble route’ (p. 119, ll. 3–6).

39 In the introduction to her edition, Siegfried suggests that ‘Poems and Fancies is best understood as a conversation with Lucretius’s De rerum natura’ (p. 18), and that the structure of the volume closely follows that of Lucretius’s work. While a published translation of Lucretius in English was not available to Cavendish, Siegfried points out that Cavendish nevertheless ‘directly alludes to and often paraphrases material from all six books of Lucretius’ (p. 20). Siegfried states that Cavendish revises Lucretius’ theory of atoms, ‘threading a connective, sympathetic vitalism through Lucretius’s otherwise dead atoms’ (p. 14). But see Shearin, Language of Atoms, on ‘the atomization of humans’ and ‘the humanization of atoms’ in Lucretius (p. 79). On Cavendish and Lucretius, see also Rees, “Sweet Honey of the Muses”.

40 Cavendish explicitly registered her disagreement with Descartes in Philosophical Letters (1664). On Cavendish and Descartes, see Sarasohn, Natural Philosophy, pp. 129–35; and Semler, ‘Margaret Cavendish’s Early Engagement’.

41 The different shapes and sizes of Epicurean atoms correspond to different qualities, such as ‘roughness to bitterness, roundness to sweetness […] bulky atoms form heavy materials like earth or flesh, whereas tiny atoms […] produce rarified, invisible, interpenetrating substances like breath, sound, sense data, and the soul’. Palmer, Reading Lucretius, pp. 11–12. Sarasohn points out that Cavendish’s vitalist theory of matter—even in her early atomism—diverges from Epicurus’s notion that ‘atoms possess motion and figure but not life’. Moreover, Cavendish ‘credits matter not only with life and self-movement but also with self-consciousness and thought’. Natural Philosophy, p. 35.
whose growth is more visible. This observation leads to the larger, bold conclusion that ‘for ought we know, the world's whole frame / May last unto eternity the same’ (ll. 12–13), a conclusion that overturns the accepted notion of the impermanence of matter and the material world. As in the previous poem in which she appeared to equivocate between creation by chance or by design, she prefices this conclusion with an apparent concession that mankind is made up of ‘the best of atoms’ (l. 11). Yet given her persistent questioning elsewhere of the assumed distinction between humans and other animals, the assertion of the superiority of man contradicts and is undercut by the statement that precedes it—that all animals consist of the same atoms: ‘According to the several atoms go, / In animals all figures do agree’ (ll. 9–10). Cavendish further subverts the assumption of man’s supremacy in her musings on the hidden understanding of vegetables and minerals:

who knowes, but Vegetables and Mineralls may have some of those ration-all spirits, which is a minde or soule in them, as well as Man? Onely they want that Figure [...] to express Knowledge that way. For had Vegetables and Mineralls the same shape, made by such motions, as the sensitive spirits create; then there might be Wooden men, and Iron beasts [...] And if their Knowledge be not the same knowledge, but different from the Knowledge of Animalls, by reason of their different Figures, [...] yet it is Knowledge.42

Not only does this passage recall her similar musings concerning the epistemological parity between birds and humans, but it also echoes her assertion that it is only his accidental shape that gives man advantage over the rest of creation.

I have already mentioned that John Rogers, and more recently, Lisa Walters have argued for the republican implications of Cavendish’s materialism; and Catriona Sandilands has called, in the twentieth-century context, for the alignment between ecofeminism and democracy, based on a questioning of the essentializing association between women and nature.43 Considering together Cavendish’s writings about animals, plants, the environment, and matter provides a fuller picture of her ecofeminism and materialism that led her to challenge the prevailing assumption of the unquestioned superiority and dominion of man over all creation, and to critique man’s use and abuse of all other creatures and the natural environment as a

42 Cavendish, Philosophical Fancies, pp. 54–55.
43 Sandilands, Good-Natured Feminist, pp. xvii–xix.
consequence of that assumption. While the conclusions she reached posed radical questions to the status quo, her methodology of basing her ethical and political principles on her investigation of natural philosophy tracks Lucretius, Ovid, and Seneca, who derived lessons for living in their ontology and cosmology. 44

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44 Ovid concludes the Metamorphoses, in which he describes the multifarious transformations of humans to non-human beings or stones, with the teachings of Pythagorus, who enjoins against eating meat (Book 25, ll. 75–142). On the relationship between physics and ethics in Seneca’s Natural Questions, see Asmis, Bartsch, and Nussbaum, ‘Seneca and his World’, p. xvii. Noting his similarity to Lucretius in ‘interspersing ethical messages throughout his physical inquiries’, they state that Seneca ‘differs from previous Stoics by welcoming other aspects of Epicurean philosophy’ (p. xv).


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