

Margaret Cavendish, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy. Abridged, with Related Texts*, edited by Eugene Marshall. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2016, pp. xxvii + 106. £8.50/\$10.00 (pb). ISBN 9781624665141.

The work of the seventeenth-century author Margaret Cavendish has recently seen increased interest from historians of philosophy. That interest was perhaps encouraged by an earlier edition of this work, which was edited by Eileen O'Neill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). The interest was also related to two general goals of some historians of modern philosophy: paying attention to more than just the centrally canonical figures, and paying more attention to women in the history of philosophy.

This edition is aimed at those interested in teaching Cavendish's work. It contains an 80 page abridgement of her 1666 *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, and selections from related works by Descartes, Hobbes, Hooke, and Boyle. It thus provides more material than the selection from Cavendish's 1664 *Philosophical Letters* in Margaret Atherton's *Women Philosophers of the Early Modern Period* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994). Obviously it provides less material than O'Neill's edition of the *Observations*, but it is also much cheaper (currently, £8.50/\$10.00 as compared with £28.99/\$54.99).

The abridgement is preceded by a useful introduction, which is aimed at a student audience. This is clear and helpful, though one or two references (e.g., to Cudworth and hylozoism) may puzzle the intended audience. The text of the *Observations* itself has been somewhat modernized, and there are some explanatory notes.

Abridging books is a tricky matter, but the selection here is sensible and useful. I suppose relatively few people are likely to be unhappy that their favourite sections have been omitted, just because relatively few people have favourite sections of this book. Still, it is worth considering ways in which the book might seem different as a result of the way it has been abridged. My sense is that Marshall's abridgement emphasizes the ways in which the *Observations* provides a treatise on Cavendish's system, but at the cost of the material on

experimental philosophy and microscopes. For example, Marshall has omitted all of chapters 6–14. These include the chapters 'Of the Stings of Nettles and Bees', 'Of the Beard of a Wild Oat', 'Of the Eyes of Flies', and 'Of a Butterfly'. Those chapters engage with Power's 1664 *Experimental Philosophy* as well as Hooke's 1665 *Micrographia*. Their presence makes a significant impression on the reader of the *Observations*, in which there is a definite focus on experimental philosophy, the work of Hooke and Power, and what can be seen through microscopes. Though there is still engagement with experimental philosophy in the abridged version, the emphasis of the work seems different.

That said, this volume covers a series of important topics in Cavendish's philosophy, including her complex materialist view, the nature of motion, matter as self-moving, Cavendish's opposition to atomism, and knowledge and perception. Thus, though there are inevitable losses in an abridgment, this book provides a very helpful resource for teaching Cavendish's philosophy. It provides an extended selection from one of her works, at an affordable price, in a nice, small volume.

Though this volume helps address the availability of texts, other challenges remain in trying to teach Cavendish's work in the history of philosophy. Some students will struggle with seventeenth-century English. Beyond that, there are other challenges in her approach and her writing, perhaps especially when teaching undergraduate philosophy students who have been trained to look for reasons and arguments. It's not that there are no such things in Cavendish's work, but she can give the impression of telling a long story about one way things might be, rather than really arguing that this is the way things are. That is not to say there is nothing interesting in Cavendish's work, but these aspects of it can cause difficulties in teaching it in a class in the history of philosophy.

Related to this is the way Cavendish makes but might seem not always to respect a distinction between natural philosophy and 'fancies'. This is illustrated in the current volume. Cavendish tells us that 'the opinion of atoms is fitter for a poetical fancy than for serious philosophy' (31). The *Observations* is supposed to be a work of 'serious philosophy', unlike her

first book, the 1653 *Poems, and Fancies*, which is where she described atomistic views. However, later in the *Observations* itself, Cavendish incorporates poetry from that earlier book to help explain her views about animal spirits (75–6). So perhaps the distinction between ‘poetical fancy’ and ‘serious philosophy’ was not quite as strict, for Cavendish, as she sometimes suggested.

There are, then, challenges in teaching Cavendish’s work. But if one wishes to do so, this volume provides a very helpful resource.

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