

MATERIAL AND POLITICAL NATURE IN MARGARET CAVENDISH'S *THE UNNATURAL TRAGEDY* AND *THE BLAZING WORLD*

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ASIDE FROM THE unprecedented nature of her achievements as a female writer, the most striking characteristic of the work of Margaret Cavendish is its diversity. It is difficult to think of another writer in English—of any period, male or female—whose work matches her range, which encompasses philosophy, science, political commentary, biography, poetry, drama, and utopian fiction. The extraordinary extent and variety of Cavendish's work in itself makes the task of encapsulating the nature of her writing and thought a significant challenge, but this challenge is further exacerbated by both the extensive revision to which she subjected her ideas and her notable capacity for self-contradiction. These factors, combined with the fact that serious study of her work has only developed momentum over the last two decades, mean that while fascinating and revealing work has been done in the various strands of Cavendish study—on her life; on her scientific writing; on her philosophy; on her literary output—there is much work yet to be done on establishing the ways in which these strands inform one another.

With a view to both addressing and illustrating this problem, this chapter will take as its focus the treatment of a single concept—that of nature—as it manifests itself in different areas of Cavendish's work. Recent critical attention, most notably in Brandie R. Siegfried and Lisa T. Sarasohn's essay collection *God and Nature in the Thought of Margaret Cavendish*, has been paid to Cavendish's treatment of the subject of nature, but this has focused predominantly upon her philosophical and scientific writings.¹ Building on my recent work carried out in the editing of Cavendish's play *The Unnatural Tragedy*, I aim in particular to consider the ways in which Cavendish's philosophical and scientific notions of nature both find expression and undergo interrogation in her literary work, with a specific focus here on *The Unnatural Tragedy* and the utopian proto-novel *The Blazing World*. I do not pretend to be able to offer a full account of Cavendish's understanding of nature in this chapter; rather my hope is that the discussion will provide

¹ Brandie R. Siegfried and Lisa T. Sarasohn, ed., *God and Nature in the Thought of Margaret Cavendish* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014). See Anna Battigelli's *Margaret Cavendish and the Exiles of the Mind* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998) for an example of scholarship that has considered the relationship between the various forms of Cavendish's writing. Other recent works that have considered Cavendish's philosophy and natural philosophy are Lisa T. Sarasohn, *The Natural Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010) and David Cunning, *Cavendish* (London: Routledge, 2016).

some sense of the complexity of her deployment of this idea and of the extent of the cross-pollination that took place between her literary and non-literary work, insofar as such an easy distinction can be made.

Cavendish and Nature

For all of the formal variety of Cavendish's work, nature is a concern that repeatedly surfaces within it, regardless of the form in which she is writing. Despite its consistent presence across her oeuvre, however, it is nonetheless itself a profoundly multifaceted concept in her work. Without suggesting that they offer an exhaustive sense of Cavendish's thinking on nature, I will consider in this essay two senses in which the term is deployed in her work. The first of these is of nature as the quasi-divine force that, in Cavendish's materialist brand of natural philosophy, orders and dictates the structure and the events of the world. While Nature is created by God, she (as nature is typically personified) appears to occupy in Cavendish's worldview much of the cosmic and spiritual space usually taken up by God in the natural philosophical systems of the period. The second idea on which the essay will focus is the notion of the natural condition of mankind, as notoriously delineated by one of the more illustrious acquaintances of the Cavendish family, Thomas Hobbes. The natural condition, for Hobbes, is that state in which humanity would exist in the absence of absolutist state power; it is a state characterized by self-interest, conflict, and unrestrained violence. As we will see, both *The Unnatural Tragedy* and *The Blazing World* explore in fascinating ways the political and philosophical implications of this idea.

Material Nature

Katie Whitaker notes in her biography of Cavendish that "her philosophical poems provided perhaps the first atomic theory of nature to be published in England, and reeked of the atheism for which the ancient Greek atomists, Democritus and Epicurus, were notorious."² Cavendish was not an atheist, but it is easy to imagine how her natural-philosophical model may have given rise to such a suspicion. In that model, God and Nature are distinct from one another, as Cavendish makes clear in a discussion of Epicurus's ideas in *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*:

As for God, he being immovable, and beyond all natural motion, cannot actually move Matter; neither is it Religious, to say, God is the soul of Nature; for God is no part of Nature, as the soul is of the body; And immaterial spirits, being supernatural, cannot have natural attributes or actions, such as is corporeal, natural motion.³

² Whitaker, *Mad Madge: The Life of Margaret, Duchess of Newcastle* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2003), 160.

³ Margaret Cavendish, "Observations Upon the Opinions of Some Ancient Philosophers," in *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* (London, 1666), Wing / N857, sig. li1v.

As, for Cavendish, God's immateriality renders him incapable of acting directly upon matter, direct responsibility for instigating and controlling terrestrial phenomena and events is delegated to Nature, which, by virtue of its materiality, is able to carry out these responsibilities:

Neither is God naturally moving, for he has no local or natural motion, nor doth he trouble himself with making any thing, but by his All-powerfull Decree and Command he produces all things; and Nature, which is his Eternal servant, obeys his Command.⁴

Crucially, though, this decree and command only seem to apply on the most macro of levels; Nature is commanded to order the universe but is not told *how* to do it, "for her actions are free and easy, and not forced or constrained."⁵ As David Cuning puts it, "we would be wisest to say that God transcends the world of natural bodies but that He provided these with the resources to attend to their own affairs."⁶

While Cavendish's system does not deny the existence of God, then, its division of cosmic labour nonetheless makes possible—or even necessary—the description of all phenomena without recourse to divine intervention (although I will say more about the necessity of God for Cavendish's model shortly); in her discussions of the material world (and, as we will see, Cavendish classes as material many things that we might instinctively not) it is nature that takes on responsibilities usually reserved for the divine. An example of this can be seen in Cavendish's first published work, *Poems, and Fancies*, which begins with a poetic account of the creation of the universe being administered by a council called and chaired by Nature:

When Nature first this World she did create,
She cal'd a Counsell how the same might make;
Motion was first, who had a subtle wit,
And then came Life, and Forme, and Matter fit.⁷

A few lines later, Nature makes clear to her councillors the hierarchical arrangement: "it is my nature things to make, / To give out worke, and you directions take."⁸

This personification of nature is of course a poetic device, and it may well be that when Cavendish refers to Nature in this way she is referring to the collective matter that makes up the universe rather than indicating a belief in a pseudo-divine figure dictating the order of things. But personification is quite a conceptually apt device, since Cavendish certainly does attribute to nature something akin to human consciousness and intelligence. In *Ground of Natural Philosophy*, Cavendish argues that

If Nature were not Self-knowing, Self-living, and also Perceptive, she would run into Confusion: for, there could be neither Order, nor Method, in Ignorant motion; neither

4 Cavendish, "Observations," sig. li v.

5 Cavendish, "Observations," sig. li v.

6 Cuning, *Cavendish*, 96.

7 Margaret Cavendish, *Poems, and Fancies* (London, 1653), Wing / N869, sig. B1r.

8 Cavendish, *Poems, and Fancies*, sig. Br.

would there be distinct kinds or sorts of Creatures, nor such exact and methodical Varieties as there are: for, it is impossible to make orderly and methodical Distinctions, or distinct Orders, by Chances: Wherefore, Nature being so exact (as she is) must needs be Self-knowing and Perceptive.⁹

Since the apparent order of the world can only be explained by the existence of a governing intellect, and since the immaterial God cannot have a direct role in governing the motions of the material world, that governing intellect must belong to nature itself. And nature's jurisdiction over the material world entails a further reach than one might expect. Since Cavendish considers anything which has the capacity for motion to be material, materiality ends up being rather a capacious category in her thinking. As Lisa T. Sarasohn puts it:

Unlike other material philosophers who attempted to find the constituents of material being in order to explain or construct the world of objects they observed, Cavendish assumed that minute parts of matter constituted both the real and the imaginary, the seen and the unseen, and every kind of so-called spirit. Her vision of the material world was broader than that of her contemporaries. She saw and imagined matter in everything, and in her thought, even the imaginary became concrete.¹⁰

Thus the material is a category that, for Cavendish, can incorporate the mind, thoughts, ideas, and the soul.¹¹ Nature, then, is an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent force in Cavendish's thinking: it is granted by God authority over physical phenomena, over what we might call the spiritual, and over the imagination.

Political Nature

That divinely granted authority is crucial in Cavendish's philosophy; it is what stops her universe from being what in many respects it seems to be: a world that can function perfectly well without God. For all of nature's self-aware governance of matter, Cavendish makes clear her feeling that a world governed only by nature and without the authority of God would be a world of anarchy:

[I]f Nature had no dependence on God, she would not be a servant, but God her self. Wherefore *Epicurus* his Atomes, having no dependence upon a divine power, must of

⁹ Margaret Cavendish, *Ground of Natural Philosophy* (London, 1668), Wing / N851, sig. B4r. For examples of other similar statements by Cavendish, and a discussion of her concept of intelligent matter, see Cunning, *Cavendish*, 55–97.

¹⁰ Sarasohn, *Natural Philosophy*, 55.

¹¹ It is worth noting here that Cavendish's philosophy allowed for immaterial and material versions of the soul, the relationship between which may be read as being analogous to that between God and Nature. Cunning notes: "We might have immaterial souls, Cavendish wants to allow, and orthodoxy dictates that we believe that we have immaterial souls, but these are not the entities that steer and direct our bodies or that form imagistic ideas of the entities that surround us. Those entities are material bodies." *Cavendish*, 65.

necessity be Gods; nay, every Atome must be a peculiar God, each being a single body, subsisting by itself; but they being senseless and irrational, would prove but weak Gods: Besides his Chance is but an uncertain God, and his *Vacuum* an empty God; and if all natural effects were grounded upon such principles, Nature would rather be a confused Chaos, then an orderly and harmonical Universe.¹²

An interesting point to note here is that Cavendish's argument for the necessity of God works more effectively for Epicurus's universe, in which the atoms of which the world is comprised are "senseless and irrational," than it does for her own, in which, as we have seen, the matter that makes up the material world is "Self-knowing, Self-living, and also Perceptive."¹³ But clearly Cavendish seems to believe that there is a degree of harmony and order in the universe that cannot be explained by the workings of nature alone and that can only have been brought about by the absolute rule of a divine godhead. Without that rule, the world would be a chaos of competing claims to authority.

This argument bears more than a passing resemblance to one applied to more terrestrial questions of hierarchy by an acquaintance of the Cavendish family, Thomas Hobbes. In his most famous work, *Leviathan*, Hobbes makes the argument that in order for a society to function with any degree of order, its members must engage in a kind of social contract, collectively consenting to absolute rule by a single figure. Without this contract, humanity is driven by what Hobbes describes as its "natural condition" to a state of interminable and socially debilitating conflict. The problem arises, for Hobbes, from nature's having created men as broadly equal: "from this equality of ability," he suggests, "ariseth equality of hope in the attaining of our Ends. And therefore if any two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies."¹⁴ The absence of clear hierarchy inevitably leads to conflict: "during the time men live without a common Power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called Warre; and such a warre, as is of every man, against every man."¹⁵ The result is a world in which there is insufficient security for resources to be spent on ennobling practices and in which life is culturally and intellectually impoverished and, in those famous words, "solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short."¹⁶ The solution to this natural condition of war is for every individual to surrender his natural right to protect and pursue his own interests in whatever way he wishes, and instead to consent to a transference of rights to a single monarch, who must be trusted to act in the collective interest. In this way, the chaos of competing individual interests is resolved, as "a multitude of men, are made *One Person*, when

¹² Margaret Cavendish, "Observations Upon the Opinions of Some Ancient Philosophers," in *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, sig. li2r.

¹³ Cavendish, *Ground of Natural Philosophy*, sig. B4r.

¹⁴ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. C. P. MacPherson (London: Penguin, 1968; reprinted 1985), 184.

¹⁵ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 185.

¹⁶ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 186.

they are by one man, or one Person, Represented.”¹⁷ The result of this compact is the Commonwealth, which Hobbes defines as

One Person, of whose Acts a great Multitude, by mutuall Covenants one with another, have made themselves every one the Author, to the end he may use the strength and means of them all, as he shall think expedient, for their Peace and Common Defence.¹⁸

Like Cavendish’s nature, which is too multifarious to attain a state of order without divine instruction, Hobbes’s humanity is doomed to incessant conflict without the investment of absolute power in a single figure.

Cavendish often downplayed the extent of her learning, and in her *Physical and Philosophical Opinions* she stated of Hobbes’s work that she “had never read more than a little book called *De Cive*.”¹⁹ Recent work by Sarasohn and Liam Semler has demonstrated, however, that Cavendish was more familiar with Hobbes’s work at this stage than she suggests.²⁰ In any case, had she read only *De Cive*, she would have encountered the argument outlined above, since Hobbes included a version of it in that text. While Cavendish clearly believes that there are limits to nature’s capacity to order itself without some divine instruction, Sarasohn suggests that Cavendish’s understanding of the natural condition of mankind is more optimistic than Hobbes’s. For Hobbes,

order in the state could occur only when colliding individuals gave their collective power to an absolute ruler. Cavendish argued instead that just as every part of material nature—rational, sensitive, and inanimate—cohered together and functioned as a whole, so every member of a well-ordered polity naturally unified to create a strong state, with each constituent functioning to perform its own duties. Hobbes emphasized the artificial beginnings of the state; Cavendish argued that humans, since they were composed of rational and sensitive matter, always lived in a political state.²¹

Questions about the philosophical justification, or even necessity, of monarchical rule, of course had a particular urgency in the 1650s, and no doubt will have carried a great

¹⁷ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 220.

¹⁸ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 228.

¹⁹ Margaret Cavendish, *The Philosophical and Physical Opinions* (London, 1655), Wing / N863, B3v.

²⁰ See Lisa T. Sarasohn, “Leviathan and the Lady: Cavendish’s Critique of Hobbes in ‘The Philosophical Letters,’” in *Authorial Conquests: Essays on Genre in the Writings of Margaret Cavendish*, ed. Line Cottegnies and Nancy Weitz (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003), 40–58, and L. E. Semler, “Margaret Cavendish’s Early Engagement with Descartes and Hobbes: Philosophical Revisitation and Poetic Selection,” *Intellectual History Review* 22 (September 2012): 327–53. Cavendish had certainly read at least some of *Leviathan* by 1664, when she included a discussion of some of its natural philosophical ideas in her *Philosophical Letters*, although here she states of its political arguments: “I did not read that part of your Author” (sig. N2r). *Philosophical Letters* (London, 1664), Wing / N866, sig. Fv–N2v. For further discussion of Hobbes and Cavendish, see the chapters by Lisa Walters and Lisa Sarasohn in this volume.

²¹ Sarasohn, *Natural Philosophy*, 102–3.

deal of personal significance for Cavendish, whose families by both birth and marriage experienced extreme turmoil during the English Civil War and who remained loyal to the Royalist cause throughout the conflict and the Interregnum. As we will see, whatever Cavendish's personal feelings on the politics of nature, she voices and explores the Hobbesian position in fascinating ways in her literary writing.

Nature in *The Unnatural Tragedy* and *The Blazing World*

The Unnatural Tragedy, published in the 1662 collection *Playes* but probably written while Cavendish was still living in Antwerp in the late 1650s, is a play which, not least through its title, encourages the consideration of what it might mean to be "natural" or "unnatural."²² The word "natural," and cognates of it, appear sixty times in the play. In a most obvious sense, one might take the "unnatural tragedy" of the title to refer to the most prominent of the play's three plots. In this plot, which takes clear inspiration from John Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* (1633), a young libertine named Frere returns to France after having studied and travelled in Italy, and he develops an erotic fixation upon his sister, Soeur. Despite Frere's best efforts at convincing her of the moral rectitude of incestuous sex, Soeur persistently rejects his advances and remains faithful to her fiancé, Monsieur Mari. In this respect Soeur differs from her predecessor in Ford's play, Annabella, who initially returns her brother's affection and becomes pregnant by him, but the outcome nonetheless remains similarly apocalyptic to that of *'Tis Pity*: after numerous rejections, Frere rapes and murders Soeur before committing suicide, and Monsieur Pere drops dead instantaneously upon the discovery of the bodies of his two children.

It might seem very clear, on the basis of this account, where this play about incest, rape, and sororicide gets its name. Yet despite preparing the ground for readers to spring to the obvious conclusion that Frere's behaviour is unnatural, the play sets about complicating our assumptions in interesting ways. First, despite the persistent references to nature, the natural, and the unnatural in the play, Frere is never at any point accused by any other character of behaving unnaturally. Instead, this is an accusation that he levels at his sister when she refuses his advances:

Sisters should not be so unnatural as to be weary of a brother's company or angry at their grief, but rather strive to ease the sorrow of their hearts than load on more with their unkindness.

(4.1.3–5)²³

²² Alfred Harbage suggests the possible range of dates of composition as 1653–1662 but opts for 1658 as his proposed date. See his *Annals of English Drama, 975–1700: An Analytical Record of All Plays* (3rd ed.), revised by Simon Schoenbaum and Sylvia Stoler Wagonheim (London: Routledge, 1989), 154–56.

²³ Margaret Cavendish, *The Unnatural Tragedy*, ed. Andrew Duxfield, *EMLS Hosted Resources* (2016). <https://extra.shu.ac.uk/emls/iemls/renplays/The%20Unnatural%20Tragedy.pdf>, accessed June 3, 2018. All subsequent quotations refer to this edition.

A couple of scenes later, during a more frank advance upon his sister, he extends his argument further:

soeur How! Would you have me commit incest?
 frere Sister, follow not those foolish binding laws which frozen men have made,
 but follow nature's laws, whose freedom gives a liberty to all.
 soeur Heaven bless your soul, for sure you are possessed with some strange
 wicked spirit that uses not to wander amongst men.
 frere Sister, be not deceived with empty words and vainer tales, made only at the
 first to keep the ignorant vulgar sort in awe, whose faith, like to their greedy
 appetites, take whatsoever is offered; be it ne'er so bad or ill to their stomachs
 they never consider, but think all good they can get down. So whatsoever they
 hear they think 'tis true, although they have no reason or possibility for it.
 (4.3.12–22)

In his attempted persuasions of his sister, Frere employs a line of argument pursued by his antecedent, Giovanni, in Ford's *'Tis Pity*. In a discussion with his tutor and confessor, Friar Bonaventura, Giovanni asks the following rhetorical questions:

Shall a peevish sound,
 A customary form, from man to man,
 Of brother and of sister, be a bar
 'Twixt my perpetual happiness and me?
 Say that we had one father, say one womb
 (Curse to my joys!) gave both us life and birth;
 Are we not, therefore, each to other bound
 So much the more by nature?
 (1.24–31)²⁴

Giovanni and Frere each make essentially the same two points. First, they suggest that there is a natural bond between a brother and sister and that it is only natural that this bond should extend to sexual union. Second, they each stress that the laws which condemn acts of incest are not natural, but rather socially generated conventions. To observe edicts against incest is, for Giovanni, to adhere to a "customary form" passed down from "man to man." For Frere, it is to obey "foolish binding laws which frozen men have made." To behave naturally would be to disregard these artificial codes altogether, since "nature's law ... gives a liberty to all."

It would, of course, be foolish to assume that because Frere is allowed to say these things we are expected to take them at face value; Soeur's despairing response is a fair gauge of the outlandishness of her brother's argument. Nonetheless, by associating Frere's ideas with those of Hobbes, Cavendish lends them a veneer of philosophical seriousness. As discussed above, Hobbes argued that for a society to attain any degree of order, all individuals in that society must forfeit their personal liberty and submit to

²⁴ John Ford, *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, ed. Brian Morris (London: Black, 1990).

a single ruler, who represents and looks after the interests of the people collectively. Hobbes is clear that this is a sacrifice that a population is unlikely to be willing to make without some degree of coercion. In order for men to resist their natural urge to conflict, artificial restrictions must be put in place, but, crucially, these restrictions must not be seen to be artificial. Hobbes explains how this has historically been achieved:

And therefore the first Founders, and Legislators of Common-wealths amongst the Gentiles, whose ends were only to keep the people in obedience, and peace, have in all places taken care; First, to imprint in their minds a belief, that those precepts which they gave concerning Religion, might not be thought to proceed from their own device, but from the dictates of some God, or other Spirit; or else that they themselves were of a higher nature than mere mortals, that their Lawes might be the more easily received.²⁵

However depraved Frere's intentions are and however cynical his argument in justifying them might be, his attempt to demystify the authority of the codes that outlaw his desire seems to derive directly from the point Hobbes makes here. Where Frere's position differs from Hobbes's is that where Hobbes sees this coercion as a necessary and fundamental aspect of the creation of an orderly and functioning society, Frere sees it as a means of asserting priggish control over people's natural sexual freedoms.

Frere is not the only character in the play to think in this way. In one of the play's other plots, a group of young women going by the collective name of "the sociable virgins" engage in intellectual and sometimes radical debate on topics ranging from classical literature to women's place in politics while under the supervision of conventionally minded matrons. In one of these debates, the First Virgin states the case that the principle of monogamy runs directly counter to the natural inclinations of women, and is thus a principle which she intends to ignore:

1 vlrGln And the truth is that variety is the life and delight of Nature's works, and women—being the only daughters of Nature, and not the sons of Jove, as men are feigned to be—are more pleased with variety than men are.

1 Matr on Which is no honour to the effeminate sex. But I perceive, lady, you are a right begotten daughter of Nature, and will follow the steps of your mother.

1 vlrGln Yes, or else I should be unnatural, which I will never be.

(1.7.43–50)

The sociable virgins also echo Frere in demonstrating a Hobbesian understanding of how authority is manufactured. In a conversation about statecraft, the First and Fourth Virgins lament a modern failure to deploy pageantry as a means of generating authority:

4 vlrGln Indeed, princes are not so severe, nor do they carry that state and majesty as those in former times, for they neglect that ceremony nowadays, which ceremony creates majesty and gives them a divine splendour. For the truth is

²⁵ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 177.

ceremony makes them as gods, when the want thereof makes them appear as ordinary men.

vlr Gln 1 It must needs, for when princes throw off ceremony, they throw off royalty; for ceremony makes a king like a god.

(2.6.190–96)

As we have seen, Hobbes stresses the political expedience of rulers of making themselves appear “of a higher nature than mere mortals, that their Lawes might be the more easily received.”²⁶ Both Frere and the First Virgin, then, consider the artificial construction of social obedience a hindrance to their natural sexual desires, but they seem to differ over the necessity of this artifice; where Frere advocates the abandonment of the “laws of frozen men,” the sociable virgins follow Hobbes in seeing them as a necessary means of curbing humanity’s recalcitrant tendencies.

By focusing its central plot on an act that so directly provokes our most instinctive assumptions about what is and what is not natural, *The Unnatural Tragedy* encourages us to revisit and examine those assumptions. Engaging with Hobbesian notions of Commonwealth, it reminds us, in something like an *avant la lettre* deployment of the Marxist notion of cultural hegemony, that the values by which a society lives are not naturally occurring but socially constructed, and that these constructions serve to maintain state power. The play is equivocal over what we should make of this state of affairs, but it is forceful in bringing it to its reader’s attention.

Many of these ideas are returned to and developed in Cavendish’s utopian romance, *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World* (1666). *The Blazing World* recounts the adventures of a young, beautiful woman who is kidnapped by merchants and taken away on a ship. After a disaster at sea kills off her captors and leads the ship to the north pole, she finds herself transported to a new world of perpetual daylight that is peopled by fantastical human-animal hybrids. When the Emperor of this world meets her, so taken is he that he instantly marries her and grants her absolute power over his empire. In this newfound position of prominence, the Empress sets about establishing learned societies, enquiring about the cultural norms of her new home, and engaging in philosophical debate with hybrid animal-men and immaterial spirits, before establishing a platonic romance with the soul of the Duchess of Newcastle, with which she instantaneously travels between the Blazing World and Earth (which, it only at this point becomes apparent, is not the place from which the Empress originally came). In the second part of the text, the Empress learns that her home country is under attack from its neighbours, and she employs the powers she has developed as a natural-philosophical head of state to liberate it from its enemies and establish its dominance over its international rivals.

If *The Unnatural Tragedy* approaches questions of statecraft in an oblique manner, *The Blazing World* tackles them directly and explicitly. As a person newly introduced to the wielding of executive power, the Empress reflects at various points upon how her

²⁶ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 177.

world should be ruled. Again, the ideas of Hobbes are pertinent here. Shortly after the Empress-to-be arrives there, the narrator comments upon the seamless governance of the Blazing World, where there was “no more but one Emperor, to whom they all submitted with the greatest duty and obedience, which made them live in a continued peace and happiness, not acquainted with other foreign wars, or home-bred insurrections.”²⁷ In her early discussions with the hybrid animal-men, she engages them directly on the topic of their system of governance:

Next, she asked, Why they preferred the Monarchical form of Government before any other? They answered, That as it was natural for one body to have but one head, so it was also natural for Politick body to have but one Governor; and that a Common-wealth, which had many Governors was like a Monster of many heads ... so we are resolved to have but one Emperor, to whom we all submit with one obedience.

(72)

The repeated emphasis on unity calls to mind Hobbes’s definition of the Commonwealth as “one person” and, of course, carries a considerable topical freight in a text published soon after the Restoration, which marked the end of England’s experiment with a republican system of government.

During her own reign the Empress becomes anxious that she has lost sight of this principle of unity. At the heart of this problem seems to be her formation of various specialist schools of natural philosophy, each associated with a particular species of animal-man hybrid. The specialist interests of these schools bear more than a passing resemblance to work pursued by Royal Society figureheads like Robert Boyle and Robert Hooke; Sara H. Mendelson suggests that the hybrid creatures that make up the philosophical schools of the Blazing World “offer the perfect vehicle for a satirical attack on ... the arrogant empiricists of the Royal Society,” and that they facilitate a critique of “new science” more broadly.²⁸ Cavendish criticizes the new empirically focused science in two ways: first, the text implies, their highly specialised focus on distinct, individual problems militates against the consideration of the bigger conceptual questions that need to be answered in order to arrive at the truth, and, second, the specialization of scientific enquiry itself necessarily ensures the fragmentation of knowledge and understanding, which in turn increases the likelihood of political disunity. These concerns are encapsulated in a passage in which, after the Empress has instructed them to destroy their telescopes, the Bear-men plead with her to allow them to continue in their discipline:

The Bear-men being exceedingly troubled at her Majesties displeasure concerning their Telescopes, kneel’d down, and in the humblest manner petitioned that they might not be broken; for, said they, we take more delight in Artificial delusions, then in natural truths. Besides, we shall want employment for our senses, and subjects for arguments; for were

²⁷ Margaret Cavendish, *A Description of the Blazing World*, ed. Sara H. Mendelson (Peterborough, Canada: Broadview, 2016). All subsequent quotations from the text refer to this edition.

²⁸ Sara H. Mendelson, “Introduction,” in Cavendish, *Blazing World*, 37. See also Lara Dodds, *The Literary Invention of Margaret Cavendish* (Pittsburgh: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 149–50, and Sarasohn, *Natural Philosophy*, 1–14.

there nothing but truth, and no falshood, there would be no occasion for to dispute, and by this means we should want the aim and pleasure of our endeavours in confuting and contradicting each other.

(79)

The political fallout of this pursuit of “artificial delusions” at the expense of “natural truth” is made clear later in the text, when the Empress confides in the Duchess of Newcastle on the matter of her rule of the Blazing World. Regretting changes she had made to the system of governance she had inherited from the Emperor, the Empress tells the Duchess that

there are such continual contentions and divisions between the *Worm- Bear- and Fly-men*, the *Ape-men*, the *Satyrs*, the *Spider-men*, and all others of such sorts, that I fear they'l break out into an open Rebellion, and cause a great disorder and ruine of the Government.

(139)

The Duchess's response is to advise the dissolution of the various learned societies, since “'tis better to be without their intelligences, then to have an unquiet and disorderly Government.”²⁹ The key to both the understanding and the governing of the world, it seems, is unity.

While the satirical exchange between the Empress and the Bear-men associates specialization and factionalism with “artificial delusion” and unity and monarchy with “natural truth,” this association is complicated by other aspects of the text. As well as staging discussions of political theory which extol the natural virtues of absolute rule, the text also shows us absolute rule in action, and in doing so it casts it in a light more reminiscent of the complaints of Frere than of the endorsements of monarchy that we hear from the Duchess and the Empress. The first instance of this comes when the Empress becomes concerned about the state of the religion in her new home. “Pondering with her self the inconstant nature of Mankind, and fearing that in time they would grow weary, and desert the divine Truth, following their own fancies, and living according to their own desires” (101), the Empress sets about establishing two chapels that take full advantage of the extraordinary natural resources available in the Blazing World. The first of these, which serves as a chapel in which to preach “sermons of terror to the wicked” (102), is built with fire stone, a mineral substance that emits flames when exposed to water. This construction facilitates an extraordinary performance of ceremonial legerdemain:

and when she would have that Chappel where the Fire-stone was, appear all in a flame, she had by the means of Artificial-pipes, water conveyed into it, which by turning the Cock, did, as out of a Fountain, spring over all the room, and as long as the fire-stone was wet, the Chappel seemed to be all in a flaming fire.

(101)

The second chapel, built with the light-emitting “star-stone,” serves instead for the “Sermons of comfort to those that repented of their sins” (102). Thus, through an entirely

²⁹ Cavendish, *Blazing World*, 140.

artificial piece of pageantry, the Empress is able to establish her form of religion in the Blazing World, “for she knew well, that belief was a thing not to be forced or pressed upon the people, but to be instilled into their minds by gentle persuasions” (102).

A similar example of performative statecraft is provided later in the text, when the Empress again makes artificial use of the natural resources at her disposal. In this instance the goal is to awe her sceptical former countrymen, whom she intends to help in their war against their invaders, into a state of submission. Again deploying the remarkable properties of Blazing World stone, and also the help of the Fish-men, the Empress reveals herself to her people in a display of Christ-like divinity, achieved entirely by optical illusion:

The appointed hour being come, the Emperess appear'd with Garments made of the Star-stone, and was born or supported above the Water, upon the Fish-mens heads and backs, so that she seems to walk upon the face of the Water, and the Bird- and Fish-men carried the Fire-stone, lighted both in the Air, and above the Waters.

(149)

The effectiveness of this performance, which makes her appear “like an Angel, or some Deity” is clear, as her countrymen “all kneeled down before her, and worshipped her with all submission and reverence” (149). The same effect is achieved among the leaders of her countrymen’s enemies shortly afterwards (154); we are again taken back to the Hobbesian establishment of power that is alluded to in *The Unnatural Tragedy*. While the theoretical discussions that take place in *The Blazing World* assert the truthfulness and naturalness of unity and monarchical power, then, the text also shows that, as Hobbes acknowledges, the practice of exercising this power requires the assistance of artificial, unnatural illusion.

Despite making clear its efficacy, the text shows some signs of ambivalence in its treatment of this kind of Realpolitik. Mendelson argues that if we base our reading purely on the Empress’s behaviour, then *The Blazing World* might be said to entirely endorse Hobbesian absolutism as a means to maintain control over a potentially unruly populace, but she also suggests that if we cast the net wider over Cavendish’s writings, we can end up with the impression that she “was unable to decide between the divergent political philosophies voiced by her avatars.”³⁰ However much the Empress appears to relish the pageantry of statecraft, at points in the text she shows the strain of sustaining her performance of power. When the Duchess congratulates the Empress on her governance of a “peaceable, quiet, and obedient world,” she replies that “although it is a peaceable and obedient world, yet the Government thereof is rather a trouble, then a pleasure; for order cannot be without industry, contrivance and direction” (129). In fact, the kind of dominion about which the text seems most enthusiastic is that over worlds created in the imagination. The Empress is persuaded by the spirits when they suggest to her that inventing a world might be the most productive political activity she could undertake, for anyone who does so “may create a

³⁰ Mendelson, “Introduction,” 47.

World of what fashion and Government he will" (123). Cavendish also declares in her epilogue to the text that

my ambition is not onely to be Emperess, but Authoress of a whole World; and that the Worlds I have made ... are framed and composed of the most pure, that is the rational parts of Matter; which are the parts of my Mind.

(163)

Given that the creation of a world from nothing makes her own relationship to her created world analogous to that of nature with the material world, this might be the most natural kind of governance that there is.

In their own interesting ways, then, *The Unnatural Tragedy* and *The Blazing World* each reflect on the concept of nature and on its association with both power and creativity. *The Unnatural Tragedy* encourages an awareness of the constructedness of the codes that we take to be natural and by which we live. *The Blazing World* lays bare the process of these conventional codes being constructed. Neither text, though, seems to fully endorse or condemn this artifice; perhaps *The Blazing World's* advocacy of a retreat into the created worlds of the imagination is an acknowledgement that the governance of the "many-headed monster" of the real world is a problem to which there is no natural solution.

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