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Anticipating the Anthropocene in "The Hunting" Poems of Margaret Cavendish

The outer world of Margaret Cavendish, the duchess of Newcastle (1624?-1674) was unstable, irregular, and chaotic.[1] As an intelligent, energetic, and practical woman, Cavendish's writings boldly serve as vectors by which she sought to enter social, political, and intellectual discourse on her own terms, in order to voice philosophical interpretations and in turn exact widespread fame.[2] Still, as a woman from seventeenth century England, her works are tempered with both anxiety-slaking wit and poetic subterfuge. Cavendish's first work, *Poems, and Fancies: Written By the Right Honourable, the Lady Margaret Marchioness Newcastle* (1653), offers a unique exemplar of her engagement with these debates through fixed, printed medium.[3] Her relative wealth and privileged, albeit exiled, position within the elite status of society granted access to both the practical tools of publication and the social circles in which to participate in philosophical discussions. Rather than a needle and thread, or other feminized domestic industries such as housekeeping, or the rearing of children, these poems and "Fancies," most especially, proved to be the tools with which she honed and legitimized her philosophical *work*.[4]

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[1] The ODNB provides alternative dates for Cavendish's life. James Fitzmaurice, "Cavendish [née Lucas], Margaret, duchess of Newcastle upon Tyne (1623?-1673), writer," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

[2] Cavendish, "To all Noble and Worthy Ladies," in *Poems, and Fancies*. "…for, I had rather be praised, in this, by the most, although not the best: for, all I desire, is Fame."

[3] Tamara Tubb, "Print and Perception: The Literary Careers of Margaret Cavendish and Katherine Philips," *British Library Online*.

[4] Cavendish, "To the Reader," in *Poems, and Phancies*. "For first, I have no Children to imploy my Care, and Attendance on; Next, my Lords Estate being taken away in those Times when I Writ this Book, I had nothing for Houswifery, or thrifty Industry to Imploy my Self in; having no Stock to Work on." See also Lara Dodds, "Form, Formalism, and Literary Studies: The Case of Margaret Cavendish," Chapter in *World-Making Renaissance Women:*

Companion poems in this first publication, “The Hunting of the Hare” and “The Hunting of a Stag” both offer a reading of Cavendish’s inner world through the symbolic anthropomorphism of animals, providing a fanciful, poetic critique on emergent philosophies extolling human exceptionalism, political commentary on the toppled hierarchy, and the avarice intrinsic to man.[5]

“The Hunting of the Hare” and “The Hunting of the Stag” were first published in *Poems, and Fancies* in the wake of her visit to London in 1653. Due to the political upheaval of the civil war, Cavendish had been in exile on the Continent since 1644. Later, with her husband, that banishment became populated with famous *philosophes*, like René Descartes, John Donne, and Constantijn Huygens. As Brandie Siegfried states, “Cavendish did not, in short, develop her ideas in isolation.”[6] In 1651, she made the journey to England with her brother-in-law Sir Charles Cavendish, in order to petition the what would be the Interregnum government for a pension.[7] Although her claim was not without merit, the Cavendish estates had been pillaged and sold off due to her husband William’s status as a Royalist combatant, and she was denied.[8] Given this state of affairs, it is possible that the mindset from which she wrote these poems was one of powerlessness, especially in relation to the Commonwealth government, the regime she would have seen as responsible for the regicide of Charles I as well as the inhibitors of her receipt of pension.[9] While “The Hunting of the Hare” allegorizes a criticism on contemporary philosophies

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Rethinking Early Modern Women’s Place in Literature and Culture, edited by Pamela S. Hammons and Brandie R. Siegfried (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 139.

[5] For a full chronology of Cavendish’s works, see e.g. Lisa Walters and Brandie R. Siegfried (eds), *Margaret Cavendish: An Interdisciplinary Perspective* (Cambridge, United Kingdom; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 289. And see hunting poems under analysis at: Cavendish, *Poems, and Phancies,* 134-142.

[6] Brandie R. Siegfried (ed.), *Margaret Cavendish, Poems and Fancies with The Animal Parliament* (Tempe, AZ: Iter Press & Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2018), 1-2.

[7] *Idem.,* 7. For more about Sir Charles Cavendish, see e.g. E.I. Carlyle and Timothy Raylor, “Cavendish, Sir Charles (1595?-1654), mathematician,” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

[8] Siegfried, *Margaret Cavendish, Poems and Fancies with The Animal Parliament*, 7.

[9] *Ibidem*.

that promote human exceptionalism, "The Hunting of a Stag" portrays the regicide of Charles I through, as Anne Elizabeth Carson points out, "transformation of the self-satisfied stalwart into a creature who comes to realize his infinitesimality in the face of impending death."[10] Through these hunting poems, therefore, Cavendish can be seen to comment on the powerlessness of her state in the political hierarchy through empathizing with the animals, and the ultimate sacrifice of kingly order to man's insatiable avarice. Indeed, this utilization of employing the motif of persecution and prey imitates Charles I's own posthumous work, *Eikon Basilike*.[11]

Interestingly, although hunting was a unique aristocratic sport allowing female participation, Cavendish peoples both poems solely with men.[12] Indeed, she decenters their humanity entirely, comingling man and dog in a highly visceral sense. In the *Hare*,[13] Cavendish merges the imagery of hunters' horns and braying dogs through the blending of their sounds, "The winding Horns, and crying Dogs he hears;" (28), and:

> Then Horns blew loud, the rest to follow on:
> The great slow Hounds, their Throats did set a *Base*;
> The Fleet, swift Hounds, as *Tenours*, next in place,
> The little Beagles did a *Treble* sing,
> And through the Air their Voices round did Ring,
> Which made such Confort as they Ran along,
> That, had they Spoken words, 't had been a Song; (66-72)

Seen thus, the hunters and the dogs work in harmonic unison to bring down the victimized hare. This imagery is extant in the *Stag* as well: "Then Men and Dogs did Circle him about, / Some

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[10] Anne Elizabeth Carson, "The Hunted Stag and the Beheaded King," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 45, no. 3 (2005), 552.

[11] *Idem*., 544. For Charles I's work, see Charles I, King of England (1600-1649), *Basiliká the Works of King Charles the Martyr: With a Collection of Declarations, Treaties, and Other Papers Concerning the Differences Betwixt His Said Majesty and His Two Houses of Parliament: With the History of His Life: As also of His Tryal and Martyrdome* [Eikon basilike], (London: 1687).

[12] Donna Landry, "Green Languages? Women Poets as Naturalists in 1653 and 1807," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 63, no. 4 (2000), 468.

[13] Henceforth, I will refer to "The Hunting of the Hare" and "The Hunting of a Stag" as *Hare* and *Stag*, respectively.

Bit, some Bark'd, all Ply'd him at the Bay" (136-37). As Carson reiterates, this is a blending of dog and man whereby "Cavendish combines the men with the dogs, no distinction made between the two classes of hunters, both engaged in bestial acts."[14] Echoing Mihoko Suzuki, through this use of anthropomorphic instrumentalization of man and beast conjoined, Cavendish is able to blend human and animal in terms of their exploitative predation, which also "indicts the cruel overkill," and "hypocrisy" of man.[15] Indeed, some lines in the *Hare* read: "When they do Lyons, Wolves, Bears, Tygers, see, / Kill silly Sheep, they say, they cruel be:" and "Yet Man doth think himself so Gentle, Mild; / When, of all Creatures, he's most Cruel, Wild:" reflecting Cavendish's rejection of human exceptionalism (91-92, 101-102).

Furthermore, the instrumentalization of dogs' and mans' voices through both poems can be interpreted as criticism of Cartesian dualism. Forming part of the Cavendish Circle, through René Descartes' presence and correspondence, Cavendish would have been offered ample opportunity to engage and formulate opinions surrounding his philosophical theories.[16] As Holly Faith Nelson points out, "while Cartesian dualism endorsed and legitimized the hierarchical binary opposition of humanity and beast," his "primary evidence of the mindless beast was the absence of speech."[17] Whereas Cavendish keeps both the hare and the stag mute throughout the poems, she shows both creatures as capable of expression and emotion during the hunts, and further, imbues them with spirit. Consider these animals at the moment of their deaths: the hare, "Then, tumbling down, he fell; with weeping Eyes / Gave up his Ghost: and thus poor Wat he dyes," (81-82) and the stag, "But Fate his Thread had Spun, he down did fall, / Shedding some

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[14] Carson, "The Hunted Stag and the Beheaded King," 547.

[15] Mihoko Suzuki, "Animals and the political in Lucy Hutchinson and Margaret Cavendish," In Special Issue: "Lucy Hutchinson" *The Seventeenth Century* 30:2 (July, 2015), 230.

[16] Siegfried, *Margaret Cavendish, Poems and Fancies with The Animal Parliament*, 6.

[17] Holly Faith Nelson, "'Worms in the Dull Earth of Ignorance': Zoosemiotics and Sexual Politics in the Works of Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle," *English Language Notes* 39, no. 4 (June 1. 2002), 13.

Tears at his own Funeral." Cavendish punctuates Wat's death with a ghost, indicating a spiritual quintessence, the anima that Descartes rejects for the animal world. Furthermore, the stag is subject to the thread of fate, which can be seen in a similar personifying light. In the classical tradition, the Moirai were goddesses who spun "individual destinies to mortals at birth."[18] However, it should be noted that these deities controlled all others' fates – even fellow gods and goddesses. Thus, Cavendish insinuates that all creatures are subject to fate; it is not only humans themselves who are elevated through possession of an immortal soul, refuting "man," who sees mankind as exceptional.

As Nelson demonstrates, this belief is also in opposition to Hobbes, who in Leviathan concludes that, "if speech be peculiar to man (as for ought I know it is,) then Understanding peculiar to him also."[19] Indeed, though the hare "Wat" is silent throughout the poem, through his deep connection to the Earth, Cavendish may be signaling practical intelligence. As "Betwixt two Ridges of Plowd-land sat Wat, / Whose Body press'd to th'Earth, lay close, and squat," demonstrates, the hare's close connection to the land in sheltering from the elements relates rationality (1-2). Furthermore, lines 5-8 show "His Head he always set against the Wind, / His Tail when turn'd, his Hair blew up behind, / And made him to get Cold; but he being Wise, / Doth keep his Coat still down, so warm he lies:" describing a calculating reason to the hare's existence within this pastoral setting. Similarly, the stag "In Summer's Heat he in Cool Brakes him lay, / Which being High did keep the Sun away;" conveying a shared pragmatism of animals existing in tandem with nature, upon the Earth (7-8).

Outside of the events coloring the era of publication, another useful way in which to view the poems as metaphors engaging with socio-political discourse can be to consider how

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[18] Jenny March and Neil Barrett, "F," In *Dictionary of Classical Mythology* (Oxbow Books, 2014), 197.
[19] Nelson, "'Worms in the Dull Earth of Ignorance,'" 16.

Cavendish freights certain characteristics with gendered meaning. This dissection and analysis of discrete aspects will attempt to blazon the poems' literary attributes. As hunting poems, both are imbued with a masculine action and take place in a feminized nature. While the pastoral form generally centers around shepherds, as a genre it can be seen as an idyll of the natural world.[20] This is important, and central to certain aspects of Cavendish's ecocentric views,[21] as "nature, *n*." (IV.11.a) is often employed in lyric as a framework for understanding the world, especially through the classical, mythological guise of personification as "Nature" (IV.10.b). Within *Poems, and Fancies,* Cavendish deploys this usage from the first page of the "Poems" section, writing, "When *Nature* first the World's Foundation laid, / She call'd a Council, How it might be made (1-2).[22] Therefore, Cavendish may be seen to conceive of N/nature as a feminized creator.

However, as can be seen in "Earth's Complaint," Cavendish distinguishes between the deified Nature and the personified Earth: "O Nature, Nature! Hearken to my Cry; / I'm Wounded sore, but yet I cannot Dye: / My Children which I from my Womb did bear, / Do dig my Sides, and all my Bowels tear:" (1-4).[23] Seen thus, Mother Earth laments to *Nature* about her children—"Mankind" – but confusingly, though Earth is their mother (having come from her womb) it is *Nature* who decides their characteristics. Either way, Nature and Earth are gendered female, but while Nature controls mankind by imbuing them with innate features, Earth is passive, enduring inertly as "They plow deep Furrows in my very Face;" (5). While Stewart Duncan suggests these furrows represent "mining,"[24] I diverge and connect both practices of

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[20] J. A. Cuddon, "pastoral" in *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, 5th ed. (Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley and Sons, 2013), 517-19.

[21] Aaron R. Hanlon, "Margaret Cavendish's Anthropocene Worlds," *New Literary History* 47, no. 1 (2016), 53-54.

[22] Cavendish, *Poems, and Phancies*, 1.

[23] Cavendish, "Earths Complaint" in *Poems, and Phancies*, 129.

[24] Steward Duncan, "Margaret Cavendish, Environmental Ethics, and Panpsychism," S*outhern Appalachian Undergraduate Philosophy Conference* (February, 2018).

mineral extraction and her later allegorized aspects of agriculture as equally exploitative and linked to consumption, thus offering multiple readings.[25] Through this lack of satiety, therefore, Cavendish casts mankind as cruel, ecocidal, and by extension matricidal by *Nature* (IV.10.b), though by the ambiguity of verbiage it can also be seen to be one and the same with man's *human nature,* (III.7.a), the basic and flawed disposition of mankind.[26]

Both the *Hare* and the *Stag* instill this flaw inherent to mankind through the pursuit of hunting. Though ostensibly the hunt is linked to providing meat for the table, Cavendish derides this notion in the *Hare*, provocatively stating, "As if God did make Creatures for Mans meat, / And gave them Life and Sense for Man to Eat," and "Nay, so Proud, that he only thinks to Live, / That God a God-like Nature him did give, / And that all Creatures for his Sake alone / Were made, for him to Tyrannize upon." (95-96, 103-06) Furthermore, in both poems, Cavendish refers to hunting as sport, or recreation, rather than as a means for providing sustenance.[27] Interestingly, while "Wat" is seemingly without appetite, the Stag delights to eat "Winter-Sav'ry," and "Wheat-seed," (43, 52).[28] While the *Stag* poem's pastoral landscape reflects a paradisiacal landscape, visually populated with greenery and foliage prior to the chase, the stag is not portrayed as feed for the hunters like "Wat," suggesting a vein of deeper nuance to study in reading these poems as companionate.

"The Hunting of the Hare," and "The Hunting of a Stag" by Margaret Cavendish comprise of 106 and 140 lines of iambic pentameter written in heroic couplets. As epic poetry in a pastoral setting, these works provide a narrative punctuated with appreciation for the natural

[25] Cavendish, "Earths Complaint" in *Poems, and Phancies*, 129. "Man cannot reach the Skys to Plow and Sow; / Nor can they Set or make the Stars to grow; / But they are still as Nature did them Plant," (9-11).

[26] "nature, *n*.," *OED Online*. December 2022. Oxford University Press.

[27] See e.g. "The Hunting of the Hare," line 97, and "The Hunting of a Stag," line 60, Cavendish, *Poems, and Phancies*, 137, 139.

[28] Cavendish, "The Hunting of a Stag," in *Poems, and Phancies*, 139.

world, colorful descriptions, jarring cacophonies, abject terror, and ecocritical commentary. Therefore, Cavendish utilizes these *Hunting* poems as vehicles with which to discursively subvert Cartesian dualism and human exceptionalism, allowing the reading to experience the terror of the hunt from the point-of-view of the quarry. While decentering the man-made hierarchy, she yet participates with it—although the stag is clearly an allegorized version of her martyred king Charles I, "Wat" the hare is a hungerless, powerless, feminized cypher, making little impact on his environment, resting often, and even preening himself (40-42). Indeed, as Laurie Shannon discusses, the hare's skittish and serpentine movements resultant from "eons of predation" is inherently feminized, pointing out that in early modern sources, the "hare is gendered female here as much for her wiles as her vulnerability."[29]

As this analysis has shown, without a doubt, Margaret Cavendish imbricates multiple meanings within her verse. Despite her unique elite position in the seventeenth century social order, she leverages her status of powerlessness and marginality during the poems' composition. Through her *Hunting* poems, Cavendish allows the reader to empathize with the animals, rather than the human hunters, elucidating her notions regarding the cruelty of a sport that subjects animals to terror. Moreover, these poems suggest an equality of beings, man and creature are alike in the hierarchy of the world that begins with and is dependent upon *Nature*—Earth itself is even subject to Nature's casting of mankind with ecocidal tendencies. In sum, Cavendish levels all beings as subject to Nature, and in allowing the animals souls, criticizes contemporary philosophical discourse. Importantly, Cavendish exposes similarities embedded within Nature, the natural world, and women. However, against the backdrop of the English Civil War, when the ordered stability of society was upended by political strife and deadly violence, Cavendish's

[29] Laurie Shannon, *The Accommodated Animal: Cosmopolity in Shakespearean Locales* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 115-117.

hunting poems offer an inversion this trope to convey criticism of class, gender, and political instability. Cavendish’s particular situation during this poem’s publication can also be seen as inherently unique to its composition, all the while ensuring man’s hypocrisy and tyranny is in full view of the reader. Thus, the *Hare* and *Stag* poems can be seen to presage the realities of the Anthropocene, in all their gory impact, through the proto-feminist lens of a privileged, yet marginalized, seventeenth century noblewoman writing her way to everlasting fame.

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