

Anne M. Thell, “[A]s lightly as two thoughts’: Motion, Materialism, and Cavendish’s *Blazing World*.” *Configurations* 23.1 (2015): 1-33.

Anne Thell’s essay explores the ways in which Margaret Cavendish’s imaginative text, *Blazing World* (1666), dramatizes and challenges the theories of organic materialism in her scientific treatise, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* (1666). Thell categorizes *Blazing World* within the genre of travel writing, and this proves key to understanding its interrelations of motion, mind, and matter. In Cavendish’s fictional work, travel becomes representative of rational and imaginative thought. While in *Observations* Cavendish considers everything, including the soul and mind, to be both material and in perpetual motion, Thell argues that *Blazing World* additionally supplies the possibility to fantasize about moving beyond materiality.

As Thell explains, *Observations* and *Blazing World* were published as companion pieces. Fascinatingly, Thell suggests that by understanding *Blazing World* as a “fictional travelogue” it becomes clear that Cavendish appropriated the genre of travel writing because it represents “a primary vessel of the experimental program she wished to critique,” particularly in its demonstration of the scientific method and use of related instruments and rhetoric (2). Thell reveals that, in many ways, Cavendish’s materialist theory counters mechanical philosophy, and this is especially true of her view of motion, in which “to *be* is to *know* and to *move*” and “thinking itself requires the active *motion* of the rational parts of matter” (3). Providing an extensive survey of relevant recent scholarship, supported by impressively thorough footnotes, Thell nevertheless expresses surprise at “how few scholars take [Cavendish’s] philosophical ideas seriously” and thus seizes this opportunity to examine those theories, particularly of motion and materialism (6).

Thell relates that Cavendish is “rationalist in that she posits reason (and not sensory perception) as the basis of all knowledge” and “materialist in that she denies the existence of incorporeal spirits in nature” (8). According to Cavendish’s organic materialism, everything in the universe is comprised of matter that is “continuous, infinite, and interdependent,” and everything in nature includes “inanimate, sensitive, and rational parts” (9). In other words, everything in nature has the capacity to perceive (even a “stone”), but different parts sense and reason in different ways (10). Detailing this materialism in terms of Cavendish’s theory of motion, Thell exemplifies a billiard stick that hits a ball, explaining that mechanists would attribute the ball’s movement to “the transfer of motion from one body to another,” but Cavendish instead attributes the ball’s motion to “conscious action,” positing that the ball moves itself “freely” and “by its own motion” so that it “perceives its circumstances and consciously moves itself” (12). Thell thus describes Cavendish’s theory of motion as conceiving a kind of “panpsychism” in which motion “is based on rational awareness and communication between parts within a unified and continuous organism” (13).

Further, in Cavendish’s materialist hierarchy, rational parts can move in various actions and therefore direct sensitive and inanimate parts (14, 16). Indeed, “the more rational matter moves the more it thinks” and has the potential for creation through imagination, which itself is material because “produced by the material motions of the mind” (19). This imaginative power is on display in Cavendish’s *Blazing World*, which conveys “both a sense of fabled wonder and the promise of important new information”

(19). Moreover, *Blazing World* investigates whether rational parts might be better off “without the burdens of inanimate and sensitive parts” (25). Cavendish imaginatively presents this possibility of purely rational worlds through this text’s description of “soul-to-soul transit” (29). Finally, Thell briefly examines a play that Cavendish may have intended for publication with these other two texts and, although the drama is incomplete, like *Blazing World* it explores the possibility of “a purer, imagined ‘matter’” in association with thought (32).

Eruditely examining overlaps and differences between Cavendish’s *Observations* and *Blazing World*, Thell’s article expands our historical understanding of ideas about mind, matter, and motion. Her insights into *Blazing World* as participating in, and critiquing, the genre of travel writing are particularly original and intriguing, especially in their linking with theories of motion. Establishing that Cavendish’s works constitute much more than merely a feminine critique of masculine science, Thell explains the fascinating intricacies of Cavendish’s organic materialism as it differs from mechanism. In this vein, she points out surprising moments of revelation, as in the descriptions of concepts such as conscious matter. Ultimately, the main contrast Thell sets up between *Observations*, in which everything is material, and *Blazing World*, in which imagination may provide an escape from material reality, provokes questions about the extent to which science is capable of melding with imagination, and this contributes to a line of thought that would be debated by various authors throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

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