5 Margaret Cavendish on Women's Autonomy, Political Skepticism, and Republican Values¹

Sandrine Bergès

Introduction

The 17th century is a foundational period as far as contemporary political thought is concerned, particularly in England, where the political upheavals of the civil war prompted intellectual debates on the nature of political sovereignty and on the legitimacy of various forms of governments. The relationship between liberty, on the one hand, and security and stability on the other was an especially strong concern, as the republican ideals of classical philosophers were enjoying a revival. Philosophers questioned whether citizens could maintain a sufficient degree of independence, or autonomy, while living under a monarch, and whether such autonomy as could be obtained was necessary for the flourishing of the individual or the state. Yet, despite the obvious applications of these debates to what it meant to be a woman in 17th-century society writings of that period from women philosophers are far and few between. If this is because women did not begin to participate in political debates until the 18th century, then it might suggest that the foundations of what we have come to consider as political philosophy were erected by men thinkers only and that women's thought tagged on to something that was already there.² In the light of this, any contribution to political philosophy from a woman of that period is significant in that it will help establish what role, if any, women's perspectives played in the development of political philosophy as we know it. Male writers of that period often omit to take into account any aspect of life that pertains to the home and family, focusing merely on the "public" aspect of political life, i.e. government and rebellions. Thus, reflections drawn from a woman's experience on how politics developed in and impacted the so-called private domain would be particularly valuable.

In this chapter, I bring one such writer to the debate. I argue that Margaret Cavendish's political writings are particularly interesting as she attempts to create a path between conservative monarchism on the one hand, and views that are sometimes associated with republicanism on the other. I will be cautious not to identify her views with republicanism, as I do not think it is possible to attribute her views to a particular school of republican

thinking, but instead will highlight the difficulties she herself had identifying with one particular school of political thought.

Cavendish's association with Hobbes (who dined with the family during their Paris exile) may suggest that Cavendish was not only a royalist, but that she also supported absolute monarchy, whatever form it might take. This makes any attempt at reading her political writings through a republican lens seem rather wrong-headed. Yet, it has been done, and done well.³ What are the motivations for asking whether any part of Cavendish's thought could be described as republican? First, Cavendish lived during a period when many philosophers turned to the thought of Machiavelli, or Cicero, and attempted to revive the old republican ideals in a way that they could be applied to the current situation. Secondly, a century later, women political philosophers embraced republicanism as a way of rejecting not only political tyranny in general, but the gender based tyranny they experienced.⁴ A third reason may be that investigating republican tendencies in Cavendish is a way of arguing that she was not simply parroting Hobbes, and that she had original political thoughts of her own. Even if, as I will argue, her republican tendencies are very limited, investigating what they were may help us tease out what was original about her political philosophy.

In what follows, I will investigate some of the issues linked to reading Cavendish as a political philosopher concerned with freedom and autonomy, especially with regards to women's condition, first by suggesting that she may have combined a certain degree of respect for republican views with a deep skepticism as to whether they would be appropriate in any context. In the second section, I look at how some of her republican concerns are developed in her short fiction, and conclude that despite clear sympathies with some republican concepts, there is no evidence that she did embrace republicanism as a viable alternative to monarchy. I suggest that, to some extent, some of her concerns may be interpreted as republican-inspired resistance to Hobbes's conception of autonomy understood as a form of negative liberty.

1. Hobbes, Cato, and Political Skepticism

When critics accused her of stealing ideas from philosophers she encountered in her husband's patronage, Margaret Cavendish replied—in print—that she had never exchanged more than a few words with Mr. Hobbes, and none about his philosophy, and that all she had read by him was “a little book called *De Cive*.” (*An Epilogue to My Philosophical Opinions*, in Cavendish 1663). When, a year later, she published her *Philosophical Letters* (Cavendish 1664), she engaged mostly with his natural philosophy, noting in *Philosophical Letters* I.13 that

seeing he treats in his following parts of the politics, I was forced to stay my pen, because of the following reasons. First, that a woman is not employed in state affairs, unless an absolute queen. Next, that to

study politics is but loss of time unless a man were sure to be a favourite to an absolute prince. Thirdly, that it is but a deceiving profession and requires more craft than wisdom.

(Cavendish 1664, 47)

Looking beyond the rhetorical denial of expertise, it is useful to study the actual content of what Cavendish says in *Philosophical Letters* I,13.⁵ First, she does not say that women are not, in principle, capable of engaging in politics—but that in practice, they will only be allowed to do so if they are absolute monarchs. Secondly, she makes a claim that is almost as strong with regard to men—they need to be sure that an absolute monarch will always listen to them before they can hope to engage usefully in politics. Third, she casts doubt on the value of all political activity, saying it requires craft, not wisdom. All this seems to put less of an emphasis on women than it does on politics itself, with the addendum that women are even less likely to make a difference for the better than men are.

Cavendish's stated reasons for not engaging with Hobbes on political philosophy is that politics is but a waste of time and that no one, especially not a woman, can hope to make any difference for the better. Although it is clear that women, in particular, would have found the idea that they might participate in politics laughable, to some extent, this applied to men as well. When Elisabeth of Bohemia asked Descartes that he should outline an account of civic duties, Descartes responded that he was not suited to the job:

I lead a life so retired, and I have always been so distant from the management of affairs, that I would not be less impertinent than the philosopher who wanted to instruct on the duty of a captain in the presence of Hannibal if I were to undertake to write here the maxims one ought to observe in civil life. I do not doubt that those your highness proposes are the best of all: that is that it is better to regulate oneself in this regard according to experience rather than according to reason, since we have rarely come across people who are as perfectly rational as all men ought to be, to the extent that one could judge what they will do solely by considering what they ought to do.

(Shapiro 2007, 137)

Interestingly, Elisabeth had a vested interest in the question, as she had been called upon to advise her teenage brother, who was proposing to lead an army against the Turks. But women who were not princesses, and who had no occasion to participate in politics, tended not to write about it.

Descartes makes it quite clear that this inability to comment on political matters is related to a lack of autonomy. He is forced, he says, to put himself "in the power of fortune," which is the furthest one can be from self-rule. In Sociable Letter 16, Cavendish similarly ties lack of political influence to the power of self-determination. Women, she says, are neither citizens, nor

subjects of the king, and only barely subjects to their husbands. This means that they have no legal standing, which has the potential to render them “more enslaved than any other creature,” but they are also not accountable and have no duty to perform that will serve the kingdom.

Another way of reading Cavendish’s reluctance to engage with Hobbes’s political philosophy is to see it as a consequence of what David Cunning has called her fallibilism, i.e. her belief that “our cognitive capabilities are highly limited” in so far as uncovering and especially understanding causal relations is concerned (Cunning 2016, 28). If “natural magick [sic]” must, to a large extent, remain a mystery to us, then it would be surprising if we were more clear-sighted as far as human social and political relationships are concerned. But despite her skepticism about our scientific abilities, Cavendish does not seem to think we should give up on pursuing scientific knowledge. The ideal of the “undoubted truth” in natural philosophy, she says, plays a similar role to that of the philosopher’s stone: it cannot be found, but while we search for it, we will discover other useful facts.⁶ And just as Cavendish’s skepticism about our scientific abilities does not lead her to conclude that we should give up our scientific pursuits, her political skepticism does not mean that she will not ask philosophical questions about politics. Her skepticism seems to be to political participation, rather than to philosophical enquiry into political questions. In other words, the point of doing political philosophy may not be to provide guidance to rulers or politicians, but it might help us understand human social arrangements better than we currently do.

So whereas we might expect Cavendish to refrain from offering advice to her correspondent where she feels that it will be useless to her, she may well at the same time engage elsewhere on philosophical reflections that are not meant as practical advice. Indeed, her *Orations of Divers Sort* (1662) do just that. In *Sociable Letters* 175 (Cavendish 1997, 240–1), she replies to a friend asking her to set out her thoughts on political philosophy in writing, that although as a woman she knows nothing of the practical matters of war and peace, she has indeed begun to write a series of political orations. But the fact that Cavendish is not presenting herself as a political expert in these orations means that they are not straightforward to interpret.⁷

1.1. *Skepticism About Rebellion in the Orations*

The point of a series of orations on various topics expressed from various points of view would be, no doubt, a way of showing off one’s expertise in rhetoric. Yet, Cavendish tells us she has no formal learning that would allow her to develop such expertise, and even if she is not telling the whole truth (she demonstrates a certain familiarity with the rules of rhetoric and possibly had read Hobbes’ translation of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*), she is hardly setting herself up as a teacher and advertising her prowess at speech making (James 2003, xxiii). She does tell us, however, that she introduced the

different view points in answer to complaints by her readers that she was "unduly forthright" in expressing her opinions (James 2003, xxii).

The section of the *Orations* where one expects to see Cavendish's view on republicanism is the last one, entitled "Orations in a disordered yet unsettled state," and I would like to focus briefly on Oration 153 in that section "To hinder a rebellion" in which a king addresses his people, on the brink of rebelling, and puts to them that they are incapable by nature to live without external rule, that the capacity for autonomous rule which would be required to set up a republic has been bred out of them:

Yet put the case you should have victory, you will sooner make a confusion than settle the kingdom into a republic, for the nature and constitution is not for it, as having been bred up a long time to monarchy, so that you may sooner change the nature of man into a beast than the government of this kingdom into a republic.

(James 2003, 267)

Orations 153 suggests that, as we suspected from reading *Philosophical Letters* I,13, Cavendish is a political skeptic, in the sense that she questions whether for any given political action it is likely to achieve the good it aims for, or whether the realities of political life will get in the way of these goods. *Philosophical Letters* I,13 merely states that position, but here we see an argument developing. The reason why it is pointless to attempt to effect sudden political change is because such change would fail to take into account and thus have any effect on long-term habits developed by citizens, and present in their institutions. In other words, for the change to be successful it would have to be social and cultural as well as political. But if a rebellion can upend a political system, it takes rather more to change social and cultural practices and habits.⁸

Secondly, Cavendish seems convinced that a sudden political upheaval will result in chaos and confusion, that newly appointed rulers will not be able to re-establish order, as the sharing of power will result in confusion in *Orations* 67 "A King's Speech to his Rebellious Rout":

[W]hich absolute power cannot be divided amongst many, for if everyone hath liberty to do what he list, not any man will have power to do what he would; for liberty will be lost if everyman will take upon him to rule, and confusion will take place of government. Thus striving for liberty you will thrust yourself into slavery, and out of ambition to rule you will lose all government. [. . .] Wherefore your best way is to submit and obey, to be content to be ruled and not to seek to govern, to enjoy your rights and to revenge your wrongs by law and justice, and not to make war and confusion to destroy yourselves.

(196)

Liberty for all, therefore, is incompatible with each living according to their own will. Cavendish here is suggesting that it is impossible for her contemporaries to become autonomous subjects. They cannot, she claims, both set out their own laws and live by them—if they attempt it they will find themselves enslaved to a greater extent than even before. Here we note also the Hobbesian inspiration: Without absolute power of the state, we may not enjoy any of our liberties, whereas, under a sovereign, at least we have some rights. But there is a different sort of emphasis being placed, an emphasis on sudden change from an established monarchy to a republican government, through rebellion. The reason why a revolt against a king will not result in a stable government that protects our rights and freedom is that the new order will not have the opportunity to organize itself into a successful government, to share the power between its members in an effective manner. In this sense the argument resembles that of *Orations* 153: We cannot hope to establish anything stable suddenly, and, without stability, a nation will return to a Hobbesian state of nature in which no-one enjoys any liberty. Thus, Cavendish's political skepticism takes on a more tangible form. What she seems to be worried about is the wisdom of sudden, revolutionary political change. She does not believe that a revolt against the existing order is likely to lead to the conditions necessary for the foundations of a new order. Because starting a republican government will require more organization and co-operation between large numbers of people than an absolute monarchy would, it follows that she is mostly skeptical about the project of creating a republican government through rebellion.

1.2. *Reading Cato's Life*

Research in the history of reading suggests that early modern readers of the classics tended to read works on political theory and history “for action,” that is, theirs was “a close and informed reading, with a diplomatic or political end in mind” (Jardine and Grafton 1990, 44). They looked in the texts for a model of how a virtuous subject or citizen should act, and sought to imitate the actions depicted in those texts, to study strategy, or government. Aristotle's and Cicero's *Constitutions* were thought of as models, Livy's *History* as a textbook for when to obey and when to rebel, Plutarch's *Lives* as a model and inspiration for virtue. This of course applied to male readers. A female reader would not have been perusing Plutarch looking for military tips. And indeed, women were not supposed to read Plutarch, or at least not those books of his that dealt with military virtues. Women's readings were supposed to bring them closer to home, showing them portraits of virtuous women of antiquity, and holding them up as an example. So, in this sense, male and female reading practices were the same: Both had to seek exemplars and adjust their lives accordingly, but given the passivity of females exemplars, a woman's reading can hardly be described as being “for action.” Citing Thomas Salter, the author of a mirror for women, Dodds

outlines what a 17th-century woman's reading should be about: seeking to become more like the virtuous roman women depicted in Plutarch's *Morals*, turning their attention to developing their wifely and home-making virtues (Dodds 2011, 48). Because she is reading Cato's life for political insight, Cavendish is unusual. At the same time, because she is a "deviant" reader, we should not expect her interpretation to offer a straightforward message. Her praise of Cato's character, even if sincere, is not unambiguous, and certainly does not apply to his political choices, i.e. support the Republic to the point that he will commit suicide rather than see it perish.

The specific worry about republican revolts explains her objection to Cato's resistance, in *Sociable Letters*, Letter 187, where she discusses her reading of Plutarch's *Lives*.⁹ Reading the story of Cato, she tells us: "makes me love the memory of Cato, for his courage, honesty and wisdom, and for the love of his country." But, she goes on, he was wrong in thinking that he died for his country when Rome went from being a republic to a monarchy, because:

[A]lthough he knew the old government was so corrupted as it caused riots, tumults, seditions, factions and slaughters, killing and murdering even in the market place, so as it could not be worse what chance soever came, but was probable a change of government might make it more peaceable and safe; wherefore Cato did not kill himself for the peace and unity of his country, but rather for the government.

(Cavendish 1997, 198)¹⁰

What then can this letter tell us about Cavendish's attitude to political change? It does not suggest, for one thing, that monarchy is obviously better than a republic. What Cavendish says is that the republic Cato knew was very bad, corrupted, and that nothing new was likely to be worse. This could be seen as a way of saying that all republics are doomed to corruption, but there is no evidence in the text that this is what she meant. It could also be read more simply as the claim that a new system is always better than one that has become corrupt, and that one should look at the potential stability of that new system, rather than its ideological underlying. And given that it is easier to establish an absolute monarchy than a republic in a state of emergency, then a monarchy replacing a republic is likelier to be successful than a republic replacing a monarchy. Therefore there is no contradiction between my readings of *Oration* 67 and *Sociable Letter* 187. Sensible people who truly love their countries, Cavendish tells us, will discount ideological preferences for more practical solutions—and this means avoiding rebellions, but if they are unavoidable because the old system is too corrupt, then preferring a new government that will not require a lot of co-ordination for its establishment, i.e. a government where one person is in charge.

Taking the letter on Cato together with the *Orations* and *Philosophical Letters* I,13 leads to the following interpretation. Cavendish is not just

skeptical that political ideology can make a positive difference to political practice and the fate of a nation, but also that change—unless the position of origin is the worst it could possibly be, as in Cato’s Rome—is generally dangerous and to be avoided. Cavendish, it seems, does not believe human beings capable of getting themselves sufficiently organized to form a sound government on the back of a rebellion. This leads her to fear political change, or at least sudden change. One problem with this interpretation is that it clashes with another reading of the Cato letter, one in which Cavendish blames Cato for his fear of change. As Dodds says: “For Cavendish, Cato’s celebrated constancy becomes a naive fear of change that blinds him to the true conditions of his circumstances” (Dodds 2011, 206). However, it seems to me that Cavendish is criticizing Cato for caring so much for the type of government that he is blind to what is happening to his country. If he cared for the people and not the ideology, he would gladly let the change happen. Instead, he is blindly holding on to a principle of choosing the practical change that would rescue his nation from disaster.

I conclude this section with the claim that there is a good presumption that Cavendish was a monarchist by default, that her support of the king was more due to her belief that change is hard and that her contemporaries were not fit for it, than to a philosophical rejection of republican principles. This ties in to the skepticism we observed in the first part of this section: Republicanism requires not just thinking, but acting, and Cavendish does not believe that she or anyone else is capable of acting in the ways that are required—whether because their character is not trained to do so, or because they would need support from more people than are willing and able to help. In that sense, Cavendish can agree with Hobbes on the necessity of absolute power, but on contingent, rather than necessary grounds, for practical, rather than philosophical reasons, and thus leaving room for accepting certain republican values and principles. I will investigate the extent to which she does that in the next section.

2. Women, Slaves, and Republican Freedom

Despite her unflinching backing of the monarchy and her strong warnings against rebellion, it is clear that Cavendish regards freedom and autonomy (in the republican sense, where autonomy is understood as independence) as things to be valued and sometimes defended. Lisa Walters argues that her position on freedom situates Cavendish as part of the republican ideas that were at the center of the civil war. According to her, Cavendish “articulates republican beliefs about tyrannicide, self-defence, natural rights and popular sovereignty” (Walters 2014, 195). Walters does not claim that Cavendish embraced the republican theories of her time, and does not suggest that she would have read Harrington, or indeed any sustained republican argumentation. But, she says, Cavendish could not have failed to pick up on the views that played such a central role in the civil war. To this we might

add that, of course, she was familiar with Roman republican views, as she clearly knew her Plutarch. But we should be careful about attributing her any particular set of republican beliefs: even if she saw merit in some of their views, this did not amount to a systematic defense, or even acceptance of any republican view, whether Roman, Cromwellian, or of the kind we now call neo-republican.¹¹ The beliefs she articulates are isolated, and to be taken together with her more conservative views, rather than part of a system.

2.1. *Self-Defense and Liberty in Assaulted and Pursued Chastity*

Walters and Karen Detlefsen have shown that Cavendish's apparently republican views are mostly to be found in her fiction and drama—but elements can also be seen in her non-fiction work, in particular the *Sociable Letters* (Walters 2014 and Detlefsen 2012). In this section, I will focus on a short story published in 1656. *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity*, the tale of a rich and virtuous young lady, returning from exile to her family after a civil war, who is shipwrecked and captured for the sake of prostitution.

A prince comes to the brothel where she is held in order to be the first to rape her, and Miseria (as she calls herself then) threatens him with a pistol, claiming that

[I]t is no sin to defend myself against an obstinate and cruel enemy, and know said she, I am no ways to be found, by wicked persons but in death; for whilst I live, I live in honour, or when I kill or be killed, I will die for security.

In that passage, the heroine is emphasizing that she sees the prince, not as a figure of authority whom she ought to obey, but as a threat she ought to defend herself against. There is a degree of ambivalence as to whether this is a radical move, as the prince, although he is the ruler of the land she is in, is not her ruler as she is captive and not a subject of his kingdom and therefore does not owe him obedience. Walter interprets the passage as part of

a unique political theory of self-defense, one which does not merely articulate an individual woman's right to self-preservation, but also engages with republican polemics that perceived self-defense as a key political concept for protecting commonwealth from tyranny or arbitrary power.

(Walters 2014, 195)

In the light of my reservations above, it is not clear whether we should accept Walter's interpretation. First, the idea that one has the right to defend oneself even against a king is not necessarily, by itself, a republican one. Hobbes believed the same.¹² Perhaps more importantly, Hobbes did not

believe that a slave could be bound by a contract, and therefore, had no duty of obedience, whether or not their lives were threatened. As I suggested, Miseria is a captive, and enslaved at the point the Prince comes to rape her, and not a subject. Thus this does not constitute by itself evidence of republican thought. There is, however, some evidence that Cavendish intends her heroine's rebellion to go much further. After she threatens him with a gun, the prince decides to take Miseria home to his palace to live, in the hope that she will become his mistress. She attempts suicide and then escapes, dressed as a man, and sets sails again. This time, she is shipwrecked on an island where cannibalism is practiced and slavery endemic: the government, which she describes as Tyrannical, and all the common people are enslaved to the royal family. The slaves, who are to be eaten, are kept like cattle, bred and fattened, and killed in such a way as not to decimate the race. Travellia (as she is now called), revolted by this practice, decides to learn the language of the island and pretend to be a god. She uses her influence to liberate the slaves:

And to you beloved people, the Gods commands Piety in your devotion; Obedience to our King; Love to your neighbour; Mercy to your Enemies; Constancy to your friends; Liberty to your Slaves; Care and industry for your Children; Duty to your parents.

One relevant difference between Travellia's freeing of the slaves and Miseria's attempted tyrannicide is that when she is Travellia, she is no longer a slave herself, and her motivations cannot be self-defense. But is she freeing the slaves because she believes slavery is wrong, or because she finds that this particular type of enslavement, of an entire people for the purpose of eating them, is distasteful? In the *Sociable Letters*, 65, Cavendish does in fact advocate that common people should be "kept like cattle" not for the purpose of being eaten, but to prevent them getting ideas above their station which might lead to rebellion.

Wherefore the Commons should be kept like Cattle in Inclosed Grounds, and whensoever any did Break out of their Bounds, they should be Impounded, that is, the Commons should be kept strictly, not to Exceed their Rank or Degree in Shew and Bravery, but to live according to their Qualities, nor according to their Wealth.

(Cavendish 1997, 78)

It is unlikely, thus, that the act of Travellia in *Assaulted Chastity*—assuming that in both pieces Cavendish is speaking with something like her own voice—is motivated by a republican distaste for slavery.

Another problem with reading *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity* as evidence that Cavendish, despite her royalist affiliations and sometimes absolutist tendencies, also held some republican views is that most of what she

says in that story is contradicted elsewhere. In a later story, *The Blazing World*, she does not favor the idea that one should defend one's liberty against arbitrary power. The empress of the *Blazing World*, when faced with dissent and factions amongst her people, is advised by her friend, the disembodied soul of the Duchess of Newcastle, to resume a more absolutist rule:

She would advise her Majesty to introduce the same form of Government again, which had been before; that is, to have but one sovereign, one Religion, one Law, and one Language, so that all the World might be but as one united Family, without divisions.

(Cavendish 1668, 87)

2.2. *Hobbesian Absolutism and Powers in the Blazing World and the Plays*

Blazing World, much like *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity*, tells the story of a woman who is captured and threatened with rape but frees herself and goes on adventures, discovering new worlds. But whereas in *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity* the heroine is only all powerful for a moment, when she poses as a god, in *Blazing World* the heroine becomes empress of the world she discovers and later of her old world too. She is therefore the most powerful person in the universe, and she is not in any way subject to arbitrary power, so perhaps she has no reason to resist it. In *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity*, the heroine finds herself prisoner on several occasions, so subject to the power of those who would not only restrain her liberty, but also rape her and possibly eat her. She has all the reasons in the world to resist. Perhaps this perspectival view of the call to resist explains why Cavendish also believes that rulers should not tolerate resistance of any kind,¹³ and why she even goes so far as to compare the people in a monarchy to cattle, arguing that letting them attempt to cross social lines would constitute a threat to security (Cavendish 1664, 78). So whatever republican leanings she may have had and are displayed in some of her works, she seems nonetheless committed to a Hobbesian view of the necessity, or at least desirability of protecting the commonwealth through an absolute regime.

But even so, the story does not end with Cavendish simply adopting a Hobbesian justification for absolute monarchy. Karen Detlefsen has pointed out that there are in fact significant differences between Hobbes and Cavendish on the question of liberty, which differences entail that it would be much harder for Cavendish than for Hobbes to advocate absolute monarchy (Detlefsen 2012, 158). In particular, Detlefsen argues that Cavendish disagrees with Hobbes because she is able to think about liberty from a woman's perspective.¹⁴ For Hobbes, having the liberty or not to act in a certain way depends on having the power to do so, so that my not being able to fly (because I have no wings) does not make me unfree in any way, it does not affect my autonomy. Autonomy, for a non-flying creature, does not

involve the ability to decide whether or not to fly, and, for a person without the capacity to form moral or political judgments, it does not imply the capacity to make important life decisions. Autonomy here, is simply to be free from impediments to self-directed motion. If we decide, all things considered, that we want to move and nothing external stops us, then that counts as autonomy in the Hobbesian sense. We cannot decide, all things considered, to fly like a bird if we know we have no wings. Being autonomous in the Hobbesian sense requires awareness and acceptance of one's natural limitations or powers. This is where Cavendish departs from Hobbes. Cavendish understands that for women, to lack a certain power translates into a lack of freedom if the reason they lack that power is an internalized custom.

It is in her plays that Cavendish most clearly articulates the degree to which women have less power and thus less freedom than men, and that this difference is caused by unnatural, wholly conventional reasons. In one, *The Convent of Pleasure* the heroine refuses to marry because "Men [. . .] make the Female sex their slaves" (Cavendish 1668, 30). In another play, *Youth's Glory*, a young woman dresses as a man to seek experience and an education. She does so with her father's blessing because he understands that her rationality is impeded by her female upbringing and that she will lead a better life if she can get an education.

Detlefsen (2012, 157–58) notes that for Cavendish one does lack freedom when one lacks power, and in her plays she clearly articulates the degree to which women have less power and thus less freedom than do men for unnatural, wholly conventional reasons, due to their diminished rationality, due to their poor education. In other words, Cavendish asks the reader to look out for internal as well as external obstacles to motion.¹⁵

One very clear example is that of Cavendish herself, who because she lacked the power to read Latin could not converse on an equal basis with the male philosophers and scientists she sought to engage in debate. She could not read what they had read, nor, for the most part, what they wrote. Her freedom to participate in the debates of her time was seriously impeded by this lack. Again, for instance, a woman who does not have the power to think critically and engage in argument with men will not be in a position to manage her family's property and defend her financial interests when she is widowed—as Cavendish's mother did for a long time. But such powers can only be acquired through education, and, as Cavendish writes in her *Sociable Letters*, women typically do not receive the sort of education that would be useful for defending their interests (let alone participate in philosophical and scientific debates!) (Skinner 1990, 136).

Cavendish's reluctance to accept that a lack of power rules out the question of liberty also translates into a disagreement with Hobbes about domination. As far as Hobbes is concerned, a citizen who acts out of fear is still free because "when such a person acts, it will still be because he possesses the will or desire to act in precisely the way in which he acts" (Hobbes 1985, 262).

Feare and Liberty are consistent; as when a man throweth his goods into the sea for *feare* the ship should sink, he doeth it neverthelesse very willingly, and may refuse to doe it if he will: It is therefore the action of one that was *free*.

(Hobbes 1985, 262)¹⁶

One need only turn to news stories of refugees coming from Syria in overcrowded boats to understand how callous this account of freedom is. There is no freedom to be had in moving from one loss to another, especially when one is making the decision under the pressure of fear. In some cases, the pretense that we are free may be yet another tool to oppress us, as for example in the case of the woman forced to choose which one of her two children will die in the novel *Sophie's Choice*. But, more generally, the citizen who acts out of fear that a ruler may intervene in her life in an unpleasant way and therefore chooses to act in such a way as to avoid such intervention is dominated: Her choices are determined by her fear of what may, very possibly, be done to her, given the political setting she lives in.

By emphasizing the role of education in the development of one's natural powers, Cavendish shows that Hobbes's view that fear does not affect liberty leaves no room for the idea that powers, though they may be natural, need to be developed, and that the use of fear as control prevents powers from developing. A person who is dominated will not grow to the full of their potential. This is very clear from the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft, for instance, who argues that women, although they are in principle equal to men in all respects, are not in fact, for the most part, capable of using their reason or their bodies in a way that a man would, as the growth of their faculties has been stunted by their education (or lack thereof) and by habits formed through customs.¹⁷

What Cavendish brings to the discussion on liberty, therefore, is not a demand that there should be more, but a cautioning that what Hobbes understands as lack of powers, and therefore not an obstacle to exercising one's liberty may in fact be the repression of power, or at least, its atrophying through lack of appropriate development.

Cavendish, then, it would appear, has a subtler analysis of freedom based on powers. Because she thinks that we need to pay attention to internal obstacles to action, and not simply "external impediments," her conception of autonomy is quite different from Hobbes and informed by some aspects of republicanism, i.e. liberty as non-domination. She understands that powers are shaped by laws and customs, and that under certain circumstances, they can either fail to develop or develop in such a way as to minimize the liberties they entail. Fear is one way to prevent the growth of powers, and indeed this is very much a trope in the philosophy of the 18th century, in particular in philosophers who argued for the need for individuals to develop their autonomy, such as Kant and Wollstonecraft. Both argued that those that most needed to rebel and fight for their autonomy suffered from a fear of their

own potential (the powers they might and should develop) internalized from their social and political environment. A woman who has been brought up to see herself as a fragile and dependent being (Wollstonecraft 1993, 112) or a peasant who has been led in everything like a beast of burden (Kant 1983, 41) will not want to fight for liberty, for they will be afraid to fail. Thus, Detlefsen tells us “fear and liberty are inconsistent for Cavendish. As a result, the realm of unfreedom is considerably wider for Cavendish than it is for Hobbes” (Detlefsen 2012, 159).

Cavendish recognizes that being afraid is not simply a reason to choose not to act, but perhaps more importantly, a cause of not developing one’s innate powers. This has the following implication. Cavendish does seem to accept that monarchy is the best constitution in 17th-century England, in that it affords the best protection against our inability to muster the sort of co-operation that setting up and maintaining a republic would require. But Cavendish also recognizes that there is more to autonomy than the absence of impediments to the exercise of one’s existing powers. She understands that the downside of absolute monarchy is that it may prevent the development of powers in certain members of society and that these will be disadvantaged and perhaps more the victims of the system than its beneficiaries.

Notes

- 1 I am grateful to Lars Vinx and Bill Wringe for their careful comments on an earlier draft, and to Eric Schliesser and the audience of the Duke New Narratives conference in April 2016 for their comments and to Alberto Siani for his careful reading and suggestions.
- 2 There were other women in the 17th century who wrote political philosophy, such as Marie le Jars de Gournay, Gabrielle Suchon, and Mary Astell, as well as women petitioners during the Civil War. See Broad and Green 2009. But all of them, like Cavendish (and perhaps to a greater extent, even), are still considered somewhat marginal to the development of modern political philosophy.
- 3 See especially Walters 2014.
- 4 See, for instance, Mary Wollstonecraft, Catharine Macaulay, Sophie de Grouchy, and Marie-Jeanne Phlipon Roland.
- 5 This apology is not an isolated occurrence, and at least twice in the *Sociable Letters*, published that same year, she concludes by stating that as a woman she ought not to voice an opinion about politics (*Sociable Letters* 65 and 67). Of course in the *Sociable Letters* these denials come after she has done just that, i.e. expressed her philosophical opinion on a political matter, just as in *Sociable Letters* 127, she follows two pages of sustained literary criticism by concluding that women are not fit to judge on these matters. This denial of expertise is a common enough trope amongst women writers at times or places when their opinion on substantial matters was unlikely to be welcome or taken seriously. No doubt, there is also an element of self-distrust and dissatisfaction with her own lack of formal education, which prevents her from reading classic texts except in (often, summarized) translations. In the “Preface to the Reader” of the *World’s Olio* (1655), she argues at length that whatever is wrong with her book must be put down to the fact that she is a woman, and therefore has less powerful (“softer” and “colder”) brains than men.

- 6 See *Philosophical Letters* 507–509, and Cuning, 31.
- 7 Broad and Green warn us that: “On political subjects, Cavendish often makes “Declamations” in which she considers the pros and cons of a position, but she rarely takes a positive stand of her own. It is thus extremely difficult to differentiate between Cavendish’s genuinely held views and those that she defends simply for the sake of rhetorical effect” (Broad and Green, 2009, 202).
- 8 Note that this view is not Hobbesian, as Hobbes would not grant traditions any weight in his attempt to rationally justify absolutism (I owe this point to Lars Vinx, minus the split infinitive.)
- 9 She would have read *The Lives* in Thomas North’s translation from the French, like Shakespeare cf (Dodds, 2011, 203).
- 10 Dodds 2011, 205, suggests that Cavendish’s admiration for Cato is also generic, what one is expected to say upon reading Plutarch’s *Lives*. But although she is unrestrained in her criticism of his suicide—“even the wisest men may err”—she also notes that his act was more admirable than that of those who killed Caesar, for it was only the result of a mistake, and not a sign of envy. She concludes the letter by reminding us of his honesty.
- 11 It is also important to note that republican beliefs need not be in opposition to monarchy as such: if a monarchy were to be set up so that any arbitrariness was checked and compensated by public deliberation, then it could be termed republican, at least according to some writers—for instance, Montesquieu.
- 12 “If the Sovereign command a man (though justly condemned,) to kill, wound, or mayme himselfe; or not to resist those that assault him; or to abstain from the use of food, ayre, medicine, or any other thing, without which he cannot live; yet hath that man the Liberty to disobey” (Hobbes 1985, 21).
- 13 “Though a king may err in his government, yet a people errs more in their rebellion, for the greatest tyrant that ever was never so destroying or cruel as a rebellion or civil war, for this makes a dissolution, whereas the other makes but some interruptions” (*Orations*, James 2003, 78).
- 14 This is not to say that Hobbes would disagree about the specific points Cavendish makes about women’s powers and liberties, but that perhaps he had not taken them under consideration which resulted in him adopting a particular theory that Cavendish wants to modify.
- 15 “[Women should be] instructed and taught more industriously, carefully, and prudently, to temper their passions and govern their appetites, [. . .] for their education is only to dance, sing and fiddle, to write complemental letters and to read romances, to speak some language that is not their native, which education is an education of the body and not of the mind, and shows that their parents take more care of their feet than their head” (Cavendish 1997, 36–37).
- 16 Hobbes draws the example from the *Nichomachean Ethics* 1110a.
- 17 For a defense of this argument, see (Bergès 2009, 82–85).

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