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Margaret Cavendish and the Skeptical Tradition

The following chapter brings attention to Margaret Cavendish's engagement with ancient and modern forms of skepticism in her late works *Observations of Experimental Philosophy* (1666) and *Grounds of Natural Philosophy* (1668). I analyze the significance of Cavendish's discussion of skepticism within the context of the reception of Pyrrhonism and Stoicism in early modern philosophy, to demonstrate the distinctive contribution of a female philosopher to the legacy of epistemological skepticism. I highlight Cavendish's assessment of specific forms of skepticism—ancient skepticism or Pyrrhonism, and early seventeenth-century skepticism—and the ways Cavendish herself integrates elements of skeptical methods into her natural philosophy. Cavendish's epistemology has gained more attention in the past decade, with scholars often arguing that her later works reflect a skepticism. Although many of these analyses emphasize her "skeptical" attitudes towards innovations in experimental philosophy of her time, they do not account for the unique form of skepticism implied in her methodology. While I consider Deborah Boyle's and others' evaluations of Cavendish's "modest" skepticism, my own analysis suggests the centrality of skepticism for Cavendish. Her distinctive skepticism sets limits on what can be known absolutely but relates to a central principle of her natural philosophy, namely the infinite variety of relative ways of knowing. The paper concludes by assessing the role of elements of her skeptical method within her earlier social and political writings, such as *Blazing World* (1666), *Philosophical Letters* (1664), and *Orations of a Divers Sort* (1663). My analysis offers philosophical context for her more controversial affirmations of absolute monarchy and religious hegemony, revealing the skeptical underpinnings of her reflections, and connecting them to her later epistemology.