

Cassandra Gorman. 2021.
The Atom in Seventeenth-Century Poetry.
Cambridge: D. S. Brewer

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Among the multiple codes, images, and topics that fed into early modern English literature, atomism became a very productive perspective from which to write philosophical verse. In this thoroughgoing monograph, Cassandra Gorman overcomes not only the already classical—and too general—approaches to cosmic order and early modern English poetry (Tillyard, 1970), but also more recent debates on the relationship between the material and the immaterial during the same period (Knapp, 2022). In the five chapters of this book, Gorman explores the narrowest scope of this correlation: that of the atom, which, as both material reality and metaphor for the divine, pervaded the verses of Henry More, Thomas Traherne, Margaret Cavendish, Hester Pulter, and Lucy Hutchinson. After an introduction that contextualizes the early modern interest in atomism in light of Francis Bacon's *De sapientia veterum* (1609), the first half of the book covers the first two authors' main compositions to discuss "the 'atom' singular" (21), a symbol of stability and permanence. The second half explores the poetics of "the 'atom' plural" (21), since Cavendish, Pulter, and Hutchinson were fascinated by "the liberating power of atoms to dissolve and reconstitute into renewed and resurrected forms" (22). These and other writers participated in the so-called "atomic renaissance of the seventeenth century" (27), with its convenient integration of Epicureanism into Christianity and Neoplatonism.

Having established a solid philosophical background, Gorman heads for the particularities of each of the five authors' poetics of the atom. The first chapter analyses Henry More's "hybrid Platonic-Epicurean atomism" (38), which relies on the principle that, like the atom, humans participate in both their own earthly materiality and their connection to God's absolute immanence. In his *Philosophical*

Poems (1647), drawing on, but also deviating from, Cartesian atomism, Henry More defends the existence of “indivisibles,” renamed as “indiscerpibles” in *The Immortality of the Soul* (1659) and the *Divine Dialogues* (1668). These substances—essentially spiritual, but capable of physical interaction—are considered irreducible: they have extension but are divisible only to the human’s intellect (44–45). More attributes this atomic essence to all living creatures, yet maintains the old Platonic longing “to reconnect with the overarching world soul” (54) as an insatiable need that is distinctive of human nature. As Gorman concludes at the very end of the chapter, the connection between atomism and More’s vital congruity depends on the fact that, for this author, atoms are “ensouled” entities, which turns them into “an explorable emblem of the divine” (73).

The atom also found a privileged place of worship in Thomas Traherne’s manuscript verse; in his *Commentaries of Heaven* (ca. 1673), the author makes of the atom the quintessence of the created world, “a connecting-point between body and soul, time and eternity, humanity and the divine” (79). Traherne’s atoms are imbued with a soul-like spiritual potential. It is only by means of “active contemplation” (96) that this potential can be exploited; Traherne resorts to poetry, which is “characteristically active” (96), to explore the atom-soul correspondence. A writer of both philosophical prose and verse, Traherne emphasizes the function of the latter as “a physical medium equipped to observe divine entities” (98) and more specifically to transmit the Pythagorean connection he sees between atomic movement and metempsychosis (102). The very writing of verse, which varies between shorter and longer forms, facilitates active contemplation: “The metrical movements of the verse enact the soul’s wondrous ability to contract its focus and to ‘Dilate’, encompassing not merely creation, but ‘Eternitie’” (110). In Traherne’s works, therefore, the atom becomes “a vessel for divine knowledge and act” (114), expressing its creative potential in the contractions and expansions of metrics.

Two other seventeenth century authors who explored the poetic possibilities of the individual particle atom were Margaret Cavendish and Hester Pulter, whose atomic perspectives are analyzed together in chapter 4. At a time when any author’s creative potential was still balanced between the perils of *vanitas* and the self-aggrandization

of phantasy (Archdeacon 2022, 125–32), these women’s “chemical vitalism” (121) stood not only for the particle itself but also for their defense of individual female authority and self-knowledge. Cavendish’s works, where natural philosophy and fiction go hand in hand, offer their most accurate explorations of atomism in the opening compositions of her *Poems and Fancies* (1653). Drawing on the faculty of “fancy” or “creation” (153), Cavendish pictures herself as the creator of world made up of atoms that come together to generate infinite new dimensions. In “A World Made by Atoms,” “Of Loose Atoms,” “What Atoms Make Life,” and the rest of her opening poems, Cavendish’s atoms avoid both determinism and chaos, as they move freely but only to occupy specific positions in the poem-world. If the creative force of fancies are distinctive of Cavendish’s printed poetry, Pulter’s insights into atomism, kept in the manuscript form, resort to the visual art of the emblematic poem. Deprived of both *pictura* and *motto*, these emblems concentrate images of atomic dispersal and dissolution which connect the human with the divine. Pulter’s faith relies on the principle “that physical destruction is the necessary first stage of the resurrection process” (134). In “The Hope” and similar compositions, death annihilates all things by turning them into indivisible particles that can aspire to rebirth only by means of divine trust (139). Contrary to Cavendish’s insistence on creation, it is “the promise of world-breaking rather than world-making” (140) which defines Pulter’s faith in resurrection. Despite these differences, there is a relevant parallelism between both authors’ atomism: like Cavendish’s fancies, Pulter’s emblematic poems allowed her to reinforce her own authority, since she “moves to associate her shifting perception of self-identity with the movement of indivisible particles” (145).

The last chapter of the book analyses the works and theories of Lucy Hutchinson, who followed two fundamental sources, Lucretius’s *De Rerum Natura* and the Bible’s *Genesis*, for the writing of her major opus, *Order and Disorder* (1679). The work itself was a reinterpretation of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, printed twelve years before; its title accounts for Hutchinson’s belief that “human experience of disorder and change unveils the promise of divine order” (187). An innovative approach, indeed, considering that “the fear of chaos and the fact of mutability” had straitjacketed the works of philosophers and poets less than a century before, insomuch as change and

corruption represented a menace for the ideal cosmic order (Tillyard 1970, 25–26). The concept that governs Hutchinson’s distinctive experience is the atom: incarnated in Adam, the immortal atom indicates resurrection after disintegration or the apparent melting into nothingness. When reading Hutchinson, “through the combined mediums of scripture, the Adam and the atom, we learn mankind shall be restored once more to the original state of ‘Paradise’” (197). In *Order and Disorder*, Hutchinson Christianizes the atom, picturing it as a divine particle, the first and original dust, the ultimate principle which will allow human beings to regenerate and reach the promised land after death.

As Gorman states in the afterword to her exhaustive study, the works of More, Traherne, Cavendish, Pulter, and Hutchinson comprise a varied yet coherent “poetics of the atom” (215) throughout the seventeenth century. A key idea for the understanding of this new vogue is that it is verse, not prose, which carries the weight of atomism. In a recent article, Gorman (2023) demonstrates that a previous manifestation of this scientific theory was already present in the lyrics of Elizabethan poets such as Sir Philip Sidney and Michael Drayton, who offered an atomized portrait of Cupid in sonnet form. The authors studied in this monograph chose the more elevated style of philosophical poetry to explore, although from different approaches, the same dual correlation, that which linked the generative potential of the individual atom with the author’s creative mind, and the infinite possibilities of atomic movement with a rich variety of poetic forms. As Gorman successfully proves in her study, the atom, with promises of vitalism, harmony, and resurrection, found in seventeenth-century poetry a fruitful art form for the exegesis of multiple material and spiritual mysteries.

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How to cite this review:

Vera-Reyes, María. Review of Casandra Gorman, *The Atom in Seventeenth-Century Poetry* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2021). *SEDERI* 33 (2023): 112–16.

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