Erin Webster. *The Curious Eye: Optics and Imaginative Literature in Seventeenth-Century England.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. xii + 212 pp. + 9 figures. $ 85.00. Review by Eileen Reeves, Princeton University.

"Curiouser and curiouser," cried Alice as she bade her feet farewell, "now I'm opening out like the largest telescope that ever was." We might repurpose that memorable phrase, and even the strange simile that accompanies it, to describe Erin Webster's study of the mutual engagement of natural philosophy and literature in early modern England. It is not just that the argument gains cumulative force as it moves from an opening emphasis on late sixteenth-century English poetry as a particular type of optical technology and on the Royal Society's claim to have extracted from its members "a close, naked, natural way of speaking," to a persuasive examination of embodied vision as it emerges in the anxious formulations of Robert Boyle and Abraham Cowley, and onstage in Aphra Behn's *Emperor of the Moon.* Webster's work also maintains in its six brisk chapters careful attention to the critical tradition associated with the texts under scrutiny and its own original and nuanced reconstruction of this odd cultural moment.

The central claim of *The Curious Eye* involves the deployment of metaphor and simile as means of variously isolating, magnifying, enhancing, stabilizing, or naturalizing particular and shared features in what might be otherwise unrelated entities. These rhetorical structures, whether masked by the indulgent or semi-apologetic "as it were" or "so to speak" in natural philosophy or boldly introduced with the accoutrements of alliteration and assonance and the familiar resources of the epic simile, act as lenses: they present to the reader likenesses normally too fleeting, too minute, too far, or too far-fetched to be grasped. As Webster shows, it is no accident that this selective rather than simply mimetic function of poetry, and its correlative agenda of idealization and distortion, emerged alongside crucial developments in optical instruments and in explanations of the eye itself. The instruments here, unsurprisingly, are the *camera obscura,* increasingly often equipped with a lens and deployed to observe eclipses and sunspots as well as to project nearby landscapes, the magnifying glass, valuable to curious naturalists and aging readers alike, and the telescope, its

deficiencies and relative rarity remedied, to a degree, by an avalanche of mediating texts, images, and performances. Such tools clearly called for active interpreters of the confusing data they provided, and just as these figures in their turn translated optical information into a persuasive idiom of similitudes, so anatomists and natural philosophers, following the lead of Johannes Kepler, increasingly favored the intromissionist theory of vision. In that model, a schematic image of the world without entered the eye, imprinting itself momentarily on the *tabula rasa* of the retina. Whether the aperture involved a living, sentient being, or a dead one, or the oval opening of a *camera obscura,* the resultant image, as Kepler realized, required the still shadowy intervention of "the tribunal of the soul."

Thomas Hobbes, among others, suggested that these intromitted images had a shelf-life of sorts, that they were subject over time to decay, to compression, and to fantastical combinations. Rather than a forthright celebration of the revelatory function of imagination and imaginative literature, thinkers associated with the Royal Society emphasized their distance from conventional efforts to delight and to persuade readers; Robert Boyle's comparison of the pernicious effect of such rhetorical displays to the distorting effect of the colored lenses adopted by those who trained telescopes on the sun makes the alarming absence of such filters the mark of the heroic observer. Webster notes that the experimentalists, their predecessor Francis Bacon, and their spokesman Thomas Sprat indulged frequently in figurative language themselves but claimed to favor the explicit and workmanlike similitude to the smooth or showy contours of the metaphor, as the latter appeared to acknowledge neither the mediated nature of vision itself, nor the subsequent distortion of linguistic description. Given the novel emphasis on the optical technology of language, the celebrant of the sober scientific style emerged from an authorized elite, one as well equipped with discernment as with proper instruments; within this context, as Webster shows, Robert Hooke presented the micrographic image of the louse in a manner at once literal and metaphorical, depicting the alien, slightly repugnant creature as that familiar target, the courtier. Such strategies are only multiplied and magnified, to use the obvious terms, in Margaret Cavendish's *Blazing World:* this narrative functions as an engaged critique of the postures

of the experimentalists, foregrounding their narrative strategies and systematically exposing the useful fictions of a uniform scale and a stable perspective.

Webster attends carefully to the sociopolitical dimensions of the emergent "empire of knowledge," showing their entanglement in the epistemological claims of discovery and invention. Here as before she presents Cavendish's work as a critique of the experimentalists' unwillingness to recognize the situated, mediated, and contingent aspects of their findings. On this reading, the arena most free from sociopolitical and epistemological pressure is not the domain of the established and well-equipped empiricist, but rather the author's interior cognitive space, perhaps best captured by the noun "fancy," with its gendered connotations of ornamentation, extravagance, and capriciousness. Webster also privileges Cavendish's steady resistance to the notion that increased visual access to places, persons, and objects would somehow reveal their inner workings: there was neither a continuum between surface and soul, nor any particular guarantee of the legibility or communicability of mental activities of the sovereign self. Those several chasms between sensory experience, private sentiment, and public expression become all the more relevant when Webster moves from René Descartes' conclusions concerning the eye's dependence on the divine supplement of the "natural light of reason" to the spectacle of blindness and poetic insight on display in John Milton's *Paradise Lost.* The epic's narrator, like Galileo Galilei, the "Tuscan artist" whose accounts of telescopic phenomena appear suspended somewhere between sensory certitude and fantastic conjecture, emerges as a seer whose similitudes offer readers momentary flares of otherwise invisible truths.

A correlate of the providential view of Creation—the notion that natural phenomena made visible the work of the Creator and were therefore scaled to and destined for eventual human perception—eroded over the course of the seventeenth century. But in a compelling chapter devoted to perspective as a conceptual tool, Webster explains the close structural echoes of theological similitudes in presuppositions and operations of infinitesimal calculus as developed by Isaac Newton and Gottfried Leibniz. She goes on to connect the contentious emergence of the latter discipline with the painterly treatment

of celestial space in the cupolas of early modern churches, as well as with Milton's own dizzying shifts of perspective and conjuring of innumerability and limitlessness in Pandemonium. Less austere matters, but no less energy, attention, and originality characterize the final chapter of *The Curious Eye:* her persuasive reading of Behn's *Emperor of the Moon* presents the play not just as a critique of the soft target of the Virtuoso, but also as a careful reflection on the convenient fictions of the experimenter's innocent eye, his austere objectives, his neutral instrument, his disembodied self, and on the patriarchal system required to sustain such poses.

This study manages both crucial attention to detail and a carefully articulated historical arc, and Webster offers throughout generous and informative syntheses of others' critical arguments before going on to delineate her own and often more nuanced position. While the oversized contributions of the usual suspects from the Continent—Kepler, Galileo, Descartes, Pascal—punctuate the narrative, the focus is for the most part on the English ambit. The relevance of England's nascent empire to these natural philosophers is persuasively presented in the third chapter. But the curious reader wonders, especially as the notion of similitude as optical technology is elaborated, if aspects of Webster's argument apply more broadly to other European vernaculars, or if by contrast, something particular to that isolated Anglophone enclave encouraged such developments.

John C. Appleby. *Fur, Fashion and Transatlantic Trade during the Seventeenth Century: Chesapeake Bay Native Hunters, Colonial Rivalries, and London Merchants*. Woodbridge, Suffolk, 2021. x + 294 pp. + 2 illus. $115. Review by Joseph P. Ward, Utah State University.

Fashion reflected status in early modern England. With the court at its heart, English culture during the sixteenth century fostered a competition for status that fueled conspicuous display among courtiers, with the ambitious deploying expensive, sometimes exotic, clothing as a badge of distinction. Although sumptuary laws half-heartedly restricted the use of certain materials into the early seventeenth century, such restrictions increased the appeal among the elite of rare fabrics