

Both of these works advance scholarship on Margaret Cavendish in significant and often remarkable ways. Lara Dodds provides the first book on the response of Cavendish to the literary traditions that influenced her. Although Cavendish frequently denied all such influence, and claimed she had read few other writers, Dodds demonstrates that her debts were many and her uses of these authors discriminating and full of implicit commentary. The Literary Invention of Margaret Cavendish brings to light a number of allusions, for instance, to Marlowe, Donne, Shakespeare, Jonson, and Milton. The Afterword examines her infrequent and generally negative references to other women writers. One compelling thesis of the book is that the tendency of scholars to approach Cavendish’s works as autobiography has kept them from recognizing her engagement with literary traditions. Cavendish’s insistence on her singularity is assessed as a strategy for protection against misogynist attacks. The book also considers Cavendish as a source of evidence about gendered reading practices in contrast to other studies on this subject, focused on men. Sometimes the discussion of reading practices interferes with a thorough analysis of the significance of literary influence. Nevertheless this is an important book whose notable findings should promote future study.

The first chapter analyzes Cavendish’s reading of Plutarch, and her willingness to criticize the earlier humanist tradition of reading for action, examined by Lisa Jardine and Anthony Grafton. Dodds notes Cavendish’s skepticism about the veracity of Plutarch’s stories as well as her questioning of the ethics of his characters, including Cato, Aspasia, and Lucretia. At times Cavendish seems completely determined by gender norms, shocked that anyone would take Aspasia seriously, given her sexual liaison with Pericles. In other cases, Cavendish reaches unexpected conclusions. The evidence about Plutarch comes primarily from Sociable Letters (1664), which is largely fictional; nevertheless Dodds persuasively argues that letters were a comfortable arena for women to talk over their reading, given the strictures placed on it by religious and moral authorities.
Cavendish’s letter-writer reports on an aggressive debate between multiple women on whether Lucretia killed herself because of chaste, wifely submission or out of arrogant pride. The writer calms the debaters down by asserting that the story of Lucretia may be an old wives’ tale. Although we might hope for more explicit resistance to the moral of the story, Dodds shows that we cannot assume that women responded to reading in the way male authorities hoped they would.

Chapter two takes up the allusions to, and imitation of, Donne by Cavendish and her husband William. Here William steals the show in a series of fascinating imitations of Donne’s poems on mutual love. William wrote his poems for Margaret during their courtship. Although Dodds seems to accept previous literary judgments that William was an inferior poet, the passages she quotes are compelling in terms of wit and poetic style. The Newcastle manuscript includes poetry by Donne as well as William’s imitations, and it deserves further attention. Dodds very persuasively argues that Margaret could never have responded in kind, given the rules of propriety, and offered instead letters about court life. Later in her career, however, Margaret cites Donne both as a literary authority and a model for metaphysical poetry. In a comparison of Donne’s “First Anniversary” and Cavendish’s “The World in an Eare-Ring,” Dodds argues that Cavendish’s poems on atomism and the plurality of worlds in *Poems, and Fancies* (1653) are metaphysical in a Donnean sense.

As an influence-study, the book is fascinating in the chapter on Milton, which considers Cavendish’s reinvention of “L’Allegro” and “Il Penseroso” (1645) into “A Dialogue between Melancholy, and Mirth” (1653). Cavendish may have been the first to imitate Milton’s set of poems. Dodds brings out the use by Milton and Cavendish of Marlowe’s invitation to love in “The Passionate Shepherd to His Love.” Whereas Milton conflates the position of shepherd and nymph in the voice of the poet, meditating on which goddess of mood and poetry he wants to accept as muse, Cavendish gives voice to the goddesses, who invite and woo the speaker. The gender of the speaker remains unclear, but Dodds rightly points out the possibility of a homosocial reading for a poem in which the speaker is told, “Refuse me not, but take me to your Wife” (“A Dialogue between Melancholy, and Mirth,” line 51). Dodds entertains the possibility that Cavendish is using Milton to consider the structure of her own career, but also subordinates any kind of autobiographical reading to an exploration of Cavendish’s literary reinvention. In a comparison of Cavendish’s *Poems, and Fancies* to other volumes of poetry, particularly by the Cavaliers, published in the middle decades of the seventeenth
century, Dodds concludes that Cavendish supports monarchy but also offers competing voices as the only way to represent the uncertainty of her age.

Many have explored the various influences on *The Blazing World* (1666), denied by Cavendish, but evident throughout the work. In Chapter four, Dodds considers Cavendish’s reaction to the genre of the utopia itself, and offers several original interpretations and questions. She traces the influence on Cavendish of Plato’s *Republic* with its emphasis on order in tension with the impact of Lucian’s *True History* and its sense of ludic pleasure. Lucian, Cyrano, and, surprisingly, Sir Walter Raleigh in *History of the World* move Cavendish to locate the Blazing World in paradise, but this placement undermines utopian desire and the generic expectations for a humanly created world. It also provides a much needed explanation for why the Empress renounces the changes she makes: if the Blazing World is paradise, no changes are needed. Dodds suggests that the creation of worlds by the Duchess and the Empress is not a celebration of fiction or utopian desire, but instead full of irony, suggesting the severe limits on women within the political sphere. Using Fredric Jameson’s analysis of utopia, Dodds argues that, when the Empress obliterates her enemies in Book Two using the technology of the Blazing World and the ingenuity of its creatures, Cavendish develops a powerful dystopia, in which the Empress ignores the advice of the spirit guides about conquest, and destroys the well-being of an entire world. Thus *The Blazing World* critiques the Royal Society’s authorizing fiction, Bacon’s *New Atlantis*, with its celebration of the potential for a “Human Empire” of technological triumph over the problems of want and mortality (144). In concluding the chapter with a consideration of the autobiographical “True Relation,” Dodds argues that autobiographical readings of *The Blazing World* flatten out the experiments with genre in the work.

Chapters five and six take up drama, and are some of the best in the book. Dodds argues that, in *Loves Adventures* (1662), Cavendish compares the romantic comedy of Shakespeare to the social satire of Jonson. While she commemo-rates Shakespeare’s wit most highly, she also finds the verisimilitude of Jonson to be closer to her own interests. Cavendish deserves far more attention as a major contributor to her generation’s assessment of English drama. She considers Shakespeare in *Sociable Letters* and compares Shakespeare and Jonson in the prefatory poem to *Playes* (1662). She demonstrates knowledge of Beaumont and Fletcher, Ford, Dryden, and Shirley’s letter to the reader in the 1647 edition of the plays of Beaumont and Fletcher. One plot of *Loves Adventures* features the cross-dressed heroine from several Shakespeare plays, and explores male con-
cerns about female fidelity and patrimony through the Viola-like Affectionata, adopted first as a son before she becomes her adopted father’s wife. Another plot-line reinvents Jonson’s *Epicoene, or the Silent Woman* into a story about Lady Bashful choosing for her husband Sir Dumb, who has far more sincere reasons for his silence than Jonson’s original. Thus Cavendish responds to the aggressive male sociability in *Epicoene*, and breaks through the gender stereotypes in both Shakespeare and Jonson: Cavendish gives Lady Bashful the successful sword-fight that Viola avoids, and which Jonson mocks in *Epicoene*. Chapter six explores *The Presence* (1668), whose double plot juxtaposes Hobbesian models of aggressive competition to Shakespearean romantic comedy. The first plot puts into motion Hobbesian materialist psychology based on his mechanical philosophy, emphasizing relentless sexual and economic striving. In the second plot, by contrast, the platonic ideals of the heroine eventually prove true. In this plot, Cavendish evokes Marlowe’s praise for love at first sight in *Hero and Leander*, following Shakespeare in *As You Like It*. Thus Cavendish “negotiates between an inherited dramatic tradition and the incipient conventions of Restoration comedy” (192).

As the Afterword establishes, Cavendish did nothing to encourage the inclusion of other women writers into the developing canon of English literature. However, Dodds argues that “far from a singular or eccentric figure, Cavendish instead might be seen as a prototype of the modern critical reader” (223). Dodds demonstrates in her lively and perceptive interpretations that there is much to be gained by considering Cavendish in the context of other writers.

The collection on *God and Nature in the Thought of Margaret Cavendish*, edited by Brandie R. Siegfried and Lisa T. Sarasohn, addresses a central question for Cavendish scholars: what was the role of religion in Cavendish’s thinking and writing? Since one of the few acceptable topics for women writers during this period was religion, it is noteworthy that none of her works directly consider this topic. In their introduction, Siegfried and Sarasohn demonstrate that much recent scholarship has focused on the influence of religion on early modern natural philosophers and the new science, and they argue that Cavendish may have been influenced in this way as well. However, the essays that follow include a wide range of opinions on the topic.

Some contributors see Cavendish as uninterested or even antagonistic to Christianity. In “Claims to Orthodoxy: How Far Can We Trust Margaret Cavendish’s Autobiography?,” Hilda L. Smith uses important original research to argue that Cavendish was both unorthodox andareligious, fulfilling her
obligations by attending Anglican services, and certainly increasing the use of religious terms in her natural philosophy over the course of her life, but that she showed no personal interest in piety or prayer, and was quite critical of religious discourse and debate. Such resistance to orthodoxy is also evident in her willingness to develop her own medical treatment, which her doctors roundly condemned, and in her active engagement in the financial affairs of the Cavendish estate, which her heirs and servants tried to stop. In a beautifully written essay, “Darkness, Death, and Precarious Life in Cavendish’s Sociable Letters and Oration,” Joanne H. Wright does not directly address the nature of Cavendish’s religion, but demonstrates that Cavendish viewed death in a secular context; she never wrote about death as a gateway to heaven, but, since it made human life precarious, it also made it more valuable. Wright points out Cavendish’s attention to the material effects of death, in part influenced by the desecration of the bodies within the Lucas’s family tomb during the Civil War. Also important were Cavendish’s refusal to value the soul over the body, and her recognition that grief is political, since it illuminates injustices endured, particularly during the violence of war. Line Cottegnies expands on a previous, very perceptive essay in “Brilliant Heterodoxy: The Plurality of Worlds in Margaret Cavendish’s Blazing World (1666) and Cyrano de Bergerac’s Estats et Empires de la lune (1657). She finds a wealth of connections between the two works: as libertine novels, they both are anti-dogmatic in their critique of certain orthodoxies, they both have radically materialist conceptions of the universe, and they both use the setting of paradise skeptically. Whereas Cyrano openly attacks religion, Cavendish treats it as purely a social device.

By contrast, other contributors see religion as an inherent part of Cavendish’s natural philosophy. In “The God of Nature and the Nature of God,” Sara Mendelson uses compelling evidence to argue that Cavendish thought all human beings shared an innate perception of God, and, in Observations upon Experimental Philosophy (1666), she swears allegiance to Anglicanism as the only true church. For Mendelson, Cavendish was a person of religious convictions who could not resist speculating about theological questions. Mendelson offers the persuasive term “skeptical Deist” to mark Cavendish’s belief that humans cannot grasp the nature of the divine and that, after creating the world, God left its workings to Nature. For Brandie R. Siegfried in “God and the Question of Sense Perception in the Works of Margaret Cavendish,” Cavendish’s theory of matter is based on certain theological premises, and, in her investigation into sense
perception, she is just as concerned to link natural philosophy with theology as Descartes and Charlton, although in significantly different ways. Siegfried sidesteps the customary attention to Cavendish’s distrust of sense impressions that accompanied her reaction to the experimentalism of the Royal Society, and argues instead that Cavendish believed that there were ways of knowing God that are similar to forms of grace.

A third group of contributors treads a careful path between these two camps. In “Paganism, Christianity, and the Faculty of Fancy in the Writing of Margaret Cavendish,” James Fitzmaurice claims that Cavendish was a believing Christian in her works on science, particularly Observations, and a religious skeptic in her plays, and he admirably does not try to reconcile the two. Citing similar evidence as that provided by Mendelson and Siegfried on the Observations, Fitzmaurice shows that in The Convent of Pleasure (1668), Lady Happy develops the notion of Epicurean gods who do not judge, and are motivated by self-interest and pleasure, whereas in the darker Youth’s Glory, Death’s Banquet (1662), which includes the suicide of two characters, Cavendish suggests that the Christian ban against suicide is a form of superstition. In “A double Perception in All Creatures: Margaret Cavendish’s Philosophical Letters and Seventeenth-Century Natural Philosophy,” Stephan Clucas persuasively characterizes the collection of letters as Cavendish’s attempt to defend herself against the dangerous charge of atheism; he makes this point through a careful analysis of Cavendish’s disagreements with Hobbes and Descartes on matter and motion, and with More and Helmont on immaterial substances. Clucas concludes that, despite her strategic purposes, her “repeated protestations of faith, and her respect of Church, revelation and supernatural grace” were more than merely a rhetorical strategy (136). According to Lisa T. Sarasohn, Cavendish declared that science and theology should not mix, but was forced to speak about religious issues, given the inextricable relationship between natural philosophy and theology during the period. Against the natural theology of Newton and Hooke, who believed that small parts of nature revealed the grand designs of the creator, Cavendish developed her own negative theology, which claimed that God was incomprehensible, and a form of fideism, the view that belief must rest on faith rather than reason. With impressive lucidity, Sarasohn carries us through Cavendish’s most difficult forms of reasoning, and arrives at some of her basic tenets: particularly, her discomfort with fusing the material and immaterial into one substance.
In “Natural Magic in The Convent of Pleasure,” John Shanahan begins a new section concerned with Cavendish's interest in early modern magic and Jewish mysticism. Shanahan demonstrates that Cavendish was well informed about natural magic, which has recently been shown to have had a significant impact on the evolution of the new science. He argues that the Convent of Pleasure presents Lady Happy as a natural magician, whose creative technology uses knowledge in a more practical way than the Royal Society. In “Margaret Cavendish's Cabbala: The Empress and the Spirits in The Blazing World,” C. Perrin Radley finds that Cavendish's interest in the “Jew's Cabbala,” cited in The Blazing World, had little to do with the mystical and occult traditions of Jewish rabbis, and much more to do with Cavendish’s knowledge of John Dee and Edmund Kelley’s conversations with spirits, both of whom she labels as mere cheats, and with her curious response to Henry More's Conjectura Cabbalistica (1662), whose findings she in some cases derides, and in others she represents accurately. On the other hand, Brandie R. Siegfried argues in “Soulified: Cavendish, Rubens, and the Cabbalistic Tree of Life” that Cavendish knew key aspects of the tradition that made the Jewish Cabbala available to Christian philosophers, and to artists like Rubens, whose cabalistic writings are considered as a possible influence on Cavendish. While Siegfried admits that Cavendish’s explicit references to it are often negative, dismissing an elite, esoteric philosophy and interest in non-material essences, nevertheless the radical vitalism that Cavendish eventually adopted is characterized as stemming from the cabalistic tradition. Sara Mendelson takes on the wider topic of “Margaret Cavendish and the Jews,” in which she argues that tolerance toward Judaism had developed by the mid-seventeenth century, and that Cavendish’s friendship with the crypto-Jewish Duarte sisters living in Antwerp made it possible that Cavendish had some slight familiarity with Jewish mysticism. Mendelson also proposes that the fideistic deism of the inhabitants of the Blazing World may be most analogous to the Jewish faith.

Although the findings about Cavendish’s interest in religion are quite varied in these essays, the information about theology and religious practice in Observations and Philosophical Letters is very welcome and establishes a firm basis from which future considerations of the topic must begin. Although Cavendish’s attitude toward religion remains ambiguous, and perhaps always will be, this volume has provided crucial initial research and several impressive arguments on the subject.

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