

# EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



**Walters, Lisa, *Margaret Cavendish: Gender, Science and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). ISBN 978-1-107-06643-4.**

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In *Margaret Cavendish: Gender, Science, and Politics* Lisa Walters contends that Cavendish's philosophical and political notions frequently align with republican rather than royalist thought. Though others have pointed to the republican implications of a few aspects of Cavendish's writings, none have declared with such conviction, sustained argumentation, and considerable interdisciplinary evidence that we should not blindly accept the idea that Cavendish subscribed to a royalist worldview. For Walters, it is not enough to believe that Cavendish simply deviates now and then from a royalist paradigm, since she maintains that Cavendish's cognitive framework and methodology are largely informed by republican principles. Therefore, Walters suggests that those who brand Cavendish an absolutist or even a moderate royalist must overlook substantial evidence to the contrary.

Walters recognizes that she is, to some extent, writing against the critical grain when she claims that Cavendish's status as a royalist should be interrogated. After all, Cavendish was raised in a royalist family, served as a lady-in-waiting to Queen Henrietta Maria, lived with the Queen when the court was exiled in France, and married the aristocrat and royalist military commander William Cavendish, Earl, and later Duke, of Newcastle. However, such associations, Walters contends, do not necessarily demonstrate a complete allegiance to a royalist paradigm, philosophically and politically speaking: biographical royalism, we might say, should not simply be interpreted as ideological royalism, according to Walters.

Before delving into the specifics of what she sees as Cavendish's resistance to 'royalist ideology' (p. 13), Walters supplies for the reader an intentionally expansive definition of royalism:

[A] set of beliefs that advance the view that monarchy is the ideal form of government, that obedience to social hierarchy is necessary to avoid disorder, as well as that a monarch's sovereignty is undivided even if limited, that subjects do not have the right to rebel against their monarch and that power does not derive from the common people. (pp. 9–10)

Walters does not say that there is *no* evidence of royalism, as defined above, in Cavendish's work. Rather she maintains that Cavendish's (a) emphasis on ontological and epistemological plurality and variety, (b) conception of the material world as a dynamic site of difference, change, paradox, and self-determination, (c) production of polyvocal texts that approach ideas from multiple points of view, and (d) troubling of hierarchical modes of thinking, significantly distance her from the royalist ideology of her time. Walters suggests that Cavendish's thought anticipates feminist and deconstructionist principles and practices, given that the Duchess often de-centers discourses and the ideologies in which they are rooted. Walters periodically draws analogies between the thinking of Judith Butler and Cavendish to stress the great equalizing force of the latter's methodology and belief system.

In the first of four chapters in the volume, Walters reviews traditional early modern gender theory to demonstrate that Cavendish consistently disrupts it, particularly in terms of rejecting the association of the female with the fallen, irrational, cold, moist, body. In developing her version of vitalist materialism, Walters tells us, Cavendish actively resignifies the body, undermining the hierarchical ideologies that inform orthodox 'body talk' of the period. Walters takes special note of the fact that it is not only the substance of Cavendish's thought that decenters and deconstructs older notions of gender. The forms she uses also demonstrate the very scientific views to which she adheres. The *Philosophical Letters*, for instance, stages a rational interaction between women correspondents in which an intelligent female writes authoritatively of natural philosophy.

Walters sees Cavendish's treatment of Nature as a form of ideological resistance, particularly from a gendered point-of-view. For Cavendish, infinite Nature, a figure of 'naturalize[d] female authority', cannot be known, owned, mastered, or conquered (p. 63). She is an active, plural, creative entity, and '[m]ale reason and knowledge' are but small

elements of her 'body' (p. 69). Walters argues that in defining Nature in these terms, Cavendish engages with Aristotelian, alchemical, and religious ideas but casts off elements that do not accord with her non-hierarchical, vitalist-materialist, eco-centric conception of the world. The gendered natural philosophy that emerges, Walters suggests, undermines the very 'political, economic, and cultural hierarchies' that prop up royalism (p. 98).

Chapter 2 of the study similarly explores how Cavendish selectively absorbs and adapts discourses associated with particular belief systems. Walters maintains that in her imaginative writings, markedly in the story 'The Travelling Spirit' (*Natures Pictures*), Cavendish distinctly fuses strands of alchemical, folkloric, theological, and scientific thought to weave a portrait of feminine Nature as 'enigmatic and powerful', 'existing beyond comprehension and categorization', and unregulated by a monarchical-like deity (p. 136). Hers is a world in which the discourses of materialism, mythology, the occult, and religious doctrine can flexibly and restlessly coexist, Walters tells us. She speculates that the Duchess also takes such an eclectic approach to knowledge production to destabilize epistemology itself, the result of adopting a method 'which believes all perspectives, yet simultaneously disbelieves' them (p. 136).

In the third chapter of her monograph, Walters finds in *The Blazing World* a stark criticism of absolutism, arbitrary power, and the divine right of kings (and queens). Walters argues that Cavendish creates a Hobbesian state *in extremum* early on in *The Blazing World* only to expose some of its limitations, particularly its reliance on force, manipulation, and deception. The text then offers up a Paracelsian-inflected politics that views the creative and free imagination of the individual subject as the true source of authority. For Walters, though Cavendish chooses, for methodological and ideological reasons, to present competing models of the operation of power in *The Blazing World*, she definitively presents 'the origin of power' as 'derived from individual creativity, free will and consent, and not from a monarch's authority' (pp. 171, 177, 194).

In the final chapter, Walters focuses less on Cavendish's resistance to royalist ideology and more on the 'republican and revolutionary strain' in her writings. In two of Cavendish's prose romances, 'The Contract' and 'Assaulted and Pursued Chastity' (*Nature's Pictures*), Walters observes Cavendish participating in the hot political topics of the day: 'tyrannicide, self-defence, natural rights', 'popular sovereignty', 'patriarchalism and contract theory' (p. 195). Walters theorizes that the speech and actions of the heroic female protagonists in these romances not only tend to support republican principles of freedom and liberty, but

also allow Cavendish to contribute ‘a feminist dimension to republican arguments based on property rights, self-defence and contract theory’ (p. 246).

While many of Walters’s points on Cavendish’s gender theory, natural philosophy, and politics, as expressed in representative works, are lucidly and convincingly argued, this reader finds that on occasion Walters problematically downplays the royalist dimension of Cavendish’s thinking as well as the creative interplay of royalist and republican ideas in her work. I have no doubt that there are aspects of Cavendish’s work that question or undermine royalist ideology, and these should not be disregarded or dismissed as aberrations. Cavendish’s eclecticism and the evolution of her thought allowed her to subscribe to elements of both royalist and republican thought, as Walters acknowledges here and there in her book. However, she then tends to move pronouncedly in the direction of Cavendish as more republican than royalist, not always considering evidence that might pose a serious challenge to a particular reading. I would have liked to see Walters address, for example, Letter 65 of *Sociable Letters* in her discussion of the Duchess’s politics: in this letter, Cavendish argues that for the stability of the state, if need be the ‘Commons’ should be forcibly constrained and kept ‘in Aw and the Nobles in Power to uphold Royal Government’, which, she says in this particular instance, ‘is certainly the Best and Happiest Government, as being most United, by which the People becomes most Civil[;] for Democracy is more Wild and Barbarous than Monarchy’ (p. 120). However, since Walters does not deny that Cavendish subscribed to some aspects of royalism, and given that she cannot possibly cover all of Cavendish’s works in her analysis, her revelation ‘of non-conformity to royalist conceptions of power, religion, politics, family or law’ in some of Cavendish’s writings is a necessary corrective to those who read her philosophy and politics in royalist terms alone (p. 247).

*Margaret Cavendish: Gender, Science and Politics*, along with Lisa Sarasohn’s earlier *The Natural Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish: Reason and Fancy during the Scientific Revolution* (2010), demonstrate just how far Cavendish studies have come in the past two decades. The sophistication and force of Walters’s reading of the intersection of philosophy, politics, and gender theory in Cavendish’s corpus is a testament to her comprehensive knowledge of past scholarship in the field and to her recognition of the complex ways that discourses from across the disciplines circulate in Cavendish’s publications. Walters’s ability to effortlessly and insightfully navigate an astonishing array of early modern ideas and beliefs in her study of Cavendish’s interdisciplinary and generically hybrid poetry, prose, and drama is remarkable. Her versatility in moving, for

example, from seventeenth-century theories of physiology, fairy lore, magic, and alchemy to free will, the imagination, natural rights, and contract theory allows her to produce the most nuanced and absorbing examination of Cavendish's politics to date. *Margaret Cavendish: Gender, Science and Politics* is essential reading for anyone working in Cavendish studies. It will also serve as an invaluable resource for those studying women's writing, natural philosophy/science, political theory, and/or gender theory in the early modern period.

### **Works Cited**

- Cavendish, Margaret, *Sociable Letters*, ed. by James Fitzmaurice (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2004).
- Sarasohn, Lisa, *The Natural Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish: Reason and Fancy during the Scientific Revolution* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).