

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



**Review of *Cavendish, Woolf, and the Cypriot Goddess Natura* by Jim Fitzmaurice,
performed at the Centre of Visual Arts and Research, Nicosia, Cyprus**

Sean Ferrier

Manchester Metropolitan University

s.ferrier@mmu.ac.uk

Lisa Walters

Liverpool Hope University

walterl@hope.ac.uk

Directed by Henry Bell. Written by James Fitzmaurice. Produced by Jim Fitzmaurice and Michael Paraskos. With Jessica Brown (John Evelyn, Café customer), Tom Cable (Constantijn Huygens, Barista), Jessica Hakin (Virginia Woolf, Barista), Lucy Morehen (Margaret Cavendish), Emilie Philpott (Elizabeth Chaplain, Mary Evelyn, Melissa), and Morgan Reilly (Beatrix de Cusance, Joan).

What would transpire if various historical and literary figures, from different places and eras — some twentieth century, some seventeenth century — sat down in a café and conversed with each other? Or, imagine if a contemporary coffee-house morphed with its customers into an early-modern *salon*? Could the two cultures converse with each other? This is the premise of Jim Fitzmaurice's avant-garde and erudite play performed on the 8th of April at the Centre of Visual Arts and Research in Nicosia, Cyprus, directed by Henry Bell. The play brings about the aforementioned conversation. It opens in a seemingly linear and straightforward manner as a graduate student and young museum curator begin a discussion over coffee about Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) and her puzzling hostility towards Margaret Cavendish (1623-73), who lived over 200 years prior to Woolf. As the play reminds us, in *A Room of One's Own* Woolf notoriously asserted that the mere thought of Cavendish was like 'some giant cucumber had spread itself over all the roses and carnations in the garden and choked them to death'. Considering that Cavendish was one of the most prolific writers in early modern print,

the first woman to publish science fiction and natural philosophy, and someone who articulated the most unapologetically feminist ideas during her lifetime, it is indeed strange that Woolf took such a hostile attitude towards her. The play addresses this mystery as it explores a host of social and philosophical ideas while setting these noteworthy intellectuals into an engaging comedy of manners.

As the café begins to close down for the evening, the conversation continues earnestly, but becomes surreal as Woolf herself walks into the café, sits down and discusses her writing with the pair. Soon after, the café barista transforms into Constantijn Huygens, the seventeenth century Dutch ‘virtuoso’ scientist, and joins the group, adding a male perspective to the conversation. Historically, Huygens had admired Cavendish as a thinker and cultivated an epistolary conversation with her about scientific and philosophical ideas. This play renders Huygens as an unabashed flirt. He defends Cavendish, then notices that he’s being rude by standing, leading to his jest that Hobbes had him in mind when he described men as brutes. At this point Cavendish herself walks in, orders a skinny latté because it is ‘the new mode’ and joins the table to gossip about figures such as Samuel Pepys and Thomas Hobbes. Complaining that he was a ‘beast’ for not accepting her lunch invitation, this Cavendish delivers the put-down: ‘Hobbes... his motion does not matter’. And so we find ourselves in a self-conscious, self-referential sort of Restoration Comedy that is wonderfully quite comfortable with anachronism.

The historical Huygens was friends with Beatrix Cusance, Duchess of Lorraine, a leading figure of Paris *salon* culture; and the characters settle quickly into the attitude of the salon, one with intellectual figures dropping in and out, discussing the meaning of nature as well as ‘proto-feminism’. They gossip about various intellectuals and play games of wit in line with salon culture. As the earlier group disperses, Cusance comes into the café with Woolf. She is then followed by John Evelyn, the famous diarist and member of the Royal Society. At the end of the play Evelyn’s wife, Mary, enters to join Cavendish to discuss their views about men. Eventually, Beatrix announces to Woolf that she is about to switch back to performing Joan, the London PhD student; so the play again becomes self-referential. Earlier, in a slightly head-spinning disregard for boundaries of time and genre, Woolf herself had commented on how she was dressed more for *Downton Abbey* than for Bloomsbury. The play doesn’t merely call the viewer’s attention to its anachronism, it revels in it. Huygens engages in a discussion of ‘gender-bending’ with the rather square John Evelyn.

The interchanging of actors among characters to play quotidian contemporary types, as well as looming historical figures, along with the softening of the distinction between a

post-modern cafe and an early-modern salon, create the sense that all of the figures blur together. This device suggests a clever link to the real Virginia Woolf's character Orlando, who is described as being born in the Renaissance, yet lives all the way into the twentieth century. Like *Orlando*, Fitzmaurice's play challenges traditional notions of time and selfhood, particularly through the performative elements of play that encourage contemporary roles to play past historical figures. Perhaps this is an insight from the playwright about how as we study figures from the past, they become part of us as well.

Although this staging was a reading of the play, actors with scripts in hand, it nevertheless brought to life these figures from the past, on the whole conveying information about them fairly deftly. There were great performances from Jess Hakin (Virginia Woolf) and Tom Cable (Constantijn Huygens). Hakin delivered Woolf with an exquisite blend of moderate haughtiness and almost-understated cattiness, while seeming perfectly at home in the non-linear, post-modern structure of the play. Cable's Huygens carries much of the dialogue and connects the various literary characters with a subtle air of mischief. Although the character of Woolf acknowledges that she and Cavendish could be considered as literary 'sisters' for the similarities in their career and place as trail-blazers, this bond had trouble shining through in the staging. Lucy Morehen portrays Cavendish as a bit too haughty. Wearing the most elaborate period costume, she seemed less like a transgressive woman of middle-class origins in Colchester (as the historical Cavendish was), than like a twentieth-century aristocrat transported into seventeenth-century costume. While it is true that Cavendish described herself as bashful, we would have imagined her being a bit more rebellious and unconventional than portrayed by Morehen, particularly since during her lifetime she wrote some of the most stunningly feminist and secular ideas of her age.

Although the play provides some discussion on the topic of Nature as expected from the title as well as from the philosophical work of Margaret Cavendish, this could have been explored in more detail, so as to render allusions to Nature a bit easier to follow. On the other hand, the irony is delicious. The Woolf character suggests their motto be 'always the possibility of irony'. The play is steeped in references and quotations from literature and history, particularly that of the seventeenth century society. This should delight cognoscenti, although the play might be difficult to relay to a popular audience, which would not necessarily pick up on many of the in-jokes and references (one of our favourite being an allusion to Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* when Huygens says he would be tempted to say that he 'will be revenged upon you all', but then stops himself because the reference is too overt.) Nonetheless, scholars and postgraduate students,

particularly those grounded in the seventeenth century, would greatly enjoy this creative and witty production.