

Lara Dodds. *The Literary Invention of Margaret Cavendish*.

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It may seem paradoxical that a book on invention contains chapters that are all on influence. This is not of course a paradox but indeed one of the most interesting avenues of investigation in the work of women writers in general and perhaps Margaret Cavendish in particular, a writer who defined herself energetically as original and unlearned: “I never read, nor heard of any English Books to Instruct me” (1), she famously asserts. This statement has already been read as disingenuous, or at least strategic, by many critics, but Dodds is the first to devote a book-length

study to Cavendish's engagement with the literary culture around her including Plutarch, Donne, Jonson, Hobbes, and Milton.

Women have often not been studied for influence in the way that many male writers have been, partly because so many of them came to light in a period when the idea of the author was under challenge and even attack, and partly because they often create the impression of unlearnedness, of spontaneous and almost unwilling acts of writing.

On the other hand, the ever-growing field of the history of reading has fostered the study of how women read, drawing on evidence in both their own writings and their notes and compilations. In her introduction, Dodds uses the work of Sianne Ngai in *Ugly Feelings* to theorize negative emotions. Dodds suggests that "envy and emulation thus conjoin the various formal, ideological, and sociohistorical problems of authorship by virtue of the central importance of imitation and contentiousness to early modern models of literary invention" (2), and asks "what would it mean to follow Ngai's recommendation and recuperate negative passions like envy, pride, anger, and resentment" (3). The chapters that follow use these emotions to complicate straightforwardly emulative or oppositional interpretations of Cavendish's reading and therefore to suggest a more nuanced picture of borrowing, adaptation, parody, and critique.

Reading Plutarch in *Sociable Letters* (1664), Cavendish combines humanist patterns of reading with didacticism, while also suggesting that some classical historians' accounts should not be read as anything more credible than old wives' tales. In a chapter on Donne, Dodds looks at how both Margaret and William allude to Donne by name (William, in fact, to the love lyrics of "Doctor Dunn" [58], nicely combining the two identities — erotic poet and dean of divinity — which Izaak Walton was to forcibly separate several decades later). Dodds sees a relationship with Milton's "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso" in Cavendish's "Dialogue between Melancholy and Mirth," one of several dialogue poems that seem also to engage with Marvell's use of that mode. Dodds sees Cavendish enacting a reversal whereby the goddesses Mirth and Melancholy invite the speaker of the poem, and then dominate themselves; the speaker is silent after the initiation of the dialogue. She sees a similar pattern in Cavendish's engagement with Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" as "Cavendish's poem explores the possibility of a nymph who offers pleasures rather than rejecting them, who participates as an agent with the power to initiate the erotic exchange rather than simply to deny it" (109).

Having looked also at Cavendish's reading of utopian fiction, with some interesting suggestions on the conservatism of this radical form, Dodds then dedicates two chapters to Cavendish's plays. Exploring *Playes* (1662), Dodds argues that in her evaluative comparison of Shakespeare and Jonson, Cavendish sets the terms that are still used today for comparing these major playwrights. Cavendish admires Shakespeare and famously published the first extended critical evaluation of his skill, but her own plays are more Jonsonian: humoral comedies focused on "Follies, Vanities, Vices, Humours" (182). Dodds argues that Cavendish combines

such humoral, and also romance forms, however, with “a commitment to verisimilitude that reproduces, cynically, the social inequities of women’s lives” (186). Cavendish’s later volume of plays (1668) is cast here as importantly transitional as it “negotiates between an inherited dramatic tradition” of Marlowe, Shakespeare, and Jonson, “and the incipient conventions of Restoration comedy” (192).

This book spans many forms of reading and patterns of influence and suggests how much more is yet to be done on situating early modern women writers within their own literary culture, even — or especially — those who work so hard to assert their own singularity.

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