



The Literary Invention of Margaret Cavendish (Medieval and Renaissance Literary Studies)

Lara Dodds

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As a reader of her literary predecessors, and as a writer who herself contributed to the emerging literary tradition, Margaret Cavendish is an extraordinary figure whose role in early modern literary history has yet to be fully acknowledged. In this study, Lara Dodds reassesses the literary invention of Cavendish -- the use she makes of other writers, her own various forms of writing, and the ways in which she creates her own literary persona -- to transform our understanding of Cavendish's considerable accomplishments and influence. In spite of Cavendish's claims that she did little reading whatsoever, Dodds demonstrates that the duchess was an agile, avid reader (and misreader) of other writers, all of them male, all of them now considered canonical -- Shakespeare, Jonson, Donne, Milton, Bacon. In each chapter, Dodds discusses Cavendish's "moments of reading" of these authors, revealing their influence on Cavendish while also providing a lens to investigate more broadly the many literary forms -- poetry, letters, fiction, drama -- that Cavendish employed. Seeking a fruitful exchange between literary history and the history of reading, Dodds examines both the material and social circumstances of reading and the characteristic formal features and thematic preoccupations of Cavendish's writing in each of the major genres. Thus, not only is our view of Cavendish and her specific literary achievements enhanced, but we see too the contributions of this female reader to the emerging idea of "literature" in late seventeenth century England. Most previous studies of Cavendish have been preoccupied with literary biography, looking into her royalist politics, materialist natural philosophy, and ambivalent protofeminism. The Literary Invention of Margaret Cavendish is significant, then, in its focus outward from Cavendish to her most enduring and positive contributions to literary history -- her revival of an expansive model of literary invention that rests uneasily, but productively, alongside a Jonsonian aesthetics of the verisimilar and a Hobbesian politics of social strife.

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