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God and Nature in the Thought of Margaret Cavendish.

Edited by Brandie R. Siegfried and Lisa T. Sarasohn. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014. Pp. 257.

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by Dr. Christina Romanelli, University of North Carolina at Greensboro

The literary works of Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle (1623-1673) span the Renaissance, Civil Wars, Interregnum, and Restoration periods, and an examination of her thought provides students and scholars with a unique perspective of this tumultuous time that is quite different from her most famous contemporary, John Milton. Notably, she's a female author writing *and publishing* about some of the most important philosophical and political issues of the seventeenth century. It is not necessary for Cavendish herself to be a proto-feminist thinker for her to be a vital addition to a feminist teacher's syllabus: her multi-genre works are accessible to a variety of skill-levels and offer an antidote to the many students who still believe the seventeenth-century to be one small step out of the dark ages when women were not allowed to do anything. Cavendish's works would be well placed in courses about Renaissance drama, early British literature surveys, and even high school classrooms that seek to challenge the canon. For all these reasons, Brandie R. Siegfried and Lisa T. Sarasohn's new edited collection, *God and Nature in the Thought of Margaret Cavendish* is

an excellent resource for scholars and students alike. The collection contains twelve essays and an introduction. Cavendish scholars Sarah Mendelson and Brandie Siegfried contributed two essays each.

Until very recently, Cavendish scholarship has focused on her essentially secular texts and epistemologies to the exclusion of the rich background of religious controversy in which she wrote. Siegfried and Sarasohn's collection begins to fill this gap by adding "another dimension to Cavendish studies...exploring the theological threads woven into her ideas about Nature, matter, magic, governance, and social relations" (7).

The first part of the collection features essays that focus on the relative orthodoxy or heterodoxy of Cavendish's thoughts on theology and Nature (often personified in her texts). Critics have generally characterized Cavendish as having a secular body of work and avoiding contentious religious topics. This collection brings that claim to the fore. In "Claims to Orthodoxy," Hilda Smith describes Cavendish as "a-religious," explaining that "she lacked both personal faith in, and institutional allegiance to, the Church of England" (19). In her first essay in the collection, "The God of Nature and the Nature of God," Sara Mendelson concurs: "Despite her protestations, Cavendish is not all that convincing in the role of conventional Anglican" (40). Representing the first half of the volume, these essays provide readers with important terms to grapple with Cavendish's eccentric and eclectic thoughts: "vitalistic materialism" (47)

“Latitudinarianism” (77), and “fideism” (95). The authors are generally in accord that Cavendish believed that matter is self-knowing and self-moving, humans have limited if any actual knowledge of God and should not be dogmatic in their approach to religion, and as human perception of God is erroneous, faith is not based on reason. While not aligning her with a specific Christian or even monotheistic sect, these essays provide a foundation for discussion of Cavendish’s relationships to the beliefs of those around her.

The second group of essays focuses on the dialogic relationships between Cavendish’s texts and those of philosophers including Descartes and More. The authors note the important proto-scientific contexts for Cavendish’s work and the ways in which she carefully read and responded to some of the most important thinkers of the time. Siegfried’s first essay in the collection, “God and the Question of Sense Perception,” positions Cavendish as a participant in debates with major philosophers about the role of God in the natural world. Stephen Clucas’s “A double Perception in All Creatures” points out that Cavendish criticized Hobbes and Descartes on their claims that matter and motion can be isolated from one another and that humans can know God. These essays highlight how Cavendish’s works bridge the Renaissance, the Restoration, and the Enlightenment as well as the national borders of the European countries where Cavendish traveled and lived in exile. In “Brilliant Heterodoxy,” Line Cottegnies reads Cavendish in the context of libertine philosophy which she helpfully

defines as “a desire to question established truths in the realm of science as well as religion [by using] similar strategies to deflect censorship. Viewing Cavendish as a cosmopolitan, albeit mono-linguistic, thinker opens up important new avenues for scholarship and offers crucial history of globalization context for survey courses.

The final group of essays centers on her view of magic and the reference to the “cabbala” in her most frequently taught text, *The Blazing World*. John Shanahan points out that “by the middle of the seventeenth century natural magic could serve as a vocabulary for wonder without supernatural trappings” (144). The last three essays explain the rich and multiple contexts for Cavendish’s interest in the Jewish cabbala. Referencing John Dee, Edward Kelley, Henry More, and Leonora Duarte, Siegfried’s “Soulified” especially shows that far from an offhand reference to esoteric nonsense, Cavendish’s interest in this tradition was based in her own experiences as an exile with a desire to see her homeland united under a single, harmonious religion (188). These authors highlight different but equally important contexts for Cavendish’s Empress’s desire to create a cabbala with the help of the immaterial spirits.

Especially teachable essays include Joanne Wright’s essay, “Darkness, Death, and Precarious Life,” Clucas’s aforementioned essay on Natural Philosophy, John Shanahan’s essay “Natural Magic in *The Convent of Pleasure*,” and Sara Mendelson’s second essay, “Margaret Cavendish and the Jews.” These essays were notable for the clarity with which they discussed important cultural contexts and would be accessible

for undergraduates in a variety of courses. Siegfried's second contribution on Cavendish and Rubens ("Soulified") would also be excellent for an interdisciplinary course on literature and the arts.

This collection captures the eccentric and prolific qualities of a major Renaissance writer without reducing her theological ideas to a formulaic maxim. As a whole, it honors James Fitzmaurice's conclusion in "Paganism, Christianity, and the Faculty of Fancy" that "consistency might well diminish one of Cavendish's greatest strengths" (92). This scholarship encourages wider reading of Cavendish's literary works, especially her plays and epistolary texts while providing enough detailed historical and cultural context to be useful in a literature course exploring the history of science, magic, or even race-relations in early modern England. This collection provides a thorough explanation of Cavendish's theological views in relation to other philosophers of the time and also opens up the opportunity to put Cavendish in conversation with prominent theologians and theological controversies of the mid-to late seventeenth century. Very little is said and very little is known about Cavendish's attitude towards worship and church attendance in general, for example, and this could be a fruitful avenue for further exploration.