

***RSA 2013, IN SAN DIEGO***

***\*\*\*International Margaret Cavendish Society Sessions\*\*\****

*Refer below for details about the next session:*

**MARGARET CAVENDISH I:  
CAVENDISH AND THE ARTS**

**Sponsor: International Margaret Cavendish Society**

**Session Organizers: James Fitzmaurice, *University of Sheffield*,  
and Lisa Walters, *University of Ghent***

**Chair: Julie Campbell, *Eastern Illinois University***

**Respondent: Alexandra Bennett, *Northern Illinois University***

**Brandie Siegfried, *Brigham Young University***

**“Conjuring the Portrait of Elizabeth I: Empresses, Jewels and the Philosophy of Enchantment in Margaret Cavendish’s *Blazing World*.”**

This paper will be a close reading of the figure of Elizabeth I in Cavendish's writing, and will explore how the Duchess braids three strands to hilarious effect: first, there is what we might term “strategic bedazzlement,” a playful invocation of famous sixteenth-century portraits of be-jeweled female noblewomen revived as a form of literal power in the New World of the novel’s newly-made empress. Second, Cavendish shades the humorous pictorial/historical pastiche with elements from seventeenth-century debates on perception which, given her focus on visual trickery, cleverly dramatizes key difficulties at the heart of the new philosophy. Finally, she taps into contemporary interest in cabalistic writing and

tradition—a move meant, paradoxically, to reinforce Cavendish’s radical materialism. Although the discussion will focus on the battle scene in *Blazing World*, elements from *Nature’s Pictures* and *Sociable Letters* will bolster my reading of her science fiction novel.

Tien-yi Chao, *National Taiwan University*

“Authoress of the World’: The Image of Alchymya and the Empress in *The Blazing World*”.

Published in London in 1666, *The Description of A New Blazing World* (usually referred to as *The Blazing World*) remains Margaret Cavendish’s most compelling and complex work. In order to examine its volatile and versatile narratives, my study re-evaluates the text in the intellectual milieu of early modern alchemy, a subject gradually gaining scholarly attention in recent years. My study suggests that *The Blazing World* contains extensive alchemical allegories and imagery, a significant feature shared by works of John Donne and Edmund Spenser. In this paper, I choose to discuss the connection between the Empress and the alchemical emblem of “Alchymya,” namely the feminine personification of the Art. I argue that the image of Alchymya allows us to explore Cavendish’s portrayal of her female protagonist as not only an androgynous “Mercurian Monarch,” but also a “Happy Creatoress” of various worlds.

James Fitzmaurice, *University of Sheffield*

“Painting, Sculpture, and Domestic Space in the Writing of Margaret Cavendish”.

Margaret Cavendish often wrote admiringly of the general power of painting to depict nature “to the life.” She was more ambivalent, however in her feelings actual painting and sculpture. In *Convent of Pleasure*, she praises the enjoyment that pictures hung in galleries and staircases can bring, but in “Of Poverty,” found in *Poems and Fancies*, she distances herself from the ownership of art, in an attack on what we might understand today as crude consumerism. She is not, I think, worried about poverty in the sense that the word is used currently, but rather ties connoisseurship to vain competition among the wealthy for status. “Poverty” is honorable and aligns with living

modestly. While making her points in this poem and elsewhere, she shows us, sometimes obliquely or in self-parody, how works of art can, and should, fit into domestic space.

## **MARGARET CAVENDISH II: CAVENDISH AND THE CRAFT OF WRITING**

Sponsor: International Margaret Cavendish Society

Session Organizers: James Fitzmaurice, *University of Sheffield*,  
and Lisa Walters, *University of Ghent*

Chair: Tien-yi Chao, *National Taiwan University*

Respondent: Brandie Siegfried, *Brigham Young University*

Lara Dodds, *Mississippi State University*

“Bad Writing’ and the Rhetoric of Cavendish’s Orations”

Cavendish’s early reception history is littered with assessments of her “bad writing.” The rehabilitation of Cavendish’s reputation during the last three decades, however, has produced an appreciation for her complex political views and her innovative natural philosophy, but has paid little attention to the aesthetic qualities of Cavendish’s prose style. This paper poses the question: what is the interpretive yield of acknowledging Cavendish’s ‘stylistic failures’? Focusing on the explicitly rhetorical Orations, I identify the simile and the series as the figures of speech that contribute most significantly to Cavendish’s style, for good and ill. The significance is twofold. First, this paper

provides a thorough formal description of Cavendish's prose style that demonstrates how her characteristic tropes produce effects of epistemological transformation and multiplication. Second, it reveals the unacknowledged tensions between aesthetic, feminist, and historical frameworks for the study of women writers within the broader field of early modern literary studies.

Amy Scott-Douglass, *Marymount University*

**“Blazing New Classrooms: Teaching Cavendish's Craft”**

Like many early modern women whose literary works began to enter the canon and the classroom only very recently, Cavendish's writing tends to be valued for what it might possibly be able to tell us about women's history rather than its aesthetic qualities. Over and above that, Cavendish's own statements against editing and in favor of what we today call “freewriting” often predetermine that her craft goes unrecognized and unappreciated. This paper offers an approach to understanding and teaching Cavendish's craft by reading her poetry and prose in the contexts of music and art history, analyzing her structure and character development as examples of the humanist tradition of *serio ludere* practiced by Erasmus and More; her descriptive passages in comparison to the artistry of Ruben's paintings; and her philosophy of poetry as divine song, as well as the musicality and meter of her poetry itself, in the context of Milton's arguments in *Ad Patrem*.

**MARGARET CAVENDISH III:  
PHILOSOPHY, NATURAL AND  
POLITICAL**

Session Organizers: James Fitzmaurice, *University of Sheffield*,  
and Lisa Walters, *University of Ghent*

Chair: Amy Scott-Douglass, *Marymount University*  
Respondent: Lisa Sarasohn, *Oregon State University*

Lisa Walters, *University of Ghent*

“Vitalism and Free-will in *The Blazing World*”

In *The Blazing World*, Margaret Cavendish engages with one of the most explosive theological debates during her lifetime; the question of whether people’s actions were predetermined or if they were instigated entirely by free-will. Though Calvinism, Lutheranism, astrology and mechanist philosophy provided diverse views of God and the universe, and represented different positions within the political spectrum, these traditions suggested that free-will is not an intrinsic part of the individual. In contrast, the Cambridge Platonists were generally anti-determinists who defended freewill and the autonomy of the individual human subject. Though Cavendish was a staunch materialist, she appropriates aspects of Platonism in *The Blazing World* and puts forward a vitalistic theory of matter which defends freewill and challenges monarchical systems of power.

Peter C. Remein, *University of Wyoming*

“Nature’s House: Margaret Cavendish and the Oeconomy of Nature”

This paper considers Margaret Cavendish’s focus on the figure of “Nature’s House” in *Poems and Fancies* (1653) and *The Blazing World* (1666) as a strategy for engaging with the emergent scientific concept of the “oeconomy of nature,” first developed by natural philosopher Kenelm Digby in 1644. I argue that Cavendish uses the conceptual metaphors of the domestic sphere (the oikos) to reconstitute natural philosophy as a feminine domain, particularly available to one attuned to the discourse of estate management. Casting the entire world as a functioning household requiring painstaking management, Cavendish envisions a feminine Nature setting into order and governing every level of the creation. While Digby understands humanity as separate from (and, in some ways, the teleological fulfillment of) the oeconomy of nature, Cavendish

suggests that humanity is fully immersed in the complex and interconnecting systems that constitute the natural world.

Sean G. Ferrier, Villanova University

“Why *The Blazing World* is Not a Hobbesian Commonwealth”

When the Empress and the Duchess in Cavendish’s *The Blazing World* discuss the Empress’s realm, the Empress says that she “did somewhat alter the Form of Government from what [she] found it.” The Empress fears that in doing so she may have precipitated open rebellion. Hobbes favors a strong system of monarchic sovereignty, such that a uniform body-politic is created, but in the Empress’ realm the different species of men, ever fractious, suggest an essential political heterogeneity that is not resolved through the exercise of sovereignty. Moreover, the Hobbesian sovereign is regarded as an ‘artificial person’ and is in fact a creation of the consent of the body politic. The prospect of an alteration of the form of government is considered illegitimate in Hobbes’ theory, whereas Cavendish proposes it several times by different characters. This paper will further explore differences in political philosophy between Cavendish and Hobbes.