

# International Margaret Cavendish Society

[HOME](#) | [CONFERENCE](#) | [RESOURCES](#) | [MEMBERSHIP](#) | [AWARDS](#) | [BYLAWS](#)

## *Paper Abstracts: MLA Conference San Francisco, 1998*

---

The following are abstracts of the papers presented at the first MCS-sponsored MLA special session, "Margaret Cavendish and the Early Modern Canon":

### **"Margaret Cavendish: Literary and Philosophical Canonicity and Generic Bricolage in the Restoration"**

**Stephen Clucas, Birkbeck College, London, UK**

This paper addresses the problematic nature of Cavendish's texts in relation to their canonical status or positioning, both in literary and philosophico-scientific traditions. I discuss the ways in which specific stylistic and generic innovations of the Restoration problematize contemporary notions of canonicity, and consider the reasons why the deliberate generic proliferation of Cavendish's texts have caused particular problems for contemporary critics and intellectual historians. I place particular emphasis on the relation of Cavendish's contributions to genres which stress provisionality and bricolage, and in turn to literary innovations of both new scientists and their opponents.

### **"Various Canonical Views of Margaret Cavendish"**

**James Fitzmaurice, University of Northern Arizona, US**

The paper traces changes in canonical views of Margaret Cavendish beginning with Charles Lamb's "chaste" and "original-brained" writer, who was a harmless and virtuous oddity. Lamb's views dominated the early and middle parts of the 19th century but were supplanted in its later years, when she was taken to have made a serious contribution to seventeenth-century biography and autobiography. As the twentieth century began, Virginia Woolf reacted against the biography and autobiography, which she seems to have take to be low-grade apologetics composed by a pampered aristocrat. In the end, Margaret Cavendish may have herself to blame for the various distortions of her life as a writer, for she was given to presenting herself in various guises.

### **"Author, Readers, and Materials in Cavendish's *Poems and Fancies* (1653)"**

**Randall Ingram, Davidson College, US**

This paper considers how Margaret Cavendish's first book, *Poems and Fancies* (1653) offers a model of authorship that challenges the ideal of objective reading, that is, reading determined by a printed

object rather than by writing or reading subjects. The paper examines Humphrey Moseley's collections of poetry from the 1640s and 1650s as important articulations of this ideal, and it considers briefly how critical practices that assume the possibility and desirability of objective reading complicate reading of Cavendish's first book.

**"Not white, black, olive, tawny, or ash-coloured': Margaret Cavendish and the Early Modern Canon of Race"**

**Sujata Iyengar, Stanford University, US**

This paper argues that Margaret Cavendish's *Blazing World* (1666) makes an invaluable addition to the canon of early modern texts on race, skin-colour and ethnic difference because of its complex negotiations between race, gender and social rank. Responding to Rosemary Kegl's observations about late seventeenth-century understandings of race and colour, I argue that the skins of Cavendish's *Blazing Worlders* express not a response to confusion about color as much as a romantic reply to the emerging scientific discourse that did connect color with race. While in her scientific writings she affirmed the inferiority both of women to men and of black men to white, I argue that in her romances Cavendish conducted a form of imaginary or romantic empiricism—a fictional investigation into different imaginative hierarchies of race, gender and sexual desire, but one in which the gradations of rank that structure the romantic plot would never be challenged.

---

*The Margaret Cavendish Society is a not-for-profit organization registered in the United States.*

*[Directory of Members](#) | [Join the Marcav-L Email List](#) | [Executive Board](#) | [Newsletters](#) | [Membership](#) |  
[Conferences](#) | [Resources](#) | [Bibliography](#)*