

Katherine Romack and James Fitzmaurice 2006: *Cavendish and Shakespeare, Interconnections*. Aldershot: Ashgate. i-xii+217 pages. ISBN 0 7546 5453 2 pb

Ángeles Tomé Rosales
Universidade de Vigo
angelestome@uvigo.es

Katherine Romack and James Fitzmaurice have edited a very useful work for anyone interested in the works of Margaret Cavendish, the Duchess of Newcastle, in general and, more specifically, in her most prominent source: the plays by William Shakespeare. *Cavendish and Shakespeare, Interconnections* contains ten essays on the strong affinities between the plays of Shakespeare and the writings of Margaret Cavendish. According to the editors, in Cavendish's plays it is possible to find characters and language reminiscent of Shakespeare's. However, such a reminiscence should not be seen as plagiarism because Cavendish develops her plots from a female point of view and, by dealing with Shakespeare's original plots from a woman's point of view, she creates completely different works. Cavendish does not use this female mark in order to avoid an accusation of plagiarism, but rather she takes into account the most important concerns for women in seventeenth-century society in order to defend women's rights at a time when the concept of femininity was strongly influenced by patriarchy. This particular fight was carried out not only through Cavendish's writings but also through her personal experience. We must bear in mind here that Cavendish's creativity led her to be considered a neurotic woman, who was even called *Mad Madge*, in seventeenth-century society. Moreover, this humiliating nickname was not only used by her contemporaries in their daily speech in order to refer to her but was also recorded in popular works by Dorothy Osborne and Samuel Pepys, among others and, as these works were read in the following centuries, Cavendish's nickname was also preserved. In fact, it has reached our age in spite of the efforts of Restoration critics, who for the last two decades have been proving that Cavendish is as noteworthy as many others. As Romack and Fitzmaurice rightly remark, their work constitutes the first attempt to explain the way an early modern woman writer "both challenged and contributed to dominant early modern paradigms of literary value" (6), something no woman had dared to do before.

This volume thus joins the efforts of modern critics who have endeavoured to retrieve Cavendish's work in the last decade. Apart from many individual articles and chapters, we must highlight here full books and collections of essays such as Battigelli (1998), Cottagnies and Weitz eds. (2003), Clucas ed. (2003), Rees (2003) and the special issues of *Women's Writing* (1997) and *EMLS* (2004). As far as Spanish contributions are concerned, I would like to mention Calderón-López (1997), Figueroa-Dorrego (2002), Figueroa-Dorrego (2003) and Martín-Lucas (2003). However, in spite of the great number of scholars who are now analysing Cavendish's literary production, the relationship of Cavendish's work to Shakespeare had not been extensively dealt with until the publication of Romack and Fitzmaurice's *Cavendish and Shakespeare, Interconnections*, except for an essay by Romack (2000).

The main body is divided into ten chapters which, because of the similarity of their content, could be seen as five different sections and which deal with topics related to Shakespeare's work as a prominent source for Cavendish as follows:

- a) the similarities between Cavendish's and Shakespeare's attitudes towards literature;
- b) the genre and dramatic strategies which Cavendish borrowed from Shakespeare;
- c) several issues concerning gender, issues which distinguish Cavendish's plays from their most immediate source, i. e. Shakespeare's drama;
- d) martial subjects, among which we can highlight the importance of soldier characters and their models in Cavendish's drama;
- e) Cavendish's most significant works: *The Unnatural Tragedy* (1662) and her defence of Cleopatra in *The Worlds Olio* (1655).

The contributors are researchers who publish largely on Renaissance and Restoration literature. In their Introduction, the editors prove that Cavendish had borrowed characters and phraseology, above all, from Shakespeare, and provide an outline of the subsequent chapters which the volume contains. Following the introductory section, there are ten chapters which for the first time establish a relationship between Cavendish and Shakespeare. The first two essays explore the correspondence between Cavendish's desire for fame and her willingness to position herself closer to the most popular playwrights. In the first chapter, entitled "Thou art a Monument, without a tombe": Affiliation and Memorialization in Margaret Cavendish's *Playes and Plays, Never before Printed* (7-28), Shannon Miller states that in the middle years of the seventeenth century playwrights and their reputations were constantly under the public eye. Cavendish was one of the Restoration drama critics who contributed to the assessment of playwrights and, among the most relevant, she always favoured Shakespeare. For Miller, thanks to this assessment, Cavendish finds it possible to align herself with the most outstanding English playwrights because she was continuously positioning herself in relation to Shakespeare and Jonson above all, but also to Fletcher and Beaumont. Precisely, her desire for fame led her to establish the folio as her preferred publication format, the most expensive and ostentatious one available. Miller points out that Cavendish, while enhancing Jonson's scholarship and his knowledge of classical works as opposed to Shakespeare's Englishness, finds her works much closer to Shakespeare. Also associated with the similarities between these authors' attitudes is James Fitzmaurice's analysis 'Shakespeare, Cavendish, and Reading Aloud in Seventeenth-Century England' (29-46). This contributor deals with the practice of reading literature aloud. After proving that collections of drolls intended for professionals were also used by amateurs, Fitzmaurice discusses Cavendish's advice on the practice of reading her plays and chapters aloud. This leads him to wonder whether Cavendish wrote her plays keeping in mind that they would be read aloud and whether she wrote only for her family and friends or also for public performance. He tries to answer this by analysing the three prefaces to *Playes* (1662) where she exposed her aims. Finally, he concludes that, as forerunners, Cavendish and her husband read plays by Shakespeare aloud as early as the seventeenth century, although they did not memorise any part. So, as these two essays illustrate, through publication or performance Cavendish tried to align herself with William Shakespeare.

As I have previously indicated, the following two chapters deal with genre and dramatic strategies and can therefore be considered as forming one section. Erna Kelly's 'Drama's Olio: A New Way to Serve Old Ingredients in *The Religious* and *The Matrimonial Trouble*' (47-62) analyses the liminal space occupied by two of Cavendish's plays which shocked her contemporaries and surprise the present-day reader. *The Religious* constitutes Cavendish's first attempt to experience a new genre: tragicomedy; on the contrary, in *The Matrimonial Trouble*, she creates a genre of her own: *come-tragedy*. According to Kelly, both plays illustrate Cavendish's originality and, as these tragicomedies fuse love with politics, they allow Cavendish to explore her favourite topic: marriage. Moreover, Kelly finds that there is a strong resemblance between these two plays and Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* (1604) and *Othello* (1602), respectively. This contributor points out that *The Religious* is also based on other Shakespearean plays and that *The Matrimonial Trouble* is closer to Restoration plays such as Congreve's *The Way of the World* (1700). In 'Dining at the Table of Sense: Shakespeare, Cavendish and *The Convent of Pleasure*' (63-83), Brandie R. Siegfried argues that *The Convent of Pleasure* is full of dramatic strategies borrowed from Shakespeare, although the most relevant one is the cross-dressed lover, a strategy which challenges the superiority of masculine arts of pleasure and, at the same time, provides a chance for women's liberation and pleasure. Thus, Cavendish's use of the cross-dressed lover to challenge gender hierarchy also comes from Shakespeare. After explaining Cavendish's preference for Shakespeare as her literary-theatrical mentor, Siegfried states that in Cavendish's play the transvestite becomes what the Duchess considers the theatrical analogue to nature's unity, focusing on this analogy by introducing Cavendish's interest in moral and natural philosophy. Therefore, her favourite topic and the dramatic strategies she borrows from Shakespeare allow Cavendish, at least, to challenge the gender hierarchy of patriarchal society.

The following section is formed by two chapters which are centred around several issues related to gender. In 'Testifying in the Court of Public Opinion: Margaret Cavendish Reworks *The Winter's Tale*' (85-102), Alexandra G. Bennett highlights the prominence of female characters on trial in Cavendish's *Youth's Glory and Death's Banquet*, *The Public Wooing* and *The Sociable Companions*, a feature which links them to Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*. However, Cavendish confers much more defiance and control of stage space on her female characters, although Shakespeare also created strong female characters in some of his plays, such as Mistress Ford and Mistress Page in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1600), or Lady Macbeth, or King Lear's daughters. Thus, by claiming women's right to speak and to be placed not only at the centre of the action but also in control of it, Cavendish challenges the concept of femininity in seventeenth-century England. For Mihoko Suzuki, Cavendish's writings enter the traditionally male discourse concerning politics and public affairs. Her 'Gender, the Political Subject and Dramatic Authorship: Margaret Cavendish's *Loves Adventures* and the Shakespearean Example' (103-20) acquaints us with the relationship between *Loves Adventures* and Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* (1604) and *Othello* (1602) among others and, at the same time, with the contrast Cavendish establishes through the introduction of women as political subjects in her own play. In the same way as Shakespeare had previously refashioned the literary arguments of classical antiquity, Cavendish appropriates Shakespeare's plays and, according to her concept of femininity, updates

them. Suzuki extensively illustrates the differences and similarities between Shakespeare's and Cavendish's plays but, above all, she highlights the gender policy Cavendish develops through her play, which proves Cavendish's mockery of Shakespeare's dramatic production.

Both Pasupathi's and Scott-Douglass's compelling essays focus on martial subjects. In 'Old Playwrights, Old Soldiers, New Martial Subjects: The Cavendishes and the Drama of Soldierly' (121-46), Vimala C. Pasupathi deals with the importance Cavendish grants to soldier characters. It is hardly likely that Cavendish had been a soldier and, although her husband had taken part in actual military campaigns, she probably obtained her military plots from North's version of *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans* (1579), as Shakespeare had done before. Moreover, according to Pasupathi, it is probable that Cavendish's imagination played an important role in her works on military subjects. For instance, since her husband spent more than half of the duration of the civil wars outside England, her superb accounts of William Cavendish's soldiery are probably based on her literary invention, which she considered superior to martial knowledge and subjectivity. Chapter 8 is Amy Scott-Douglass's 'Enlarging Margaret: Cavendish, Shakespeare and French Women Warriors and Writers' (147-78). The author focuses on Cavendish's modelling of "some of her dramatic characters, and some of her selves, after particular seventeenth-century French noblewomen warriors and writers" (149). According to Scott-Douglass, it is clear that Cavendish found inspiration in specific historical and literary figures, especially in those called Margaret, to construct her female characters. Therefore, throughout her essay, she analyses how Cavendish was influenced by these characters, taking Shakespeare's Margaret of Anjou as a point of departure.

The final two essays are about Cavendish's appropriation and revision of Shakespearean models of sexuality and pleasure. Karen Barber's '*The Unnatural Tragedy* and Familial Absolutisms' (179-91) deals with Cavendish's renewal of some Shakespearean works in *The Unnatural Tragedy* (1662), one of her most difficult works. The most relevant topic in this tragedy is incest, which can also be found in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* (1604). According to Barber, *The Unnatural Tragedy* is concerned with "how politics, and the beliefs and practices justified or instantiated by the government of the time, impact the health of the family" (184). In fact, as Barber points out, Cavendish had never met most of her husband's extended family. When she wrote this tragedy, she was living in exile on the continent because her husband, at that time Marquis of Newcastle, had been declared a traitor and his estates had been confiscated. *The Unnatural Tragedy* reflects the contemporary events which had placed her in this position, i. e., the failure of absolute rule. In *Measure for Measure*, she could have noticed the absence of a kingly father-figure and, following Shakespeare, her *Unnatural Tragedy* connects the absence of an absolute monarch with the violations of 'nature' in the family and, therefore, in the state. It could also be likely that in the same way as in Shakespeare's *King Lear* (1608), she was aiming at criticising the lack of a natural, legal heir to the throne. Throughout the whole essay, the difference between Shakespeare's and Cavendish's concepts of women becomes evident. For Barber, Cavendish's Soeur shifts the emphasis from a woman's virginity, in itself a valuable virtue, to the role of chaste behaviour within the family.

The last chapter, “‘I Wonder She Should be so Infamous for a Whore?’: Cleopatra Restored’ (193-211), comprises Cavendish’s defence of Cleopatra in *The Worlds Olio* (1655). Katherine Romack compares this female character in Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* (c. 1606) to Dryden’s transformation of her in *All for Love* (1677) and comes to the conclusion that Cavendish anticipated Dryden by aligning Cleopatra with matrimonial virtue, although in contrast with Dryden’s, Cavendish’s Cleopatra is both interesting and sexually appealing. Romack extensively proves that Cavendish admired Cleopatra. For instance, she claims that in letter 162 of *Sociable Letters*, “Cavendish tacitly figures herself as Cleopatra, erotically playing to the triumvirate of political power, sexualised ‘wit’, and dramatic ‘humour’ represented by Augustus Caesar, Ovid, and Shakespeare” (209) and, in addition, Cavendish, like Cleopatra, played the role of a whore herself at the opening of *The Humorous Lovers* (1677) in the garb of a courtesan. According to Romack, this performance was a way of creating viable sexual identities for Restoration women. However, Romack also points out that Cavendish did not go as far as Behn in abandoning “conventional models of Protestant and aristocratic propriety to enter the sexual marketplace” (210). Even so, Cavendish was undoubtedly “one of the most popular and controversial figures of English public life at a time when high-class women’s activities were severely restricted to the domestic sphere” (Martin-Lucas 2003: 213). Despite the fact that she did not endanger her reputation in the same way as Behn, Cavendish challenged the concept of femininity typical of patriarchal society, thus becoming the first Englishwoman to write a substantial body of literature intentionally for publication.

Regarding the disposition of the volume, it should be noted that although each contributor includes a number of references to Renaissance and Restoration drama in their essays, the edition as a whole lacks a general bibliography comprising the works referred to in the various essays. However, in spite of this criticism, I would like to highlight that, in my opinion, this volume constitutes one of the most relevant attempts to analyse Cavendish’s sources and, at the same time, the original traits which make her works completely different from Shakespeare’s plays, although they are based on Shakespearean plots. Moreover, *Cavendish and Shakespeare, Interconnections* is worth reading by anyone interested in Cavendish’s writing, due to the great variety of topics it deals with. In fact, this selection of critical essays can be considered as a means of decoding this author’s work. It also reveals Cavendish’s concerns, her interests and her goals, which have hitherto remained unknown. Once again, I find it necessary to emphasize that seventeenth-century female writers were considered inferior to their male counterparts and, therefore, unable to convey useful ideas. Thanks to the contributors to this appealing collection of essays it is possible to see Cavendish in a different light, a light that shows her no longer as an eccentric woman writer but as the first English woman who wrote a considerable corpus of plays, and one who often reworked and appropriated the plays of the most canonical English dramatist for her own purposes. We must forget the neurotic *Mad Madge* that patriarchy created in order to cancel out this active creative woman and welcome Margaret Cavendish as a versatile, prolific writer and a noteworthy playwright indeed.

Works Cited

- Battigelli, Anna 1998: *Margaret Cavendish and the Exiles of the Mind*. Lexington: The U P of Kentucky.
- Calderón-López, María Isabel 1997: ““If it be naught”: Margaret Cavendish and the Performance of Transcendence”. *SEDERI* 8: 121-128.
- Cottagnies, Line and Nancy Weitz, eds. 2003: *Authorial Conquests: Essays on Genre in the Writings of Margaret Cavendish*. Madison: Fairleigh Dickenson UP.
- Clucas, Stephen, ed. 2003: *A Princely Brave Woman: Essays on Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- EMLS* 14 (2004): <URL: <http://purl.oclc.org/emls/si-14.html>>. Accessed 26 April, 2007
- Figuroa-Dorrego, Jorge 2002: *Tecendo tramas, fiando ficciones: Narrativa inglesa de autoría femenina (1621-1688)*. Vigo: U. de Vigo, Servicio de Publicaciones.
- Figuroa-Dorrego, Jorge 2003: ‘Men’s Violence in Women’s Prose Fiction of the Seventeenth Century: the Case of Margaret Cavendish.’ *El inglés como vocación: Homenaje al profesor Miguel Castelo Montero*. Eds. de Toro-Santos, Antonio and María Jesús Lorenzo-Modia. A Coruña: U. da Coruña. 185-194.
- Martín-Lucas, Belén 2003: ““A world of my own”: Margaret Cavendish’s auto/biographical texts’. *Re-shaping the Genres: Restoration Women Writers*. Eds. Luis-Martínez, Zenón and Jorge Figuroa-Dorrego. Bern: Peter Lang. 213-232.
- Rees, Emma 2003: *Margaret Cavendish: Gender, Genre, Exile*. Manchester: Manchester UP.
- Romack, Katherine M. 2000: “Margaret Cavendish, Shakespeare Critic.” *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare*. Ed. Callaghan, Dympna. Oxford: Blackwell. 21-41.
- Women’s Writing* 4 / 3 (1997).

Received 21 November 2006

Revised version received 25 April 2007