



**Margaret Cavendish, Poems and Fancies with The Animal Parliament, edited by Brandie R. Siegfried (Iter Press, 2018).**

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# EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



**Margaret Cavendish, *Poems and Fancies with The Animal Parliament*, edited by Brandie R. Siegfried (Toronto: Iter Press, 2018). xx + 462pp. ISBN 978 0 8669 8593**

**3.**

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Editions of early modern texts abound. Increasingly introduction-heavy and note-weighted editions of poems, prose and (especially) plays clog up our bookshelves. Academic offices groan under piles of inspection copies of prose, drama and poetry anthologies, many of which cover remarkably similar ground. Some editions of early modern writing are smothered by controversy — the *New Oxford Shakespeare* is so mired in rancorous debate about its polemical re-shaping of the Bard's canon that it is difficult to respond to it objectively. Some editions take so long to appear that they appear outdated at the time of issue — some of the third generation Arden editions of Shakespearean plays have suffered from that. And some editions offer renderings of texts that simply appear in print too often — for example, nobody needs another edition of Arden of *Faversham* or *The Tragedy of Mariam*. But some editions of early modern texts offer so much that they can change not just the study of a single author but the study of a period as a whole. This magnificent edition of Margaret Cavendish's enormous collection of poetry and prose, *Poems and Fancies with The Animal Parliament*, is such an edition. It is a pristine edition of a huge, complicated work that contains some 280 poems as well as much prose. Erudite, thorough, accurate and packed with useful contextualising detail, this edition complicates our understanding of Cavendish as well as making this work properly accessible for the first time; it tells us much about intellectual networks in the mid-1600s and it does much to connect the cerebral, natural sciences aspects of late-Renaissance poetic discourse with thematic preoccupations that seem to be rather more based on emotions.

There is not adequate space here to detail the scale of Siegfried's achievement in conveying the poetry and prose of Cavendish so clearly, nor is there space to detail the

unparalleled job that Siegfried has done to treat Cavendish not just as a singular, high-achieving individual but as a well-connected British Royalist and European intellectual whose reputation far transcended subsequent, lazy notions about ‘Mad Madge’. Simply, in this review I will describe the layout of the edition and concentrate on a few brief passages to highlight just how essential this edition is.

After a useful list of illustrations and abbreviations and an endearing acknowledgments section we are given a 55-page introduction. In many editions of early modern texts, especially dramatic texts, such long introductions can be oppressive and off-putting. But with a relatively little-known text such as *Poems and Fancies* such length is necessary. It is magnificently organised and written and contributes a great deal to what I had wrongly thought to be a bloated, over-crowded field of Cavendish studies. Cavendish, of course, is now thought of as a major writer of her period. But she has been appreciated for literary innovation and sensitivity — her pioneering fantasy work, *The Blazing World* and her letter/essay on Shakespeare are the sort of literary texts for which she is now most renowned. But Siegfried, utterly convincingly, insists that Cavendish should be known for her thinking as a natural philosopher as much as for her literary interests and innovations. She stresses that Cavendish was appreciated by scientific thinkers of her day and, crucially, asserts that her innovative, if idiosyncratic, thinking about nature went hand in hand with literary, generic experimentation. C. P. Snow would surely have appreciated this introduction.

Siegfried goes on to provide us with a good, pithy biography of Cavendish and then gives a survey of her copious published works. The densest part of the introduction deals with the complexities of the five-book structure of *Poems and Fancies*. The poems reveal the sheer catholic range of Cavendish’s thinking and the variegated strands of her intellectual preoccupations. In Siegfried’s own words, the poems engage with ‘topics in natural philosophy (including atomism, biology, chemistry, medicine, psychology, anatomy, magnetism, astronomy, and meteorology), political theory, local history and folklore, mathematics, and moral philosophy’ (p. 14). That is a conservative list: to that I would add geometry, book design, natural history, ornithology, husbandry, poetics, rhetoric and personal relationships. Siegfried makes enormous efforts to explain Cavendish’s grand design; any reader of the Cavendish text will be grateful to Siegfried for so helpfully explaining how Cavendish’s book works partly as a dialogue with Lucretius’ *On Nature*.

Many of Cavendish’s specific preoccupations are highlighted by Siegfried, including Cavendish’s poetic expressions of distaste at the Cartesian notion of animal mechanism. This edition, then, does much to enhance awareness of Cavendish as a vital writer about

non-human animals and an important figure in the long, slow road to decent animal welfare and humane, reasoned good attitudes towards non-human animals. Cavendish is quite serious when she asks us to reflect on the possible wisdom of a fish that may somehow know as much about the saltiness of the sea as we do (p. 207). Each of the individual books within the text is accounted for and introduced effectively. Then, a few pages underline the surprisingly lengthy historical impact of *Poems and Fancies*. Parts of the work were reprinted and engaged with for centuries. Romanticists will certainly be interested in Siegfried's comparison of William Wordsworth's compassion for animals with Cavendish's. The section ends with a melancholy note about Virginia Woolf's superficial dismissal of the 'folly' of Cavendish (I'll bet that Woolf read virtually none of Cavendish's poems or prose first-hand) and, more happily, with a celebratory note about the latter-day feminist rehabilitation of Cavendish in both scholarship and creative work. The 'Note on the Text' is admirable in its clear explanation of editorial decisions. *Poems and Fancies* was published in 1653, 1664 and 1668. The third edition is quite different from the previous two, and these differences are accounted for by Siegfried. Her edition is based on this third edition — indeed, it is based specifically on the Huntington Library's copy of the work — a copy described in some detail and with noticeable warmth. (The title-page of this copy is reproduced in a colour plate; even in these *EEBO* times reproductions of title-pages are always welcome.) Siegfried, clearly, massively enjoyed the thousands of hours of labour that went into producing this immaculate edition.

Cavendish's own prose and poems are then laid out. All of the pieces of prose and verse are accompanied by helpful notes. There are 1,333 footnotes: I did not see a single error anywhere. As stated earlier, one cannot begin to do justice to the range and complexity of Cavendish's poems and prose in a review of this scope. Suffice to say that the text can, I think, work on two levels: macrotextual and microtextual. Macrotextually, the five books can be read as a whole so that some understanding of Cavendish's sophisticated, highly personal vision of an atomised world can be reached. But there are 280 poems, and many can be taken wilfully out of context and appreciated individually. Any scholar of seventeenth-century culture can dip into Cavendish's book if they seek, say, a poem about (material or metaphorical) horses, about clouds, about sunbeams, about trees, about fish, about the misery of civil war, about riches and poverty, about the efficacy of learning, about the necessity of honour or about the seductive power of the Devil. The edition ends with useful appendices that detail differences between the three original editions, a superb bibliography of Cavendish's primary works, other relevant primary works and salient critical commentary, convenient indexes of poems' titles and first lines and a helpful general index. Generous, thorough and welcoming, this edition has been assembled with a passionate professionalism that does much to honour

Cavendish and her complicated legacy. Scholars of seventeenth-century intellectual and literary culture will be using this formidable edition of Cavendish's seminal work for decades to come.