

Panel Discussion Proposal

International Margaret Cavendish Society Conference Theme for 2024 – Fame

The University of Seville, December 12 and 13, 2024

Panel Discussion – Fame Reimagined: Creative Approaches to Margaret Cavendish and Early Modern Women Writers

Organizers – James Fitzmaurice (Northern Arizona University and the University of Sheffield) and Sara Jayne Steen (Plymouth State University)

Participants – James Fitzmaurice (Northern Arizona University and the University of Sheffield), Sara Jayne Steen (Plymouth State University), Naomi Miller (Smith College), Mariah Spencer (Northern Illinois University), and Sarah Gristwood (independent scholar and novelist).

Description – Many early modern women writers were famous – or infamous – in their own time. Lady Mary Wroth was infamous as a tattle-tale on the subject of court scandal, Mary Sidney Herbert countess of Pembroke was revered as a self-effacing patron of great male poets, and Margaret Cavendish was what we today would call a celebrity eccentric. This panel will examine how twenty-first-century fiction and live performance have helped to create the very different ways that Cavendish and Pembroke are now known. We will discuss Miller’s biographical (or biofictional) novel on the subject of Pembroke, looking at how the novel pays attention to this fascinating woman as a major poet who lived an interesting, nuanced life. We will consider how a stage play by Fitzmaurice seeks to reformulate the infamous views of Virginia Woolf regarding Cavendish. Did Woolf, contrary to popular belief today, empathize with Cavendish’s shyness? Where live performance is concerned, we will engage with the classroom exercises in reading aloud and video recording undertaken by students in a university Cavendish course taught by Spencer. Along the way we will discuss matters of biography and biofiction in relation to authorial fame. When, for instance, is it permissible for a biographer to look into what is not known but might have existed? When not? Is it reasonable to re-create a woman writer in ways that are contrary to what is known? If so, in what situations? Steen and Gristwood will approach how we might consider these questions associated with twenty-first-century fame.

Brief Bios

James Fitzmaurice is an emeritus professor of English at Northern Arizona University and an honorary research fellow at the University of Sheffield. He has been a post-doctoral fellow at Yale University and is a life member of Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge. The bulk of his scholarly writing has been on Margaret Cavendish and early modern women writers and includes a scholarly edition of Cavendish’s *Sociable Letters* suitable for upper division and graduate classroom use. His play about Margaret Cavendish and Virginia Woolf was staged at the CVAR Museum in Cyprus in 2017. It will have a table read by members of the Sheffield Day One actors group in the summer of 2024.

Sara Jayne Steen has authored or edited six volumes, including *The Letters of Lady Arbella Stuart*, and has co-edited collections on early modern women writers for *Shakespeare Quarterly* and *Quidditas*. She has published on several members of the Cavendish family. Her most recent book is

a collection co-edited with James Fitzmaurice and Naomi Miller entitled *Authorizing Early Modern European Women. From Biography to Biofiction*, which was honored by the Society for the Study of Early Modern Women and Gender. Recognized for teaching and scholarship, she has been faculty member, chair, and dean at Montana State University and is president emerita of Plymouth State University.

Naomi Miller is Professor of English and the Study of Women & Gender at Smith College. Her interests include Shakespeare, early modern women authors, lyric poetry of all periods and children's literature. In 2016 she was awarded Smith's Sherrerd Prize for Distinguished Teaching. In addition to scholarly articles, and articles for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, she has published an historical fiction novel, *Imperfect Alchemist* (2020), that launches her larger fiction series about women authors in early modern England called *Shakespeare's Sisters*, as well as multiple books about Renaissance women authors and the early modern world. She is currently completing a novel about Mary Wroth called *Strange Labyrinth*.

Sarah Gristwood is a former broadsheet journalist, specializing in celebrity and women's issues. Her most recent work was editing *Secret Voices: A Year of Women's Diaries*; while her books on the sixteenth century include *The Tudors in Love: The Courtly Code Behind the Last Medieval Dynasty*; and *Game of Queens: The Women Who Made Sixteenth-Century Europe*. A regular broadcaster on CNN, Sky, and the BBC, she is a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society and of the Royal Society of Arts; and has been shortlisted for both the Marsh Biography Award and the Ben Pimlott Prize for Political Writing.

E Mariah Spencer serves as Assistant Director of Undergraduate Studies & Coordinator of Educator Licensure at Northern Illinois University. With a Ph.D. in English from The University of Iowa, her professional journey blends a deep academic background with diverse research interests. These include educator licensure, play as pedagogy, and the history of educational reform. Her scholarly contributions span British Renaissance literature, women writers, and gender studies, with notable publications in journals like *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Teaching* and *The Routledge Companion to Gender and Science Fiction*.