

Panel Discussion: *Writing, Fame, and Gender in Margaret Cavendish: Paper bodies as forms of gaining public visibility and perseverance.*

Organizers: Julia Urabayen (University of Navarra) and Sergio Marín (University of Sevilla).

Participants: Jorge Figueroa Dorrego (University of Vigo), Ruth Breeze (University of Navarra), Isabel Calderón (University of Cádiz), Julia Urabayen (University of Navarra) and Sergio Marín (University of Sevilla).

Description: In this roundtable, some of Margaret Cavendish's works will be analyzed with the aim of reflecting on the role that writing plays as a means to achieve fame and perseverance. As a woman in the 17th century, Cavendish experienced the sharp separation between public and private spaces as a division marked by a deep sexist charge. She, being a woman, was not supposed to perform or desire certain activities. Yet, she desired and performed them. Faced with obstacles that either impeded or judged as inappropriate her writing activities, her ambition for fame and her awakening of a feminine consciousness not entirely subject to conventional norms, Margaret not only dreamed of becoming Margaret the first, but she also laid the foundations to achieve it: her works, or her paper bodies, have preserved her name and her image (present in much of her texts).

Using the close relationship between writing and fame from a gender perspective (in a broad sense) as a guiding thread, the presentations will showcase a work in progress linked to a research project. The first three presentations will address the main questions by focusing on certain works of Cavendish. The last two presentations, while also studying some of the author's works, will focus on more general issues: the relationship between appearing in the public space and being preserved in written memory, and the creation, marked by many ambiguities, of a female cosmology.

Jorge Figueroa Dorrego: *Fame, Gender and Ethics in Margaret Cavendish's Natures Pictures*

As in her previous books, Margaret Cavendish insists in *Natures Pictures Drawn by Fancies Pencil to the Life* (1656) that her ambition to climb the steps to "Fames Tower", and thus be remembered in the afterlife, is restless and extraordinary. She intends to do so by writing because women were barred from heroic actions, the administration, and the government. Significantly, she wrote about different subjects, acknowledged her authorship, and published her works in costly volumes. However, both writing and the ambition for public recognition were also gendered masculine at the time and, probably for that reason, Cavendish felt the need to vindicate them in texts and paratexts. In her autobiography appended to *Natures Pictures*, she combines that defense of her *unfeminine* desire for public recognition and renown with a more mainstream set of *feminine* values such as modesty, temperance, loyalty, and privacy. Thus, she attempts to neutralize the equation of female writer and unchaste woman that was common in the misogynistic discourse of the time. This paper will analyze the representation of fame in the verse and prose tales of *Natures Pictures*, many of them quite disregarded by most scholars so far, and will focus on the virtues and actions that are presented as providers of public repute. Most male protagonists achieve it through heroic action in war, whereas the female protagonists through a commitment to chastity. However, some manage to combine it with martial heroism, rhetorical skills, encyclopedic knowledge, and an ambition of fame as remarkable as the author's.

Ruth Breeze: *Fame and writerly ambition in the prefaces to "The World's Olio": A dialogic approach*

In Margaret Cavendish's time, the notion that women could be present as intellectuals in the public sphere met with strong opposition (Rosengren 2023): although Renaissance culture had in some sense admitted women to participate in cultural and scientific activities (Wiesner-Hanks, 2008), their entry into public fora still met with incomprehension (O'Neill, 1998), and their aspirations to achieve public fame appeared even more aberrant. Cavendish's own attitude to public fame is notoriously contradictory. On the one hand, she proclaims that, with Fortune's help, "The whole Volume, like a Cannon Bullet, shall Echo from Side to Side of Fames large Brasen Walls, and make so loud a Report, that all The World shall hear it" (Dedication of *The World's Olio*, 1665), while on the other, at almost the same time she envisions that her writing will "be buried in silence" but might "rise gloriously hereafter" (preface to *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, 1666). It seems that Cavendish's projection of fame operated on two levels. This contribution looks at the representations of fame in Cavendish's multiple prefaces to *The World's Olio* and *Philosophical and Physical Opinions*, considering the imagery used to depict fame and the causal attributions used in the texts directed towards different readers. In this, I shall adopt a dialogic approach (Bakhtin, 1981), in the understanding that her attitude towards public fame is conditioned by underlying tensions that remain unresolved.

Isabel Calderón: *"Your coming spoyl'd the Triumph": Margaret Cavendish as Lady Contemplation*

One of the critical topoi about Margaret Cavendish and her extensive oeuvre is her unquenchable ambition for fame. The reasons for such a craving however are more difficult to ascertain. From her own biographical account, it follows that Cavendish repeatedly experienced persecution and was bashful by nature, fearful of others, addicted to contemplation, and had an enormous ambition to achieve fame for which she would spare no efforts both through constant, verbose writing and eccentric attire. Living "by remembrance in after-ages" was essential for Cavendish even if that amounted to paradoxical self-obliteration and retreat into the recesses of her mind to contemplate her thoughts. Since her own life circumstances as a seventeenth-century woman as well as her temperament barred her from attaining the fame she so desperately wanted in her own day, Cavendish chose to live absorbed in contemplation, which resulted in the creation of very singular worlds of her own where she could reign sole empress. Cavendish's fear of (mis-)judgment led her to safe seclusion in the contemplation of her thoughts. This in turn allowed her to achieve self-indulgent empowerment while envisioning future empathy and full appreciation of her writing. Within this logic of contemplative retreat as the path to glory, Lady Contemplation, one of the characters in Cavendish's eponymous play, asks to be construed as a version of herself, as the self-portrait of a woman who suffered and abhorred the all-pervasive and disturbing threat of the outside world, and yet succeeded in reaching glory within the realm of her mind and beyond.

Julia Urabayan: *History, stories, public space, gender and fame in Margaret Cavendish*

The appearance in the public sphere, according to Hannah Arendt, has been one of the conditions for achieving earthly immortality or fame since ancient Greek times. In this framework, History recounts the actions and deeds of heroes (those who took part in the Trojan War) and the words of political figures (such as Pericles). If that is the case, those who do not appear in public are not part of History, and their fate is to fall into oblivion.

Logically, they can tell stories about their lives or the lives of others, but these narratives will lack political relevance.

Margaret Cavendish, raised in a world shaped by this conception of the public sphere and fame, understood very well that the division between public and private spaces completely conditioned the lives of women. Despite the oscillations, irony, and twists present in many of her works, there are two points she did not want to renounce: being an autor(ess) and creating spaces of action for women in her works. The first aspect is Margaret Cavendish's appearance in the public sphere through the use of words (stories), which should guarantee her fame or survival in memory. The second dimension opens a channel for political action (deeds and actions) for women. In this case, it is not Margaret but her *alter egos* who present themselves as women of action who demand to be part of History (*Bell in Campo* and *The Blazing World*). In both options, women appear in the public sphere and claim fame.

Sergio Marín Conejo: *Abyss and anchor: Cavendish's yearn for hearth*

The misogynistic society in which Margaret Cavendish lived not only reflected socio-political and economic conditions but also exerted cultural and intellectual pressures. In that abyss, Cavendish confronted the constraints imposed by the patriarchal ethos as she developed and experimented with her thoughts. Consequently, inconsistencies are to be expected in her statements as she gradually formed certain beliefs in her consciousness' layers, leading her to embrace notions of individuality and naturality. In the unfixed debate between organicism and mechanism, which she might not have been fully aware of, Cavendish found refuge in a universal concept of hearth, influenced by the sense of liberty inherited from her mother. From the publication of *Nature's Pictures* in 1656 onward, she asserted herself to be an "authoress", reflecting her decision to rely on her own cosmovision. This self-identification evolved into describing herself as a "Creatoress" (BW), despite claiming to be illiterate and ignorant—in a *Captatio Benevolentiae* fashion. Whether this was a marketing strategy or a response to doubts about her authorship, her choice of words signifies a vindication of respect and a different notion of womanhood. This claim is not only a personal declaration but also a response to the need to create space for a feminine cosmology, separate from the patriarchal mindset in which the liberty she learned at home could be fully developed.