

# Spirits, Angels or Demons? Margaret Cavendish and the Renaissance Occult Tradition

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## Abstract

This paper explores seventeenth-century female writer Margaret Cavendish's scientific treatises and literary creations in relation to the Renaissance occult tradition, which includes fields such as theurgy or magic, witchcraft, alchemy, natural philosophy, religion, and modern sciences. During the European Renaissance and scientific revolution, the emergence of modern sciences and the occult literature passed down from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance were closely interrelated, sometimes even co-existent; thus an enlightened scientist in this period might still retain hidden belief in ancient occult theories and practices. Although scholars have reclaimed Cavendish's position as an important scientist and natural philosopher during the scientific revolution in the seventeenth century, and confirmed her contribution to contemporary studies of science and natural philosophy, very few scholars further investigate the potential influence of the Renaissance occult tradition on Cavendish's writings. In this paper, I first delve into the key issues relevant to occultism in Cavendish's scientific oeuvre in the greater context of the Renaissance occult tradition, and then analyze Cavendish's representation of occult themes such as witchcraft, magic, alchemy, and spirits in her literary works, including *Poems and Fancies*, the short story "The Travelling Spirits" in *Natures Pictures*, and the science fiction *The Blazing World*. This study aims to contribute to our better understanding of the intriguing relationship between the emergence of modern sciences in seventeenth-century scientific revolution and the Renaissance occult tradition.

Keywords: Margaret Cavendish, Renaissance occult tradition, science, theurgy, witchcraft, spirits