
Su Fang Ng’s comprehensive new book explores conceptualizations of families in literature and political thought of seventeenth-century England. Casting a wide net, ranging from Milton and Hobbes to Margaret Cavendish and early Quakerism, Ng’s monograph will be of interest to scholars working in disparate areas of seventeenth-century studies, since it brings together issues and texts from literature, political theory, history, religion, and gender studies. She frequently replicates a stylistic flaw she finds in Milton: “whose writings are so peppered with quotations [that] . . . they frequently overwhelm his prose (144).” Nevertheless, readers will doubtless appreciate the breadth of material she draws from as she constructs her detailed and persuasive argument.

Ng explains her methodology in the introduction: “By examining the field of discourse defined by its use, this study historically contextualizes the family-state analogy to offer a better sense of the political debates” (8). Claiming an affinity with the tenets and practices of new historicism and cultural materialism, she declares that “this study is unabashedly historicist in blurring the boundaries between historical and literary material” (10). Although these boundaries are not as indistinct in her work as this statement suggests, the monograph’s argument is strengthened by its juxtaposition of texts that have not always been read together in such a context. Her inclusion of Margaret Cavendish, for example, an author who is still not widely read outside of select early modern circles, brings a new perspective to the more familiar works of Robert Filmer and others. Ng’s study, therefore, provides historians and political scientists access to some of the recent literary scholarship that helpfully illuminates germane issues that transcend traditional disciplinary distinctions.

The book is divided into two major sections that generally follow chronological categorization. The first, “Revolutionary Debates,” includes chapters on the Stuart court, Milton, Hobbes, and Cromwell. The second, “Restoration Imaginings” is comprised of an “interchapter” followed by considerations of Milton, Cavendish, and Quakerism. This segment of the book also includes an epilogue that looks ahead to uses of the family-state analogy
in the eighteenth century. The chapters work well either in isolation or as part of her overall argument, so scholars and graduate students who are most interested in a particular author will be as well-served as those readers who will benefit from the entire monograph.

The “Revolutionary Debates” section interweaves historical research with readings of literature and political philosophy. Although the chapter concerning Queen Anna’s court pales in contrast to Leeds Barroll’s ground-breaking work on this topic, it helpfully contextualizes the court—and that of King James—in the framework offered by the family-state analogy. As Ng comments, “Queen consorts’ unsettling representations of sovereignty are but one example of how reiteration of family tropes did not exactly duplicate a single model of the analogy” (45). The chapter usefully reiterates material from Jonathan Goldberg and other scholars of the Stuart family in order to establish the ways that articulations linking families and states are being used for a variety of political purposes, despite the deceptive parallels that the use of similar language may suggest.

The Milton and Hobbes chapters continue this work, as Ng details Milton’s use of families to encourage political reformation: “With family standing in analogical relation to the state, new configurations of family—in particular, Milton’s republican troping of family—make possible new forms of government” (53). This Milton chapter highlights the author’s prose writings, as it details his unsuccessful attempts to create and support “a fraternal republic of peers uninfected by the disease of rank” (73). Hobbes, on the other hand, is shown to “[dramatize] a confrontation between two of the most pervasive metaphors for polity in the early modern period: the family and the human body” (79) in his effort to lodge power in the sovereign “with no intermediate levels of authority” (100). These adjacent chapters offer valuable considerations of the contrasting viewpoints of two major thinkers of the time. The section ends by reminding readers of the political quandary caused by the actual family of Oliver Cromwell, who failed to produce a reasonable heir or to address adequately the issues of succession within a republic.

The second section concerns fictive writings and religious ruminations on the relationships between families and politics after the Restoration. The second Milton chapter considers *Paradise Lost*, which Ng argues “can be compared to a number of major works of political philosophy in the period” (143). In this context, she cites works by Robert Filmer and John Locke
which, like Milton’s epic, use Genesis to support a patriarchal view of the state. This Milton piece provides an informative reading of the epic which is enriched by its placement within the broader context provided by the larger study. Likewise, the subsequent interpretation of Margaret Cavendish’s Blazing World is strengthened by being placed within a framework created by texts that will be more familiar to many of this book’s audience. Here, Ng offers a snapshot of the important work being done on Cavendish in recent years. As she notes, modern scholars “have been [slow] to treat Cavendish seriously as a political theorist” (175). Ng’s study demonstrates the folly of such myopia as she offers an insightful reading of this unusual work that casts family and political structures in quite a different light than do the writings of many of her prominent male counterparts. Cavendish also provides a valuable segue into Ng's consideration of Quaker perspectives on leadership and the family, particularly since Quaker women “were insisting on their central place in the sect and refusing to be relegated to a peripheral role” (220).

Ng’s brief epilogue gives summary of the ways that the family-state analogy was sustained and reconceptualized in the eighteenth century. Like the rest of her book, this postscript is pointed and articulate. Although brief, it succinctly illustrates the reemergence of the family-state analogy in the works of Mary Astell and others, further indicating the prominence of this trope throughout the period in question.


From June 2 through September 9, 2006, the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, DC, hosted an exhibition inspired by Elizabethan “soundscapes.” An ethnomusicological term introduced in the late 1960s, a “soundscape” consists of “the sounds heard in a particular location, considered as a whole.” As such, it incorporates not just performances of documented music, but also such other aural experiences as bells and street vendors’ cries. The library’s exhibit boasted a fascinating array of engravings, music prints and manuscripts, commonplace books, musical instruments, catches and ballads, chant