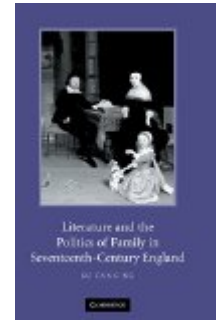


**Su Fang Ng.** *Literature and the Politics of Family in Seventeenth-Century England.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. viii + 236 pp. \$96.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-87031-3.



**Reviewed by** Vanessa Wilkie

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**Commissioned by** Brian S. Weiser (Metropolitan State College of Denver)

This is the first book by literary scholar Su Fang Ng, yet the broad application of her work gives the book a scope that far surpasses the typically narrow confines of a dissertation. Ng's goal is to take the family-state metaphor as it was used in early modern England and stretch it in a myriad of ways to test its complex applications. In her introduction, she explains that scholars in the past have viewed the idea of the monarch as the "father" and the state as the "children" as a rather simple analogy. However, Ng's book demonstrates that "because the early modern family did not conform to a single model, the family metaphor in the period did not have a single meaning. It supported absolute monarchy as well as contractual, voluntaristic, and participatory forms of government" (p. 12). She points out that the metaphor was used by monarchs (both male and female), political theorists, and theologians of various denominations to demonstrate different meanings of patriarchy, authority, family, and power based on their own beliefs. Her thesis gives this work a broad interdisciplinary appeal, though her partic-

ular historical context is literary based. While historians may situate these sources and ideas in a slightly different context, Ng's arguments and ideas are convincingly valid and interesting.

Ng argues that "the meaning of the family metaphor depended on context," and she takes great care to discuss her literary sources against the backdrop of the relevant historiography to re-contextualize this metaphor in diverse ways (p. 12). This allows the reader to see the varying styles of the family-state metaphor used by seventeenth-century writers, like John Milton, Thomas Hobbes, Margaret Cavendish, James I, and Anna Queen of Denmark. Ng then masterfully analyzes these texts through the lens of scholarly historical work to explain what these variances in this analogy could have meant within the literary context of seventeenth-century thought. She weaves historical and literary theories together so fluidly that the flexibility of the family-state metaphor becomes a fascinating insight into the complexities of both political and family structures, as well

as theories of gender. Her thoughtful methodology yields the conclusion that no idea can merely be taken at face value, and that both the author and intended audience had a dramatic effect on the meanings of the analogy.

Her book is broken up into two parts. Part 1 focuses on the revolutionary debates, referring to the wide range of applications for the family-state analogy at times when the preestablished political forms were transformed, as was the case with the transition from the Elizabethan era to the Stuart monarchies. The succession of James I and Anne of Denmark meant that England could have a metaphoric "father and mother," and this dramatically altered the family-state analogy from the time of Elizabeth. When Oliver Cromwell died and his son Richard assumed the role of protector, the family-state analogy could be manipulated to show the transfer of authority from father to son, and was then again used to express the lack of authority established by the "new father." Ng's chapter on Milton's political and religious prose exemplifies a compounded metaphor where family-state relations do not just run vertically, but also assume a horizontal exchange of authority between brothers, as well as men and women.

Part 2, "Restoration Imaginings," is a bit more abstract as Ng focuses on the politics of Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), Cavendish's *Blazing World* (1666), and Quaker notions of marriage and discipline. In this section, she focuses less on specific applications of the family-state analogy and more on seventeenth-century radicalism. While a discussion of the varying manipulations of the analogy are consistently present in her work, this section of the book "address[es] how various marginalized authors developed communal identities separate from, though still in dialogue with, national culture" (p. 142). These marginalized authors still contributed to the discussion of the family-state analogy, though their peripheral locale allowed them to truly rethink and reconfigure the

gendered and familial notion of power and authority.

Ng's work does not only provide a keen understanding of multifaceted literary texts, but also creates an intricate history to a seemingly simple metaphor. By surveying a variety of genres and texts, Ng lucidly articulates the convoluted meanings associated with the family and with the changing landscape of seventeenth-century political ideologies. In the conclusion, Ng carries this metaphor into the eighteenth century to set the stage for the effects that increasingly liberal ideas had on the family, and thus the analogy of family and politics. She reminds us that no idea can exist entirely within a vacuum and that even the ubiquitous concept of "the family" can be manipulated to express an infinite number of powerful relationships, especially when it is situated in the context of the tumultuous political and religious climate of seventeenth-century England.

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