

**“YET IS SHE A PLAIN AND RATIONAL WRITER”:  
MARGARET CAVENDISH’S SELF-FASHIONING  
IN *THE BLAZING WORLD*, POLITICS, SCIENCE AND  
LITERATURE**

**JUAN DE DIOS TORRALBO CABALLERO**

University of Córdoba

***Abstract:** This study focuses on The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World by Margaret Cavendish. It explores the political undertones and the support of the monarchy that permeates this text published in 1666, alongside Observations upon Experimental Philosophy. It also discusses its scientific and philosophical content, examining the dialogue used, which is based on the theories of contemporary scientists. The article will also study the author's self-depiction in The Blazing World, tangentially citing several strategies of self-fashioning contained within Poems and Fancies (1653) and Natures Pictures Drawn by Fancies Pencil (1656).*

***Keywords:** Blazing World, Cavendish, natural science, restoration literature, self-fashioning*

If your Majesty were resolved to make a Cabbala, I would advise you, rather to make a Poetical or Romancical Cabbala, wherein you can use Metaphors, Allegories, Similitudes, etc. and interpret them as you please. (Cavendish 2016a: 121)

## **1. Introduction: “I may live in a glorious Fame”**

Margaret Lucas (1623?–1673) was born in Colchester (Essex) to a family belonging to the gentry (her parents were Thomas Lucas and Elizabeth Leighton). where she enjoyed a happy and idyllic childhood (Todd 1989: 497). The family, however, suffered for its political ideals on several occasions; for example, when an anti-monarchical group ransacked their house and attacked Margaret's mother. Margaret settled in Oxford for one year with her sister and became a maid of honour

to Queen Henrietta Maria. She followed the court to St Germain (France) in 1645, three years after the English Civil War broke out in 1642, culminating in the beheading of Charles I and the proclamation of the Republic, or Commonwealth, under Oliver Cromwell, in 1649.

In France she met and married William Cavendish in 1645 (an army officer and a minor Cavalier poet), who was the Earl, Marquis and, ultimately, First Duke of Newcastle upon Tyne in 1665, as a reward for his fidelity and defence of the royalist cause. After marriage, they also lived in Holland and Antwerp, and Margaret would rub shoulders with the intellectual elite of her era, as she met scholars like her brother-in-law, the mathematician Charles Cavendish, the philosophers René Descartes and Pierre Gassendi, and exiled intellectuals, such as Thomas Hobbes (at that time he was working on his *Leviathan*, published in 1651) and Edmund Waller. They remained in exile on the Continent until the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660, returning to Welbeck Abbey, where Margaret (who had no children) set about writing.

Thus, Margaret Cavendish eventually dedicated herself fully to intellectual debate and writing. Her first books were *Poems and Fancies* and *Philosophical Fancies*, which she sent to the press in 1653, during a brief visit to England (Hobby 1988: 81). She also published essays, like her collection *The World's Olio* (1655) as well as a series of stories, under the general title of *Natures Pictures Drawn by Fancies Pencil to the Life*, the next year.

The work examined here is prose fiction, describing a fantastic voyage to a Utopian world, featuring an amalgam of literary genres, such as romance and satire. *The Description of a New Blazing World* (also known as *The Blazing World*) is “the first science-fiction novel to have been written and published by a woman” (Mendelson 2016: 21) and “female scientific utopia, introduced like many contemporary utopias and dystopias as a travelogue to an imagined locale” (ibid.). The fictional story reveals the writer's philosophical side, scientific theories, and the politics of her time.

*The Description of a New Blazing World* is composed of two parts. The first (Cavendish 2016a: 59-142) begins with the kidnapping of a maiden by her suitor, followed by an account of their trip, which ends in another world (called The Blazing World), where she is turned into the Empress of a diverse society, before ultimately returning to Earth. The second part (Cavendish 2016a: 143-164) describes the return of the Empress to her home world to help her country's king.

*The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World* was published in 1666 and 1668, alongside *Observations upon Natural Philosophy*, whose full title is *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy: To which is Added the Description of a New Blazing World*. Margaret Cavendish possibly intended to add a third work, “A Piece of Play” (Thell 2016: 128), which was eventually published in *Plays, Never before Printed* (1668). Throughout the narrative, Cavendish interweaves various passages of self-representation; for example, as Anne M. Thell has observed, the character of Lady Phoenix from “A Piece of Play” symbolises the aesthetic model

of “palingenesis” – regeneration, the epitome of the author's self-projection and desire for immortality. Regarding the theme of self-representation, Kate De Rycker (2017: 76-93) has also investigated its relation to *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World*.

Margaret Cavendish explains “her theories of authorship, publication and poetics” (Ross and Scott-Baumann 2018:199) in her prefaces. In *Poems and Fancies* (1653, revised and re-edited in 1664 and 1668), the writer (1972: 1) firmly declares, “For all I desire, is Fame”. The second edition of the collection of poems includes several highly complimentary lines written by her husband, William Cavendish: “Your New-born, Sublime Fancies, and such store, / May make our Poets blush, and write no more”. *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World* (1666) includes an episode in which the Duchess expresses to the spirits her wish to triumph over oblivion by attaining lasting fame: “I may live in a glorious Fame, and by the other I am buried in oblivion” (Cavendish 2016a: 123). In the closing scenes of *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World*, the Duchess beseeches “your Majesty [...] the Elixir that grows in the midst of the Golden Sands, for to preserve Life and Health” (Cavendish 2016a: 157).

Cavendish’s literary legacy offers numerous examples of self-representation and various references to the subject of fame. One of the protagonists of *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World* is explicitly mentioned as “the Duchess of Newcastle” (Cavendish 2016a: 148) on various occasions. The objective of the present paper is, firstly, to explore the author’s strategies of self-representation in *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World*, by examining both the paratextual elements as well as the text itself. A further aim is to illustrate the uniqueness of this narrative in its depiction of contemporary scientific dialogue, combined with the opinions of the author herself, whose other publications include the non-fiction work *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*.

## 2. Paratextual elements: “chose rather the figure of Honest Margaret Newcastle”

The frontispieces of the published text contain a wealth of information meriting further study. These include “an image of the author facing the title page to amplify its contents” (Ezell 2017: 51). The 1656 edition of *Natures Pictures Drawn by Fancies Pencil* contains a sketch by Peter Clout of the author and her husband in a social context, “with a crowd around a table in front of a cheerful fire, servants busy in the background” (ibid.). This has the effect of generating “a domestic scene” containing imaginary elements that evoke an atmosphere of literature and story-telling: “This in this Semy-Circle, wher they Sitt,/ Telling of Tales of Pleasure & of Witt”. The image of the author was taken from a portrait by Abraham van Diepenbeeck, a famous painter from the school of Rubens.

A similar image appears in *Poems, and fancies written by the Right Honourable, the Lady Margaret Newcastle*, published in 1653. In this edition, the author is depicted standing on a pedestal, flanked on either side by Athena and

Apollo. These are “classical motifs of fame during the 1650s” (Ezell 2016, 52) which were also recreated in *Hesperides* (Robert Herrick 1648) and *Fragmenta Poetica* (Nicholas Murford 1650). The format of the poems, consisting of 300-page folio volumes including all the paratexts, follows the schematic developed by other writers. Cavendish “wishes her poetry to be seen as being unorthodox, original, and experimental” (Ezell 2017: 197). The author’s portrait differs considerably from the image included in *Poems by the most deservedly admired Mrs Katherine Philips*, published in 1667 (with subsequent editions in 1660 and 1678), consisting in a bust by William Fairthorne, “in contrast to Margaret Cavendish’s full-length portrait of herself atop a pedestal” (Ezell 2017: 197). The self-fashioning displayed by Cavendish contrasts significantly with the self-effacement of Philips, who cultivated “an alternative female poetic lineage based on those women poets who had reputations for virtue” (Prescott 2003: 60).

The full title of the work analysed here is *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World. Written by the Thrice Noble, Illustrious, and Excellent Princesse, The Duchesse of Newcastle* (Cavendish 2016a: 55). The text is notable for its innovative approach to topography, as illustrated by the adjective “blazing” included in the title. Equally remarkable is the author’s appetite for explaining and clarifying elements within the text, an aspect that is also emphasised in the title through the noun phrase “The Description” and in the apposition that sheds further light on the conception of this “New World”. The adjective “blazing” emphasises the importance of the story’s localisation through its meaning of “burning very brightly”; it also carries the significance of being “of outstanding power, speed, heat, or intensity”, according to the definitions contained in *Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary*. The title page continues to elevate the author’s image: the three successive adjectives referring to the noun “Princesse” are premodified by the adverb “Thrice”, which further emphasises their laudatory significance. It is also worth noting that the author is referred to initially by her peerage title, while her actual name is only given afterwards: (“[...] Princesse, The Duchesse of Newcastle”).

Following this, the reader is presented with a eulogy by William Newcastle (Cavendish, 2016a: 57) entitled “To the Duchesse of Newcastle, on her New Blazing World”. Similarly, noteworthy is the fact that Newcastle signs the poem using his full ducal title, which he received on returning to England following the Restoration of the Monarchy. The content of the poem draws a comparison between the creation of a new world by Cavendish and the territorial discoveries of Columbus. The poet ultimately deems Cavendish’s achievements superior to those of the world-famous explorer, given that he “Found a new World, *America* ‘tis nam’d / Now this new World was found, it was not made” (lines 4-5). He goes on to contrast the writer’s creative abilities with Columbus’ feats through a biblical reference (Genesis 1: 2-3), by means of which he stresses that she created her world out of nothing: “Then what are *You*, having no *Chaos* found” (Cavendish 2016a: 7). He continues his argument by maintaining that, while Columbus discovered and named his new territory, Margaret actually created and named her new world by virtue of her ingenuity and

imagination (“But your creating Fancy, thought it fit”) (Cavendish 2016a: 10-11), the additional merit being “To make your World of Nothing, but pure Wit” (Cavendish 2016a: 11).

The third element worthy of investigation is the preface to the reader, in which the author emphasises the originality of her creation, while at the same time attempting to defend herself from any potential criticism: “I have made a World of my own; for which nobody, I hope, will blame me, since it is in every ones power to do the like”. In relation to this, she references the legendary achievements of great conquerors such as Alexander III of Macedonia and Julius Caesar (Cavendish 2016a: 60). Cavendish also remarks on the coherence between the fictional and the philosophical texts that she published simultaneously: “If you wonder, that I join a work of Fancy to my serious Philosophical Contemplation; think not that it is out of a disparagement to Philosophy; or out of an opinion, as if this noble study were but a Fiction of the Mind.” (Cavendish 2016a: 59). The preface to the second edition (which is an abbreviation of the first) also begins with an allusion to the correlation between the two works. In the opening pages, the writer conceptualises the literary genre, declaring “Fictions are an issue of man’s Fancy, framed in his own Mind, according as he pleases” and that “the end of Fancy, is Fiction” (*ibid.*).

Throughout the text, multiple references are evident that indicate a consideration of the reader’s perspective, implying that Cavendish was eager to please her reading audience. For example, while describing the lenses of microscopes, the narrator mentions “their optick observations through the several sorts of their Glasses” before admitting that attempting a full explanation “would be a tedious work, and tire even the most patient Reader, wherefore I’le pass them by” (Cavendish 2016a: 83).

Lastly, “The Epilogue to the Reader” gives further evidence of the author’s methods of self-proclamation, while also interweaving certain narrative threads. Cavendish builds herself up as an author: “By this Poetical Description, you may perceive, that my ambition is not onely to be Emperess, but Authoress of a whole World” (Cavendish 2016a: 163). She also suggests certain specific qualities of the world she has created: “But I esteeming Peace before War, Wit before Policy, Honesty before Beauty; instead of the figures of Alexander, Caesar, Achilles, Nestor, Ulysses, Helen, etc. chose rather the figure of Honest Margaret Newcastle” (*ibid.*). The author stresses the originality of her work, warning any “unjust Usurpers” of copying her unique idea:

...and if any should like the World I have made, and be willing to be my Subjects, they may imagine themselves such, and they are such; [...] they may create Worlds of their own, and Govern themselves as they please. But yet let them have a care, not to prove unjust Usurpers, and to rob me of mine; (Cavendish 2016a: 163)

In this way, Cavendish applies the existing mechanisms of print culture in order to justify, authorise and defend both her fictional narrative and her

philosophical treatise. Not only *a priori* (“To the Reader”), but also *a posteriori* (“The Epilogue to the Reader”), the author emphasises the innovative nature of her work, while at the same time clarifying its content and elevating its ontology.

### 3. Realism: “Why they preferred the Monarchical form of Government before any other?”

Eugene Marshall (2016: xxv) suggests that, while in *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* Cavendish “sets out her views in relatively systematic ways and in philosophical treatises”, the fictional work contains “her thoughts on social or political issues”. For example, the text begins with a noteworthy defence of women, when the narrator enters into a debate with the Priests and declares, “I never perceived any Women in your Congregations”, asking them “But what is the reason, you bar them from your religious Assemblies?” (Cavendish 2016a: 72).

The author's connections with the royal family dates back to her childhood. She had been a lady in waiting at the court of Henrietta Maria (Ross and Scott-Baumann 2018: 11, 99), whom she accompanied to Paris with her husband during Cromwell's Puritan theocracy. During this period, she composed *Natures Pictures Drawn by Fancies Pencil to the Life*, the first edition of which appeared in 1657, with a second edition following in 1671. In this way, the author's own life experiences reflect her political beliefs.

Within the framework of this narrative, the Empress is an absolute ruler capable of moulding the will of her subjects to match her own wishes. In religious matters, she “did not onely convert the Blazing-world to her own Religion, but kept them in a constant belief, without inforcement or blood-shed”, achieving this through peaceful means: “that belief was a thing not to be forced or pressed upon the people, but to be instilled into their minds by gentle perswasions”. Thus the protagonist confirms, “both Church and State was now in a well-ordered and settled condition” (Cavendish 2016a: 202), demonstrating the social harmony that corresponded to the smooth functioning of governmental and religious establishments. In the second part of the work, the Duchess makes the same assertions (Cavendish 2016a: 145).

Cavendish's belief in the necessity of an established set of rules or laws becomes clear in the dialogue between The Empress and The Duchess regarding the Duchess' imaginary world. In the construction of this world, she “framed all kinds of Creatures proper and useful for it; strengthened it with good Laws, and beautified it with Arts and Sciences” (Cavendish 2016a: 126). The narrator goes on to clarify the factors necessary for achieving lasting social harmony:

...for it was governed without secret and deceiving Policy; neither was there any ambition, factions, malicious detractions, civil dissensions, or home-bred quarrels, divisions in Religion, foreign Wars, etc. but all the people lived in a peaceful society, united Tranquility, and Religious Conformity; (Cavendish 2016a: 126)

At the beginning of the narrative, the protagonist asks the States-men: “Why they preferred the Monarchical form of Government before any other?” (Cavendish 2016a: 72). Their response reveals the author’s views on the body politic; firstly, regarding the need for the political establishment to be governed by one voice; secondly, in the pejorative conceptualisation of a system of multiple governors as a monster with numerous heads. The author also stresses the importance of monarchy by drawing a parallel between it and God, stating that both inspire devotion and loyalty in their followers. She ultimately concludes, by way of a syllogism, that a monarch is essentially a god to be worshipped and obeyed. In this way, the fictional text reveals the writer’s personal belief in the need for total obedience to the monarchical system in order to safeguard social stability and harmony:

That as it was natural for one body to have but one head, so it was also natural for a Politick body to have but one Governor; and that a Common-wealth, which had many Governors was like a Monster of many heads: besides, said they, a Monarchy is a divine form of government, and agrees most with our Religion; for as there is but one God, whom we all unanimously worship and adore with one Faith, so we are resolved to have but one Emperor, to whom we all submit with one obedience. (Cavendish 2016a: 72)

Towards the end of the first part, when the Empress wishes to unify the “factions of the Bear- Fish- Fly- Ape- and Worm-men, the Satyrs, Spider-men and the like, and other of their perpetual disputes and quarrels” (Cavendish 2016a: 140) and seeks the Duchess’ “advice and assistance”, the Duchess counsels her “to introduce the same form of Government again, which had been before, that is, to have but one Sovereign, one Religion, one Law, and one Language” (Cavendish 2016a: 139).

The fictional community portrayed by Cavendish displays a hierarchy of power similar to the monarchical model of Western civilisation, particularly of England. Through a description of the virtues of the population, the author conveys a highly positive image of a community of people that have lived for hundreds of years in a state of seemingly perpetual youth. The protagonist wonders “how it came that the Imperial Race appeared so young” (Cavendish 2016a: 93).

When the Empress visits the Duchess’ country, she arrives at Court and notes how the “affability mixt so exactly together, that none did overshadow or eclipse the other; and as for the Queen, she said, that Vertue sat Triumphant in the face, and Piety was dwelling in her heart and that all the Royal Family seem’d to be endured with a divine splendor” (Cavendish 2016a: 129-130). The specific country that the Empress visits – and the chronology of the story itself – are revealed implicitly, supporting the interpretation of the Duchess as the *alter ego* of Margeret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle.

Margaret Cavendish’s husband is also referenced in the narrative, and in a wholly positive light. The Duchess mentions that Charles II was educated by William Cavendish, a historical detail that actually occurred between 1638 and 1640: “when she had heard the King discourse, she believ’d that Mercury and Apollo had been

his Celestial instructors; and my dear Lord and Husband, added the Duchess, has been his Earthly Governour” (Cavendish 2016a: 130). The Duke is characterised as “being wise, honest, witty, complaisant and noble” (Cavendish 206a: 133) and, before entering into a debate with Fortune, he himself alludes to his two friends, “Prudence and Honesty” (Cavendish 2016a: 134), an allegorical device which recalls the work of John Bunyan and the medieval mystery plays. When the Empress expresses her desire to visit the Duke, “there two souls went towards those parts of the Kingdom where the Duke of Newcastle was”. Further detail is given, that “the Emperess and Duchess’s Soul were travelling into Nottingham-shire, for that was the place where the Duke did reside” (Cavendish 2016a: 130). Travelling through Sherwood Forest, they reach the Duke’s residence at Welbeck, a country house modelled on Welbeck Abbey. Further references mention the family palace “called Bolesover” and their love of equestrianism, or the “Art of Mannage” (Cavendish 2016a: 132), which will later be emulated by the Emperor at the end of the narrative: “for he had built Stables and Riding-Houses, and desired to have Horses of Manage, such as, according to the Emperess’s Relation, the Duke of Newcastle had” (Cavendish 2016a: 158).

Another explicit reference to the King appears in the second part, when the Empress travels to “her Native Country” (Cavendish 2016a: 143), which is currently at war – a clear reference to the Second Anglo-Dutch War. In a particularly evangelical and messianic scene, the Empress gives a patriotic speech on board a ship in which she confirms, “I intend to make you the most powerful Nation of this world”. Subsequently the narrator mentions “the King of E S F I” (Cavendish 2016: 153), an acronym for the King of England, Scotland, France and Ireland, confirming that the Empress “made it the absolute Monarchy of all the World”. The Empress receives her compatriots and, returning to her ship maintains a lengthy conversation with the King himself: “wherein the Prince and Monarch of her Native Country was, the King of E S F I with whom she had several Conferences” (Cavendish 2016a: 155). Before returning to her Blazing World, she gives a final discourse, the opening lines of which are particularly eloquent. The speech takes its inspiration from an address given by Elizabeth I (Martí Escayol 2016: 177), further confirming the representation of the English monarchy in the text. It also gives direct references to the geography of England and the Channels that separate it from neighbouring countries: “Great Heroick, and Famous Monarchs: I came hither to assist the King of ESFI against his Enemies, he being unjustly assaulted by many several Nations, which would fain take away his Hereditary Rights and Prerogatives of the Narrow Seas” (Cavendish 2016a: 155).

#### **4. Scientist: “have the truth of the Phaenomena’s of Celestial bodies”**

The contributions of early modern women to science have been studied by Sarasohn (2010), Mendelson (2016: 10) and Martí Escayol (2016: 12), among others. The connection between science and literary discourse has been investigated in



*English Literature and the Disciplines of Knowledge, Early Modern to Eighteenth Century. A Trade for Light*, edited by Jorge Bastos da Silva and Miguel Ramallete Gomes (2017).

Margaret Cavendish visited the Royal Society on Thursday, 30<sup>th</sup> May 1667, causing a considerable amount of controversy among its members. The visit made her one of several “high-ranking ladies to attend meetings in which experiments were performed as entertainment [...] The Duchess’s visit in 1667 was one such occasion” (Mendelson 2016: 13). The source of this information is none other than Samuel Pepys (1978: 144), who wrote in his *Diary* that “the Duchesse of Newcastle [...] had desired to be invited to the Society; and was, after much debate, pro and con, it seems many being against it; and we do believe the town will be full of ballads of it”. The renowned Restoration-era diarist also remarked “Anon comes the Duchesse with her women attending her” (ibid.). In terms of the innovative experiments that the writer witnessed at the Royal Society, Pepys tells us “Several fine experiments were shown her of colours, loadstones, microscopes, and of liquors among others, of one that did, while she was there, turn a piece of roasted mutton into pure blood, which was very rare” (ibid.).

The Empress acts as a voice for the author when she asks the hybrid animal-men questions of a scientific nature, remarking that the “new founded societies of the Virtuoso’s had made a good progress” (Cavendish 2016a: 73). The Bird-men and the Bear-men, who enter into conversation with the Empress, are an ironic depiction of the Baconian principles of the Royal Society (Bacon’s utopic vision, *New Atlantis* (1627), forms part of the background of Cavendish’s *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World*; Mendelson 2016: 31-39), while the “vertuosos” also represent the members of the Royal Society themselves.

The protagonist asks the Bird-men questions regarding the sun and the moon, solar heat, the shapes and positions of celestial bodies, “the motes of the sun” (Cavendish 2016a: 75), air, wind, snow, thunder and lightning. The dialogues reflect the thinking of the foremost scientific minds of the age, including Kepler in the definition of the sun as a solid rock, a theory presented in his *Grounds of Natural Philosophy* (1668). Galileo’s theory of sunspots is also cited, as is the work of Hobbes with regard to the formation of snow (*De Corpore*, IV, 28) and Boyle (“An Examen of Mr. Hobs’s Doctrine, touching Cold”, 1665).

In this way, Cavendish incorporates genuine scientific theories by recognised thinkers into her writing. She also includes her own opinions, such as with regard to the formation of snow, where she refutes one of the existing theories: “This observation amazed the Emperess very much, for she had hitherto believed, That Snow was made by cold motions, and not by such agitation or beating of a fiery extract upon water” (Cavendish 2016a: 77). Similar topics, such as heat (Cavendish 2016b: 23-27), were also explored in the author’s philosophical work.

In the encounter with the Bear-men, the author uses references to telescopes and microscopes as a means to incorporate the debate over the geocentric and heliocentric models of the universe, hinting at the divisive nature of the argument:

“but these Telescopes caused more differences and divisions amongst them, then ever they had before” (Cavendish 2016a: 78). Cavendish echoes the theories of Ptolemy and Copernicus and also summarises Kepler’s theory of the movement of the planets around the sun: “for some said, they perceived that the Sun stood still, and the Earth did move about it; others were of opinion, that they both did move; and others said again, that the Earth stood still, and the Sun did move [...]” (Cavendish 2016a: 78). Following a discussion of scientific matters with the Fish-men and Worm-men, the narrator states, “This Relation confirmed the Empress in the opinion concerning the motion of the Earth, and the fixedness of the Sun” (Cavendish 2016a: 87). The author’s implied criticism of the microscope by extension also amounts to a critique of Robert Hooke, who discussed the new invention in *Micrographia*. In *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, the author offers a similar viewpoint (Cavendish 2016b: 8).

The influence of Galileo is also apparent in the depiction of the Bear-men, who discover new stars and discuss their size. Lastly, the Empress questions the validity of telescopes and suggests that the Bird-men should trust their innate perception rather than relying too heavily on scientific instruments: “let the Bird-men trust onely to their natural eyes, and examine Celestial objects by the motions of their own sense and reason” (Cavendish 2016a: 79). The episode is an implicit reference to the concept of empirical knowledge, as defended by the writer herself in *Philosophical Letters* (1664). Cavendish’s philosophical treatise dealt extensively with the idea of perception (Cavendish 2016b: 32-63); in it the author explores the subject through twelve questions and their respective answers. The first of these questions (Cavendish 2016b: 49) is “What difference is there between self-knowledge and perception?”

The author reveals her skepticism regarding certain experiments performed at the Royal Society (Ezell 2017: 178), contesting the work of Robert Boyle (*Experiments and Considerations Touching Colours*, 1664) and Robert Hooke (*Micrographia*, 1665) in particular. Her challenge of the experimental philosophers is also evident in *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, particularly in the third chapter:

...as boys that play with watery bubbles, or fling dust into each others’ eyes, or make a hobby-horse of snow, are worthy of reproof rather than praise, for wasting their time with useful sports, so those that addict themselves to unprofitable arts spend more time than they reap benefit thereby” (Cavendish 2016b: 8).

In her meeting with the Ape-men, the protagonist explores the concept of the ἀρχή, which she describes as “the Primitive Ingredients of Natural Bodies” (Cavendish 2016a: 91) or “the true principles of natural bodies” (Cavendish 2016a: 92). This allows the writer (through her literary character) to refute the pre-Socratic theory of the four elements (earth, air, fire and water) and the *tria prima* (salt, sulphur and mercury). Both hypotheses are dismissed in the protagonist’s question:

Why should you be so simple as to believe that fire can shew you the principles of Nature? and that either the four Elements, or Water onely, or Salt, Sulphur and Mercury, all which are no more but particular effects and Creatures or Nature, should be the Primitive ingredients of Principles of all natural bodies? (Cavendish 2016a: 92)

The Empress personally explains her theory, which is essentially a transposition of the writer's own views (2016a: 92): “it is in vain to look for primary ingredients, or constitutive principles of natural bodies, since there is no more but one Universal principle of Nature, to wit, self-moving Matter, which is the onely cause of all natural effects”. The second part of *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* presents this conceptualization (Cavendish 2016b, 70-2) in its sixth and seventh chapters.

As demonstrated above, certain female writers turned their attention to contemporary epistemology (as also evidenced by Aphra Behn's translation of Fontanelle's *Les Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* (Torralbo 2017: 226) entitled *A Discovery of New Worlds*, a dialogue between a Marchioness and a philosopher). Coupled with this interest in the epistemology of the age, there exists a notable enthusiasm for contemporary philosophical thought. Anne M. Thell (2017: 41) defines *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World* as “a wildly imaginative travel text that explodes the epistemological assumptions on which empiricism is based”.

### 5. Philosopher: “I will not dissolve your society”

The passage in which the protagonist encounters the orators (Parrot-men) is a philosophical episode with deeply parodic undertones. Firstly, one of the Parrot-men attempts to formulate an eloquent discourse in discussion with the protagonist, but is unable to complete their own line of thinking, “his arguments and divisions being so many, that they caused a great confusion in his brain, he could not go forward, but was forced to retire backwards” (Cavendish 2016a: 98). Next, one of his colleagues tries to complete the argument for him and is equally unsuccessful. In response, the Empress declares that “they followed too much the Rules of Art, and cofounded themselves with too nice formalities and distinctions” advising them “to consider more the subject you speak, and leave the rest to your natural Eloquence” (Cavendish 2016a: 98).

Her Imperial Majesty hoped to confirm the skills of the logicians “in the Art of disputing” and encouraged them to discuss various subjects. As will be seen, the Jackdaw-men represent Aristotelian logic, applying the reasoning of syllogistic progression, albeit with contradictory premises and conclusions. First, they discuss politicians in four syllogisms; the first of the four, and the response it elicited, are as follows:

Every Politician is wise:  
 Every Knave is a Politician,  
 Therefore every Knave is wise.

No Politician is wise:  
 Every Knave is a Politician,  
 Therefore no Knave is wise” (Cavendish 2016a: 98).

They then turned their attention to the subject of philosophers. One of the Jackdaws offers a syllogism, which is immediately rejected by one of his colleagues, who offers his own attempt:

Every Philosopher is wise:  
 Every Beast is wise,  
 Therefore every Beast is a Philosopher.

Every Philosopher is wise:  
 Some Beasts are not wise,  
 Therefore some Beasts are not Philosophers. (Cavendish 2016a: 99)

The Empress interrupts the discussion, declaring, “your formal argumentations are able to spoil all natural wit” and “that Art does not make Reason, but Reason makes Art”. She continues by saying “especially your Art of Logick, which consists onely in contradicting each other, in making sophisms, and obscuring Truth, instead of clearing it” (Cavendish 2016a: 99). Margaret Cavendish imbues her narrative with various logical and philosophical operations that were frequently employed in the intellectual dialogue of the time. At the same time, the writer ridicules the overly formulaic structure and rigid reasoning of the syllogistic progression (Mendelson 2016: 98).

The protagonist concludes with an emphatic rejection of this form of intellectualism, warning of the potential threat that it poses to the establishments of politics and religion. The declaration is a clear example of self-representation in direct speech:

In short, said she, I do not ways approve of your profession; and though I will not dissolve your society, yet I shall never take delight in hearing you any more; wherefore confine your disputations to your Schools, lest besides the Commonwealth to Learning, they disturb also Divinity and Policy, Religion and Laws, and by that means draw an utter ruine and destruction both upon Church and State. (Cavendish 2016a: 100)

Cavendish depicts certain figures in the form of a caricature; the portrayal of the orators as parrots and the logicians as jackdaws is a perfect example of this

technique. Both groups take on the attributes of their respective birds, while the caricature also heightens the sense of parody evident in the scene.

The text also integrates the Platonic conception of the mortal body and the immortal soul. This viewpoint would have been accessible to Cavendish through contemporary philosophical texts such as Thomas Stanley's *History of Philosophy*, 1656 (Mendelson 2016: 30), among other sources. The theory, and particularly its interpretation by writers of the seventeenth century regarding "the Souls of Loves" that "live in the bodies of their Beloved" (Cavendish 2016a: 118), appears within the narrative when the spirits ask the protagonist if she wishes to have a scribe to "write the Cabbala" to which she replies that she desires a spiritual scribe. She then expresses her preference for the spirits of the classics "Aristotle, Pythagoras, Plato, Epicurus, or the like", but the spirit replies that "those famous men were very learned, subtile and ingenious Writers, but they were so wedded to their own opinions, that they would neer have the patience to be Scribes" (Cavendish 2016a: 118). The protagonist then states her wish to "have the Soul of one of the most famous modern Writers, as either Galileo, Cassandus, Des Cartes, Helmont, Hobbes, H. More, etc." to which the spirit responds that their vanity would not allow them to be the spirit of a woman (Cavendish 2016a: 119). It is interesting to note that the protagonist first gives priority to the classical writers, and then to the contemporary philosophers.

Given the impossibility of finding a scribe among the groups mentioned by the Empress, the spirit makes the third suggestion of an ingenious female writer, the Duchess of Newcastle. This *momentum* is a crucial instance of self-fashioning whereby the author proposes herself as a writer within her own narrative. This is done with modesty but also with determination, the writer essentially proposing herself as a fitting alternative to the aforementioned classical philosophers and contemporary thinkers:

But, said he [the Spirit], there's a Lady, the Duchess of Newcastle, which although she is not one of the most learned, eloquent, witty and ingenious, yet is she a plain and rational Writer, for the principle of her Writings, is Sense and Reason, and she will without question, be ready to do you all the service she can. (Cavendish 2016a: 119)

## **6. Writer: "I intended them for Playes; but the Wits [...] condemned them as incapable of being represented"**

The narrative developed by Cavendish in *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World* contains various literary allusions. In her meeting with the Immaterial Spirits, the protagonist mentions *The Alchemist* by Ben Jonson, which was first performed in 1610 and printed in 1612. The author would certainly have been familiar with this work, given that her husband was Jonson's patron. Discussing the Jewish Cabbala, the protagonist condemns the English alchemists John Dee and

Edward Kelly as charlatans, citing Jonson in defence of her position: “but they [Dee and Kelly] proved at last but meer Cheats, and weer described by one of their own Country-men, a famous Poet, named *Ben, Johnson*, in a Play call’d *The Alchymist* [...]” (Cavendish 2016a: 104).

In a final dialogue between the two protagonists, in which the eccentricity of the Duchess is remarked upon as well as her honesty and virtue, there appears an indirect allusion to her *Orations of Divers Sorts, Accomodated to Divers Places* (1662) (Martí Escayol 2016: 180). The Empress points out that a certain literary work of Cavendish’s portrays characters notably lacking in these aforementioned qualities, to which the Duchess’ response emphasises her skill as a writer in being able to depict such unappealing characters: “how comes is that you plead for Dishonest and Wicked persons in your Writings? The Duchess answered, it was onley to show her Wit, not her Nature” (Cavendish 2016a: 158)

Before the end of the narrative, the Emperor asks the Duchess how best to establish a theatre, confirming that she had written plays in the past. Cavendish did in fact write *Playes Written by the Thrice Noble, Illustrious and Excellent Princess, the Lady Marchioness of Newcastle* in 1662. The protagonist explains that she was unable to stage her plays, because they did not follow contemporary theatrical customs, although she also remarks upon the quality of the writing:

I intended them for Playes; but the Wits of these present times condemned them as incapable of being represented or acted, because they were not made up according to the Rules of Art; though I dare say, that the Descriptions are as good as any they have writ” (Cavendish 2016a: 159).

The theatrical customs referred to are those established by Aristotle in his *Poetics*: the unity of action, time and place. These guidelines were taken up by John Dryden in *An Essay on Dramatic Poesie* (1668) and advocated by Samuel Johnson (Richetti 2017: 278). The Duchess remarks further “it is the Art and Method of our Wits to despise all Descriptions of Wit, Humour, Actions and Fortunes that are without such Artificial Rules”. The Emperor’s subsequent question and the Duchess’ response give further clarity to the issue:

Are those good Playes that are made so Methodically and Artificially? [...]. They were Good according to the Judgment of the Age, or Mode of the Nation, but not according to her Judgment [...] their Playes will prove a Nursery of Whining Lovers, and not an Academy or School for Wise, Witty, Noble, and well-behaved men. (Cavendish 2016a: 160).

The Emperor’s response is unequivocal: “I [...] desire such a Theatre [...] will have such Descriptions as are Natural, not Artificial”. This support for naturalness over artificiality allows the Duchess to conclude that her literary works would be fit

for the stage in “The Blazing World”, but not in the “Blinking World of Wit” (Cavendish 2016a: 160).

During their visit to the Duchess’ country, at one point the protagonists come to a building where there are “many Galants”. It is revealed to be “one of the Theatres where Comedies and Tragedies were acted”. The Emperess enquires “whether they were real?” to which the Duchess responds “No [...] They are feigned”. After seeing a play, the Emperess states her preference for “a natural face before a sign-post, or a natural humour before an artificial dance, or musick before a true and profitable Relation” (Cavendish 2016a: 129). For an empirical account we have the observations of Samuel Pepys, who attended the staging of Cavendish’s play (*The Humourous Lovers*) Saturday, 30<sup>th</sup> March 1667, leaving no room for doubt as to his utter disapproval of the work:

At noon home to dinner, and thence with my wife’s knowledge and leave did by coach go see the silly play of my Lady Newcastle’s, called “The Humourous Lovers;” the most silly thing that ever come upon a stage. I was sick to see it, but yet would not but have seen it, that I might the better understand her. (Pepys 1893: 471)

The following month, on the 11<sup>th</sup> April, Pepys (1978:141) once again commented upon Cavendish’s comedy in his *Diary*, stressing once more that it was “the most ridiculous thing that ever was wrote”. Pepys makes no mention of Cavendish’s fictional work in his writings, although he does include these references to her dramaturgy as well as her unprecedented visit to the Royal Society, a fact that certainly fits with the content of *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World*.

## **7. Conclusion: “my ambition is not onely to be Emperess, but Authoress of a whole World”**

The narrative work of Margaret Cavendish was a milestone for its time, not only for having been written by a woman, but also for the very fact that it was printed and published in a society and a culture that was so eminently patriarchal. An example of proto-science fiction, it is also remarkable for its inclusion of the latest and most innovative perspectives on politics, science, philosophy and literature, all of which are articulated by two female characters, “two female souls” with “intimate friendship between them” (Cavendish 2016a: 127, 121). Just as Lady Phoenix in “A Piece of a Play”, the Duchess of *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World* embodies the thoughts and concerns of Cavendish herself.

Cavendish integrates various contemporary academic devices into her narrative, through which she succeeds in setting out her own theories as well as her own vision of reality. *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World* is a self-assertive text that brings to life the authorial self-representation in terms of social, literary and personal matters.

## References

- Bastos da Silva, Jorge and Miguel Ramalhete Gomes (eds.). *English Literature and the Disciplines of Knowledge, Early Modern to Eighteenth Century. A Trade for Light*. Leiden: Brill. Rodopi.
- Boyle, Robert. 1664. *Experiments and Considerations Touching Colours [...]*. London: Printed for Henry Herringman.
- Boyle, Robert. 1665. "An Examen of Mr. Hobs's Doctrine, touching Cold" in *New Experiments and Observations Touching Cold, or An Experimental History of Cold [...]*. London: Printed for John Crook, pp. 805-845.
- Cavendish, Margaret. 1653. *Philosophical Fancies*. London: Printed by Thomas Roycroft for J. Martin and J. Allestrye.
- Cavendish, Margaret. 1655. *The World's Olio*. London: Printed for J. Martin and J. Allestrye.
- Cavendish, Margaret. 1656. *Natures Pictures Drawn by Fancies Pencil to Life*. London: Printed for J. Martin and J. Allestrye.
- Cavendish, Margaret. 1662. *Playes Written by the Thrice Noble, Illustrious and Excellent Princess, the Lady Marchioness of Newcastle*. London: Printed by A. Warren.
- Cavendish, Margaret. 1664. *Philosophical letters [...]*. London: [s.n.].
- Cavendish, Margaret. 1668. *Plays, Never before Printed [...]*. London: Printed by A. Maxwell.
- Cavendish, Margaret. 1668. *Grounds of Natural Philosophy [...]*. London: Printed by A. Maxwell.
- Cavendish, Margaret. 1677 (first performed 1667). *The Humorous Lovers. A comedy [...]*. London: Printed by J. M. for H. Herringman.
- Cavendish, Margaret. 1672 (1653). *Poems, and Fancies Written by the Right Honourable, the Lady Margaret Newcastle*. Menston: Scholar Press.
- Cavendish, Margaret. 2016a (1666). *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World*. Mendelson, Sara H. (ed.). Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press.
- Cavendish, Margaret. 2016b. *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy. Abridged, with Related Texts*. Marshall, Eugene (ed.). Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.
- De Ricker, Kate. 2017. "A World of One's Own: Margaret Cavendish and the Science of Self-Fashioning" in da Silva, Jorge Bastos and Miguel Ramalhete Gomes (eds.). *English Literature and the Disciplines of Knowledge, Early Modern to Eighteenth Century. A Trade for Light*. Leiden: Brill. Rodopi, pp. 76-93.
- Ezell, Margaret. J. M. 2017. *The Oxford English Literary History. Volume 5: 1645-1714. The Later Seventeenth Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Herrick, Robert. 1673 (1648). *Hesperides*. Scholar Press. Menston: Scholar Press.
- Hobbes, Thomas. 1655. *Elementorum Philosophiae. Sectio Prima De Corpore*. Londini: Excusum sumptibus Andreae Crook sub signo Draconis viridis in Coemeterio B. Pauli.
- Hobby, Elaine. 1988. *Virtue of Necessity. English Women's Writing 1649-88*. London: Virago Press.
- Hooke, Robert. 1665. *Micrographia [...]*. London: Printed by J. Martyn and J. Allestrye.
- Marshall, Eugene. 2016. "Editor's Introduction" in Cavendish, Margaret. *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy. Abridged, with Related Text*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, pp. vii-xxviii.



- Martí Escayol, Maria Antònia. 2016. "El Mundo Resplandeciente, una Mirada tras las bambalinas del siglo XVII" in Cavendish, Margaret. *El Mundo Resplandeciente*. Madrid: Siruela, pp. 9-48.
- Mendelson, Sara H. 2016. "Introduction" in Cavendish, Margaret. *A Description of the Blazing World*. Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, pp. 9-49.
- Murford, Nicholas. 1914 (1950). *Fragmenta poetica [...]*. London: King's Lynn.
- Pepys, Samuel. 1978. *The Illustrated Pepys*. Selected & edited by Robert Lathan. London: Book Club Associates.
- Pepys, Samuel. 1893. *The Diary of Samuel Pepys. Transcribed by Mynors Bright from the Shorthand Manuscript in the Pepysian Library*. Edited with additions by Henry B. Wheatley. New York: Random House.
- Prescott, Sarah. 2003. *Women, Authorship and Literature Culture, 1690-1740*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Richetti, John. 2017. *A History of Eighteenth-Century British Literature*. Oxford: Willey Blackwell.
- Ross, Sarah and Elizabeth Scott-Baumann. 2018. *Women Poets of the English Civil War*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Sarasohn, Lisa. T. 2010. *The Natural Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish: Reason and Fancy during the Scientific Revolution*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Thell, Anne M. 2016. "Lady Phoenix: Margaret Cavendish and the Poetics of Palingenesis" in *Early Modern Women: An interdisciplinary Journal*, 11, pp. 128-136.
- Thell, Anne M. 2017. "Lady Phoenix: Motion, Imagination, and Cavendish's Blazing World" in Thell, Anne. *Minds in Motion. Imagining Empiricism in Eighteenth-Century British Travel Literature*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, pp. 41-72.
- Todd, Janet. 1989. "Newcastle, Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of" in *British Women Writers. A Critical Reference Guide*. New York: Continuum, pp. 497-499.
- Torrallbo Caballero, Juan de Dios. 2017. "The Translatress in her own Person Speaks: Estudio de las traducciones de Aphra Behn a partir de la tipología de Dryden" in *Alpha*, 45, pp. 217-233.