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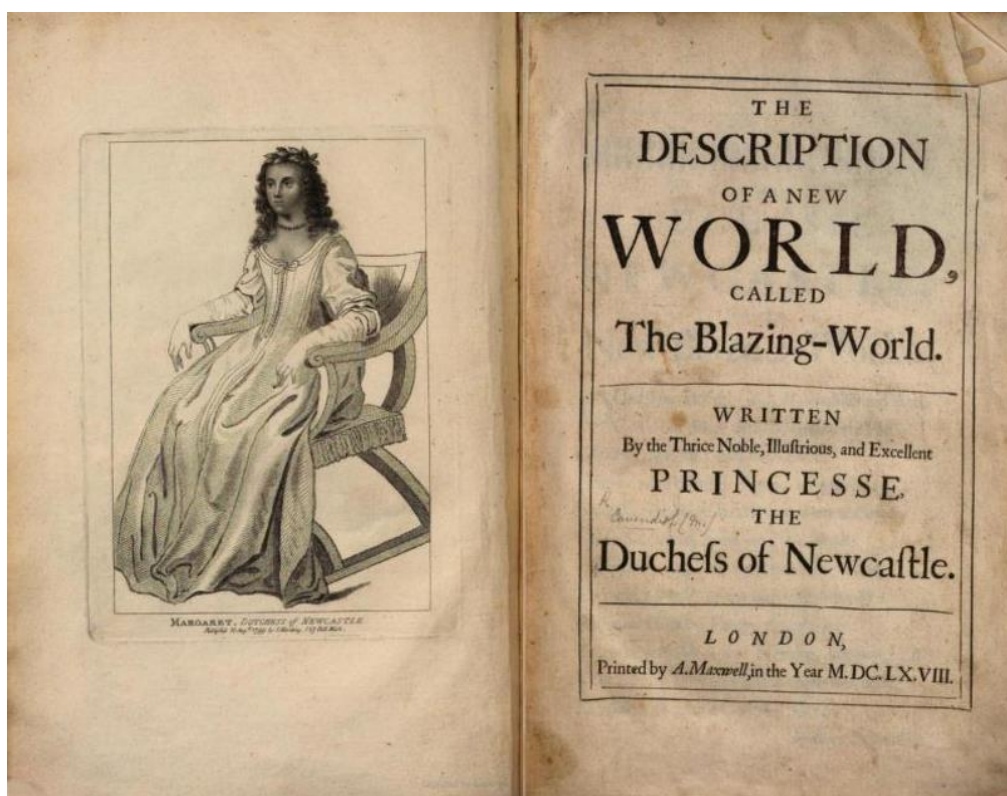
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Departament de Filologia Anglesa i Germanística

Grau en Estudis Anglesos

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**“For concerning the Philosophical World, I am Empress of
it myself”: Margaret Cavendish’s vindication of
authorship in *The Blazing World* (1666)**



Frontispiece and Cover Page of *The Description of a New World, called The Blazing-World*, 1666.

Table of Contents

Abstract	iii
Introduction	1
Philosophical Background, Vision and Authorship	5
Chapter 1:	
Optics as Precluding Natural Knowledge: Science in <i>The Blazing World</i>	11
Chapter 2:	
Mind Power: Cavendish's Authorial Self-Representation in <i>The Blazing World</i>	18
Conclusions	26
Bibliography	28

Abstract

Margaret Cavendish's *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, a disquisition on the experimentalist scientific model of her time, was first published in 1666 together with her utopian fiction *The Blazing World*. The fact that these works were paired together, despite their dissimilarity in form and style, reveals Cavendish's will to break the mould. Cavendish's natural philosophy is based on the portrayal of nature as scattered self-knowing constituents that become a whole in matter. However, Cavendish's organic materialism defends that humankind's prowess of nature is unattainable due to nature's greatness and heterogeneity. Accordingly, our cognitive processes are at times unavailing at providing accounts of nature that are accurate.

This final degree paper seeks to examine the interactions between Cavendish's scientific theories of matter, knowledge and perception and her literary achievement: Was Margaret Cavendish's negative response to the Royal Society's fascination with optical instruments an authorial claim? To what an extent do Cavendish's epistemological theories that relate to optics, rational matter, and knowledge nurture her authorial identity, and how do the main characters in *The Blazing World* epitomise Cavendish's authorial self?

Cavendish argued that subjectivity is our best tool to inquire about nature. Equipped with this argument she took a stance against the Royal Society's empirical and objective method of exploring nature with optical devices such as microscopes or telescopes; at the same time, this allowed her to develop an intricate notion of identity that led her to an original authorial performance.

Introduction

Margaret Lucas Cavendish (1623-73) was a popular member of the English aristocratic circles of her time through her marriage to the royalist William Cavendish, 1st Duke of Newcastle upon Tyne. Margaret was also an imaginative writer with many diverse interests, ranging from politics to philosophy and science. Gweno Williams described Cavendish's literary enterprise as noteworthy because it embodied "the remarkably ambitious scope of her personally orchestrated publishing career, unique among early modern women writers" (2008: 165). Considered a prolific author in her lifetime, Margaret Cavendish published a considerable number of works belonging to different genres such as poetry, drama, biography, philosophical essays, and romance. Her best-known work of fiction *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World*, and her non-fiction philosophical disquisitions were printed under the volume *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* in 1666.

Margaret Cavendish has attracted considerable critical attention in the last twenty years, especially in the area of early modern women's writing for her defence of women's opinions in writing and her engaging fictional work. While most critics have concentrated on Cavendish's drama and representations of gender (Emma Rees, Sara Mendelson and Lisa Walters, in particular), as well as her political and social circle (James Fitzmaurice, Kathleen Jones, and Kate Whitaker), her political and philosophical thought has been approached in a transversal manner in her corpus, only recently attracting more sustained and focused attention by scholars such as Deborah Boyle, Eileen O'Neill and Lisa Sarasohn. While these studies offer much valuable insight into what we now may call Cavendish Studies, scholars themselves acknowledge that there are still many unexplored and underrepresented aspects in Cavendish fiction and prose.

One of these concerns the subject of ‘optical vision’, which seemed to preoccupy Cavendish as an object of scientific and literary inquiry. In particular, her commentary regarding visual perception and knowledge will be the bedrock of this final degree paper, for Cavendish’s examination of optics, subjectivity and cognition will serve as her justification for the construction of the authorial selfhood which is conveyed in *The Blazing World*. Margaret Cavendish’s *Observations*, a treatise on natural philosophy, was first published in 1666 jointly with her utopian work *The Blazing World*. The fact that these works were paired together, albeit their dissimilarity in form and style, reveals Cavendish’s will to break the mould. These works, printed after they had circulated in manuscript form, advance an open discussion of philosophical matters at a time when it was very unusual for women to engage in an open and intellectual debate in print. In doing so, Cavendish is also conveying her own authorial self. However, neither her contemporaries nor many critics up until the 20th century had taken much notice of her and given the credit she deserved.

Born in Colchester to an aristocratic family and with very limited formal education, for she received private instruction altogether with her seven siblings, Cavendish and her mother fled to Oxford due to the political and social turmoil in 1642 where King Charles I established temporarily his court. Two years later, at the time of the English Civil War, Cavendish joined Queen Henrietta Maria’s court, became her maid of honour and followed her into exile in Paris. As an expatriate, she met William Cavendish and they got married in 1645. The figure of the Duke of Newcastle exerted an extraordinary influence all through Cavendish’s life. William Cavendish, being a polymath himself, encouraged his wife to write and also financed her publications. Since the circulation and publication of women’s written production was socially accepted but not encouraged outside court circles, the case of Margaret Cavendish is even more particular for her discussion of philosophical and scientific matters in some of her works.

Societal dogmas of the time did not approve of a female writer who would proudly let her works circulate, and sooner rather than later rumours that cast doubts about the authorship of her production started to surface. One of Cavendish's responses was to append various missives from her husband, her brother-in-law and herself to authenticate that those works published under her name were only to be attributed to her. These supplementing epistles were a conscious vindication of her status as author, which Eugene Marshall's introduction to *Observations* accounts for as an endorsement of "the property of her being so bold as to write in her own name and to think her thoughts worthy of publication" (2016: 10). It is precisely in the preface entitled *To The Reader in The Blazing World* that Cavendish addresses the issue of her licence to be a "creatoress":

that though I cannot be Henry the Fifth, or Charles the Second, yet I endeavour to be Margaret the First; and although I have neither power, time nor occasion to conquer the world as Alexander and Caesar did; yet rather than not to be mistress of one since Fortune and the Fates would give me none, I have made a world of my own: for which no body, I hope, will blame me, since it is in every one's power to do the like. (Cavendish, 2016: 124)

While being in exile, Margaret Cavendish was encouraged by her husband and her brother-in-law to pursue her interest in philosophy. As an émigré, Sir Charles Cavendish was the landlord of a parlour whose attendees were none other than leading European philosophers such as Hobbes, Digby, Descartes, Mersenne, or Gassendi. Cavendish herself recounts in her autobiography her engagement in philosophical and scientific debates with her husband and her brother-in-law who had actually partaken in exchanges of views with these philosophers. As a result, she absorbed knowledge that complemented her early schooling, fuelling her interest in philosophy, which eventually turned out to be the outset of her own line of thought and also a seal of her fiction.

The restoration of the English monarchy, the emergence of the Royal Society in 1660 and their pioneering tenets relating to natural philosophy meant that Cavendish's return to England and the publication of Margaret's *Observations* and *The Blazing World* were not an accident. *Observations* and *The Blazing World* are two sides of the same coin;

whereas in the former Cavendish tackles the Royal Society's conviction that mechanism and observation could account for an objective and complete attainment of the essence of all natural phenomena arguing in favour of a vitalist and materialist explanation of the natural world; in the latter Cavendish shows how visual perception and imagination do in fact lead to a kind of judgement that, despite its subjectiveness, stands in connection with the views expressed in *Observations* regarding the self-knowing quality of all natural elements. Thus, *Observations* paves the way for the development of its appendix narrative *The Blazing World*.

Among her frequent arguments that back up the bulk of her reasoning, Cavendish's theory of vision is particularly singular and appropriate to decode her concept of authorial figure. In words of Lisa Walters both pieces "explore her theories about optics and vision as they relate to perception" (2016: 377), acknowledging that *Observations* is her theoretical framework and that its application is accomplished in *The Blazing World*. Cavendish held that our senses alone could not reach the inner essence of natural objects or phenomena, and they had to be commanded by our reason if one wished to have access to authentic natural knowledge. Therefore, Cavendish integrates our faculty to see into our quality to envisage with our minds to come up with a method that allows us to attain a truthful account of nature, even when this is not embedded in our physical world. This paper attempts to examine the relationship between Cavendish's scientific notion of vision (sensory perception) and her imaginative faculty (rational perception) and how Cavendish employs them to be the author of her own natural world: Since Cavendish deemed telescopes and microscopes devices that deceived the senses, did Margaret Cavendish's blueprint to question the Royal Society's new scientific and empirical enterprise work on behalf of her authorial identity? How appropriate are Cavendish's hypotheses about rational and sensory perceptions to nurture her authorial

self? and how do the characters of the Empress and the Duchess of Newcastle emblemize Cavendish's model of authorship in *The Blazing World*?

For the purpose of this paper, an outline of Margaret Cavendish's thinking in relation to other philosophers of the period will be included so as to put her understandings in perspective. Yet, the focal point will be the core of her discussion on knowledge and (optical) vision as it establishes a link between visual and literary creations. Once the philosophical ground and the context of critical debates on authorship have been discussed, a number of sections will be devoted to the analysis of selected passages in Cavendish's fiction *The Blazing World*, one of the works that best reflects her line of thought and her authorial ambition on the issue of "vision" and "authorship". The first chapter will deal with the analysis of an excerpt of her utopian work so as to scrutinise the narrative techniques employed to portray empiricism as an unsound philosophical and scientific approach for the successful study of the natural world. The second chapter will test how Cavendish's fiction and natural philosophy endorses her authorship.

Philosophical Background, Vision and Authorship

European philosophers of the seventeenth-century committed themselves to creating an effective and complete conceptual framework capable of explaining nature in a way that would supersede classical world-views. At that time, natural philosophy was influential as a school of thought and it was mainly devoted to the exploration and speculation of nature and natural phenomena by means of intuition. However, the major seventeenth-century English philosopher John Locke (1632-1704) and early empiricists in the Royal Society were troubled about the status that intuitive knowledge was given to philosophical inquiry. As a result, this branch of natural philosophy called 'experimental philosophy' aimed at questioning "the *truth* of beliefs that *are* generally held, ones traditionally important in philosophy" (Sosa, 2007: 99).

In the interest of the formulation of an irrefutable method to challenge long-established knowledge based on instinct, experimentalists such as Robert Hooke worked along the lines that scientific knowledge could be attained from the evidence that our senses could gather if and only if specialised appliances were used. The scientific instrument to which attention will be drawn as the point of departure for this paper is the telescope. The development of lenses and the growing recognition and usage of these in scientific inquiries will be essential to understand not only the stance of the Royal Society but also some of the criticisms the institution and its members received. Margaret Cavendish was indeed one of these detractors who felt uneasy about experimental philosophy, and for the past three decades scholars have found in Cavendish's epistemology a great source of information to discuss and revisit an ample range of topics. Nonetheless, this paper will concentrate on how Cavendish's philosophical views on the subject of optics and the materiality of the physical world disapprove of the Royal Society's scientific methodology to inquire into nature.

Eve Keller states that "one of the most trumpeted claims of the new science was its procedural emphasis on objective observation and neutral experiment" (1997: 452), and to do so microscopes and telescopes were employed. The logic behind it is that, according to Francis Bacon in his *Preface to the Novum Organum* (1965 [1620]), human judgement was prone to be misled. As a result, he submitted the premises of a methodology to study nature that consisted in establishing "progressive stages of certainty" while retaining "the evidence of the sense, helped and guarded by a certain process of correction" (1909-14: 151). Hence the solidness of experiments *per se* was ensured if reliance was bestowed on the irrefutable impartiality of the experimental appliance rather than on the researcher's dependence on sensory perception. Bacon was convinced that by rectifying our senses we would receive information that would lessen "the illusion that the sensible qualities offered by them are the real determinations of

things and the illusion that things are divided according to our human sensibility” (Malherbe, 1996:80). Accordingly, Robert Hooke agreed with Bacon that instruments of observation were essential to exploit and correct the imperfections of human rational processes derived from our sensory organs in order to have access to valuable and solid knowledge. Both thinkers advocated for a model of philosophy based on unbiased and rigorous examination of natural phenomena that would cast aside what Sosa (2007) calls “armchair intuitions”. However, Hooke differed from Bacon’s conclusion that the observer’s judgement became more neutral thanks to optical tools. In *Micrographia* (1665), Hooke included engravings of an array of objects he had observed through “glasses”. While defending the convenience of microscopes in the attainment of physical certainty, Hooke also asserted that those engravings were as accurate as they could since objects shifted appearances when seen under different lights or from different perspectives. In order to give an assurance about the verity of those engravings, Hooke declared that they were a compound of images that the observation had built in his mind. Therefore, both the optic equipment and the beholder played an active role in putting forward a factuality. Since Margaret Cavendish was acquainted with both Hooke’s and Bacon’s works and the functioning of microscopes and telescopes, she replied to them by divulging her thought in her *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*.

Cavendish’s reading of Hooke’s *Micrographia* revolved around the deluding nature of microscopes, and how their employment for scientific purposes, rather than disclosing the natural truth, would lead to the breed of fictional species. Most of Cavendish’s epistemology defended that probable opinions, meaning knowledge, were the result of perception ruled by reason. Cavendish made a rather inconsistent use of the terms ‘knowledge’ and ‘perception’ throughout her whole philosophical work. Therefore, a clarification of the aforementioned concepts is necessary for a better understanding of Cavendish’s thought.

Firstly, there are two distinct types of knowledge according to Cavendish: self-knowledge and exterior knowledge. While the former is “innate and fixt” (*Observations*, 2016: 16) and does not entail perception, the latter is extrinsic and is accessed by our ability to perceive through our senses. Secondly, ‘perception’ can denote either rational or sensorial perception; whereas rational perception refers to cognitive processes such as imagining, theorising or reasoning, sensorial perception represents neurological activities like seeing or listening. Exterior knowledge, as claimed by Cavendish, is in fact the source of what we “know”, but it does not mean that exterior knowledge is actually entirely true. Cavendish argues that the knowledge-perception alliance implies an exercise of patterning that can only reproduce an object’s “exterior shapes and motions” (50). Moreover, Cavendish conceives that perceptual errors are plausible when rational and sensitive perception processes are not efficient and systematic. Cavendish provides an explanation for this phenomenon with honey and how it tastes depending on the disposition of our organs. The viscid substance “is sweet to those that are sound, and in health; but bitter to those that have the overflowing of the gall” (273), and this bitterness is actually a defective replica of the honey’s exterior nature. Consequently, the rationale behind her criticism to experimental philosophy is that ultimate natural truth cannot be attained either with our senses or with visual aid from instruments, because the inherent essence of natural entities, i.e. self-knowledge, cannot be revealed through their outer configuration. Cavendish’s philosophical stance implies that our knowledge of the world is limited and, in the words of Deborah Boyle “to search for knowledge about the world is to search for the most probable opinions about causes in nature” (2005: 447). Cavendish’s mild scepticism about the certainty of knowledge collides with the attitude of the Royal Society. In her view, true knowledge about nature would never be disclosed employing neither reason nor senses, specially senses, which in turn made knowledge available to be re-evaluated. This is precisely what the Royal Society was doing at the

time, to reassess “old” knowledge, but on the other hand the answers they obtained from the experiments carried out to challenge former knowledge were presented as scientific dogma.

The impossibility to put forth her way of thinking in an overtly manner because of both societal and scientific orthodoxy made of Margaret Cavendish somehow a transgressor who was ostracised. As mentioned before, Cavendish was once on exile and, as Anna Battigelli puts it, “she turned this life story to use in her work, using her very real experience as an exile as a privileged rhetorical stance from which she might address and even critique her world authoritatively” (1998: 7). Cavendish exploited this strategy to make herself visible within her own creations, which were first fashioned in her inner secondary world –her mind– without being completely withdrawn them from their source: the primary, actual world. Thus, Cavendish’s understanding of imagination, which according to her reasoning it is one of the cognitive process of the rational perception that is merely internal, although it is fuelled by exterior stimuli, supports her authorial self-fashioning scheme. She argues in her work *Nature’s Pictures* (1656) that “fancy is not an imitation of nature, but a naturall Creation [...] so that there is as much difference between fancy, and imitation, as between a Creature, and a Creator.” (C3v). As well-worded as this quote is, what can be extracted for the benefit of this dissertation is that imagination is about inventing a natural world that is original. By original I mean that the essence of everything existing in that world is known to its author, thus the person responsible for that creation is in possession of a certainty that cannot be contested.

Similarly, Tolkien’s *On Fairy Stories* discusses and theorises about the role of imagination in relation to the effect of rational perception on our exterior knowledge that sympathises with both Cavendish’s rather overtly intertwined philosophical and literary theories:

Fantasy is a natural human activity. It certainly does not destroy or even insult Reason; and it does not either blunt the appetite for, nor obscure the perception of, scientific verity. On the contrary. The keener and the clearer is the reason, the better fantasy will it make. If men were ever in a state in which they did not want to know or could not perceive truth (facts or evidence), then Fantasy would languish until they were cured. If they ever get into that state (it would not seem at all impossible), Fantasy will perish, and become Morbid Delusion. (1947: 18)

In the excerpt above, Tolkien argues in favour of employing fantasy or fancy to have access to truth, which is expressly Cavendish's cornerstone for her utopian production. By giving birth to a secondary, alternative world, as she does in *The Blazing World*, she is bringing into existence an authentic, natural, unquestionable world and the instrument used to gain admission to this world is her narrative. In the social and cultural context of the seventeenth century where women were kept aside, fantasy provided Cavendish the means to shape an alternative reality that allowed her to have the powerful position she was denied in her physical world. Retrieving the ontological contrast between Cavendish and the Royal Society in their inquiry of the truth of the natural world and linking it with literary creation authorship, Cavendish acknowledges the great effort put into the development of lenses to acquire a better knowledge of the external shape of objects, but the essence –the truth– of objects could not be attained by microscopic examination and thus could not lead to objective certainty. Battigelli claims that Cavendish's condemnation of the general excitement around instruments such as microscopes or telescopes is a manoeuvre not to debunk the Royal Society's advances, but to attribute her own fiction a distinctive and meaningful power to readers: the ability to "successfully transport readers to the textual worlds she created." (1998: 94). When Cavendish creates her secondary world out of her imaginative process, a world that no one can cast doubt upon its truthfulness, she is authenticating her authorial self and by simultaneously making room for her individuality, she is creating a space for her unique narrative. In Tolkien's aforementioned essay, he maintains that there is "a sudden glimpse of the

underlying reality or truth” (23) in all works of fantasy because whatever has been created within the boundaries of that imaginary world is legitimate by nature.

Chapter 1

Optics as Precluding Natural Knowledge: Science in *The Blazing World*

This chapter will be devoted to the analysis of an excerpt of *The Blazing World* where the main character of the Empress maintains a dialogue with the bear-men concerning the essence of the sun and the moon. The aim of this chapter is, through the close-reading of a fragment from Cavendish’s fiction, to examine her defense of “natural truth” as a claim that sustains her authority in the text, while she is critical of the Royal Society’s stance on the use of optical instruments to sharpen and improve observation and obtain verifiable knowledge. To do so, it is necessary to summarise the narrative up to the fragment that will later be explored.

A commercial traveller kidnaps a lady because he falls deep in love with her and they both sail into an unknown destination. However, this trip is disrupted by a frenzied sea storm that leads the expedition towards the North Pole. As a result of the devastating effects of the tempest, the whole crew dies except for the Lady and the vessel trespasses the northern tropic of their world and enters a different world. Finding herself in an unknown environment, the Lady fears for her life but soon discovers that, apart from being far from hostile creatures, the inhabitants of that new world were hybrids between animal species and human entities, and they all joined forces to bring the Lady before their Emperor, their world’s highest authority. As soon as the Emperor sees the Lady, the Emperor starts worshipping her because he thinks she was a kind of goddess. The Lady’s reaction is to tell the Emperor that she is only a mortal and that she is not worth such exaltation. In response, the Emperor makes her his wife, which turns the Lady into the

Empress of this new world she is inhabiting. Because of her new status, she possesses absolute authority to reign as she pleases. One of her first accomplishments as Empress is to build schools and to establish societies with the virtuosi that live in that world in order to gain some insight of the world she has to rule. The narrator gives an account of all the associations that the Empress had at her disposal:

The bear-men were to be her experimental philosophers, the bird-men her astronomers, the fly-, worm- and fish-men her natural philosophers, the ape-men her chemists, the satyrs her Galenic physicians, the fox-men her politicians, the spider- and lice-men her mathematicians, the jackdaw-, magpie- and parrot-men her orators and logicians, the giants the architects, etc (134).

The society the Empress summons first is the bird-men, the astronomers, and after she interviews them she requests the presence of the bear-men, the experimental philosophers. She does so because when the Empress interrogates the bird-men about “the true relation of the two celestial bodies, viz. the sun and moon” (136), the bird-men proved to be rather inconsistent in their approaches. Although all of them agreed on the outer appearances of both the star and the satellite, the bird-men were not able to find a common voice to explain the nature of the heat of the sun or the reason why the sun and the moon become visible in different shapes. The Empress also asked the bird-men about the nature of the air, the cause of wind, and the episodes of thunder and lightning. Although the interpretations provided by the bird-men are conflicting, the Empress does find some of them valid according to her own reason. After discussing with them for a while, the Empress saw fit to call a new society that could provide her with satisfactory answers to natural phenomena in order to steer the bird-men clear of dissension and antagonism among them. Then, the bear-men received the commands of the Empress to make observations through the telescopes they possessed so as to make inquiries about the nature of the celestial bodies that could complement those of the bird-men. Yet, the bear-men fail to produce a unanimous and solid account of the celestial bodies they observe in the sky. The incompatibility of the bear-men’s statements about astronomical

questions exasperates the Empress so much that she attacks and raise objections to the alleged usefulness of implements such as telescopes in the search for natural truth. According to the Empress, optical instruments confound the senses such as the sight in this particular case. The bear-men sought an excuse to justify their accounts by blaming their own defective nature. They assert that their witness was not consistent because “the sensitive motion in their optic organs did not move alike, nor were their rational judgements always regular” (141). Despite the bear-men’s answer, the Empress feels compelled to defend her attitude against telescopes, which it is also then applied to the use of microscopes, by stating that the knowledge of truth could not be attained employing deluding glasses because the natural creation that is human sense and reason is by all means more efficient and unchanging than what the Empress calls “art”.

The distinction made by the Empress between art and nature will be our point of departure to discuss the philosophical and scientific perspectives that sustain Cavendish’s narrative. In *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, Cavendish confronts her readership with a rhetorical question: “how can a fool order his understanding by art, if nature has made it defective?” (2016: 6). Before tackling this question, an understanding of what notions of “nature” and “art” in the seventeenth century are paramount to the interpretation of Cavendish’s approach. Tien-yi Chao collects in her article all the connotations the aforementioned terms had in Cavendish’s times. Within the subject of natural philosophy, the concept of art was very much related to science and to “professional, artistic or technical skill” (2011: 52), whereas ‘nature’ was used primarily to refer to the employment of sense in relation “to the material world” (53). Going back to Cavendish’s inquiry, she expounds in the philosophical disquisition attached to *The Blazing World* that art, understood as science and more specifically as the usage of optical instruments for scientific purposes, could not in any way, shape or form assist in the investigation of Nature, understood here as the material world, because “the perception

of sight [...] goes no further than the exterior parts of the object presented; and though the perception may be true, when the object is truly presented, yet the presentation is false, the information must be false also” (7). If we apply this explanation to the reports that the Empress receives from both the bird-men and the bear-men about celestial bodies, one is able to distinguish them as distinct on the basis that the bird-men use solely their vision to account for natural phenomena whereas the bear-men resort to telescopes to reach similar conclusions of that of the bird-men. The discrepancy amongst the bird-men and the bear-men is regarded as unlike by the Empress, since the employment of technology on the part of the bear-men to achieve a greater understanding of the natural world proves to be as ineffective as the bird-men’s bare-eyed observation. Cavendish insists that the naked eye is the optimal tool to conduct fruitful observations and that “the best study [of Nature] is rational contemplation joined with the observations of regular sense” (9). Cavendish deemed art as emulation of nature which is the reason why it deceives the senses, because the image that it is perceived through optical instruments is not accurate enough.

Consequently, the result of the usage of optical instruments to examine natural objects is the creation of hybrids, or in Cavendish’s terms “hermaphroditical figures” that, as claimed by Cavendish herself in *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, are “a third figure between nature and art. Which provides that natural reason is above artificial sense” (9). Conveniently, the narrator of *The Blazing World* recounts that the inhabitants of this new world are anthropomorphic animal creatures –the bear-men, the bird-men, the worm-men, etc.– that are at the service of the Empress. This narrative strategy could be very well understood as satire if we bear in mind each society epitomises several philosophical branches that contrast with Cavendish’s thinking.

Precisely, what Cavendish does is to present views that differ from hers by citing them in a shortened way and out of context parallel to other opinions:

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; some counted more stars than others; some discovered new stars never seen before; some fell into great dispute with others concerning the bigness of the stars; some said the Moon was another world like their terrestrial globe, and the spots therein were hills and valleys; but others would have the spots to be the terrestrial parts, and the smooth and glossy parts, the sea. (p. 140-1)

In this excerpt, the bear-men cited different theories about the movement of the sun and the earth –Ptolemaic, Copernican and Tychoic– and straight after they jump into the discussion of stars and the moon. Yet, satire would be a rather superficial and inexact explanation for the addition of hybrids since the representation of natural philosophy by the fly-, the worm-, and the fish-men, with whom Cavendish felt more identified, would imply that she is mocking her own line of thoughts. Consequently, I connect the inclusion of these “hermaphroditical figures” in her narrative with two purposes that are interdependent on each other: on the one hand Cavendish depicts “contemporary scientific opinion as ridiculous and contradictory” (Hutton, 2003: 168) and by presenting them within the dialogue that the Empress maintains with her virtuosi, Cavendish puts forth that a discursive approach to examine the natural world is in fact the most inclusive and effective; on the other hand Cavendish problematizes the limitations that observational and experimental scientific paradigms brought into the study of the natural world, for the objects and phenomena described by the Royal Society were, according to her, creations, not natural discoveries, while simultaneously giving credit to the production of alternative spaces powered by her mind that could in fact shelter the certain and objective knowledge that could not be reached in the natural world. The latter ambition will be developed in detail in the following chapter since it deals with the concept of subjectivity and authorship.

As explained in the previous section, Cavendish's epistemology was based on the concepts of knowledge and perception. Within these categories, she distinguished between self-knowledge and external knowledge on the one hand, and rational and sensorial perception on the other hand.

Self-knowledge would correspond to intrinsic nature of all kind of substance and, in her opinion, everything in the material world had substance. In fact, the point of departure in Cavendish's line of thought is that nature is one infinite material entity, to which she calls "matter", and there is only one energy governing the natural world, to which she calls "motion", and each natural object and event is, in words of Eugene Marshall in his introduction to *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy, Abridged with Related Texts*, "distinguished from one another by their varying parts of matter, bearing different motions, within that one infinite material substance" (2016: xiii). Thus, self-knowledge was Cavendish's label to refer to the essence of objects and since it was of internal nature, albeit of its materiality, it could not be attained by means of observation because "nature is a self-moving, and consequently a self-living and self-knowing infinite body, divisible into infinite parts, [...] whatsoever has body, or is material, has quantity, and what has quantity is divisible" (27). However, scrutiny could lead to the external knowledge of matter which would be conducted by means of perception. Yet, Cavendish did not conceive perception as a single faculty and she divided it into two subcategories. Rational perception referred to mental activity that was governed by reason, like memory, speculation, or even judgement. On the contrary, sensory perception applied to faculties of external organs such as sight, hearing or touch. The employment of solely sensitive perception, namely vision, is precisely how the bird-men conducted their study on celestial bodies. Needless to say, neither the bird-men nor the bear-men could obtain the ultimate truth about the natural phenomena the Empress enquired them about because they only had access to the external appearance of the celestial bodies examined.

From the excerpt selected from Cavendish's *The Blazing World*, we see that the rationale behind Cavendish's criticism to experimental philosophy is that absolute natural truth cannot be attained either with our senses or with visual aid from instruments, because the inherent essence of natural entities, i.e. self-knowledge, cannot be revealed through their outer configuration. Moreover, Cavendish brings to light the empirical tenets promoted by the Royal Society in the analysis of natural phenomena as flawed. In bringing the results of the bird-men and the bear men on an equal footing, it seems clear that Cavendish aimed to pinpoint that experimentation and observation with optical instruments as methods to verify or disprove knowledge of the workings of the natural world lead to as many disagreements as using sight alone. Consequently, Cavendish advocates for reason as a suitable approach to natural truth instead of observation carried out through the senses as astronomers or experimental philosophers did. In fact, she mentions in *Observations* that "our exterior sense can go no further than the exterior figures of creatures, and their exterior actions; but our reason may pierce deeper, and consider their inherent natures, and interior actions" (25), which suggests that if sensitive perception is ruled by rational perception, natural truth is more likely to be accessible, thus rational discourse and speculation proves to be more adequate than deductive or inductive thinking and experimentation in attaining knowledge. Nevertheless, Cavendish takes into consideration that her method of inquiry is not entirely reliable "for there can be no perfect or universal knowledge in a finite part [human beings], concerning the infinite actions of nature" (25), yet she deems it more valuable for the inquiry of nature on the grounds that "discourse shall sooner find or trace Nature's corporeal figurative motion, than deluding Arts can inform the Senses" (76). As a result, Cavendish opts for exercising a particular element of her rational perception, namely her imagination, to create an alternative cosmos that is in consonance with her line of thought to prove that unequivocal knowledge of nature can only be attained by means of fantasy.

Accordingly, we read at the beginning of *The Blazing World* that the vessel that transports the Lady that later becomes Empress enters another world. The narrator explains that the terrestrial globe is connected with another unknown world by one of their poles. I maintain that this particular instance in the book is a metaphor for Cavendish's creative process in which her views on the relationship of epistemology and science are entangled. Since human beings cannot procure for a complete and universal understanding of this material world, Cavendish's imaginative exercise attempts to build a space where her beliefs about nature are undisputed and her authorial self finds the means to explore her identity within the narrative and has recognition her physical world denies her. Precisely, this latter question about authorship will be the central point of the following chapter.

Chapter 2

Mind Power: Cavendish's Authorial Self-Representation in *The Blazing World*

Cavendish states in *Observation upon Experimental Philosophy* (1666) that "the mind being material, is dividable as well as composable, and therefore its parts may as well oppose each other, as agree" (2016: 39). It might seem to be an irrelevant quotation at first, but it serves the purpose of this chapter, which is to examine how Cavendish vindicates her textual authority in the narrative. Although authors such as Kate Lilley, Hero Chalmers or Emma L. E. Rees are more prone to discuss Cavendish's authorial self-representation as a consequence of the constraints she faced in her contemporary society and cultural milieu, this paper seeks to give greater emphasis on the role of imagination as the key to Margaret Cavendish's authorship because it is closely related to the way she conceived nature and natural philosophy –a realm full of variety with room for conversations, digressions, speculations, and exchange of opinions and beliefs driven by reason-governed senses–, which stood in contrast with the seventeenth-century emerging

scientific discourse devoted to methodological principles that attempted and succeeded in removing subjectivity from the inquiry of the natural world, when in fact subjectiveness is embedded in the nature of human beings. Yet in the approach to her authorial performance it may be more appropriate to look at Cavendish's own line of thought, since the nexus between them is her faculty to fathom the intricacy of the physical and the mental world. For this purpose, the concept of identity and its implications in the creation of literary works will be considered and will serve as a point of departure to determine the autonomous scope of Cavendish's authorship. Afterwards, a number of fragments of her work *The Blazing World* (2004) will be selected to examine the extent to which Cavendish applies her notion of subjectivity as the beginning and end of knowledge to construct her authorial identity.

Regarding the connection between selfhood and authorship, Paul Ricoeur in *Oneself as Another* discloses his opinions about the notion of subjectivity in the construction of a personal identity and his views on the interpretation of the self, which turn out to be relatively in line with those of Cavendish. Ricoeur's concept of ipseity covertly entails the idea of otherness, hence it cannot be understood as something specific and clear-cut for it involves the inclusion of its alleged opposite. To illustrate his point, Ricoeur resorts to Descartes' renowned quote "I think, therefore I am" to explain how in the hermeneutics of the self, sameness and otherness are analogous. According to Ricoeur, the Cartesian cogito serves as a declaration of wisdom, knowledge can explain existence; whereas the exploration of the self works as a certification of truth, existence stands by itself as evidence of certainty. Ricoeur does not maintain that one overrides the other, he only asserts that knowledge understood as "epistēmē" (science) and attestation of belief are different degrees of certitude. Subjective testimonial validity is therefore as legitimate as "the criterion of verification of objective science" (1992: 21) because the method used, a discursive and unsystematic inquiry, requires contemplation which is

fundamental for the acquisition of knowledge. This explanation is pertinent to understand Cavendish's imaginative thought in that the exercise of mental faculties can originate authentic statements that cannot be deemed as either "right" or "wrong" because they are triggered by one's internal and individual reality. It is too logical that Cavendish's model of authorship is derived from an exercise of rational introspection in which her understanding of nature endorses her production. Yet, I will suggest that Cavendish's exploration of identity inspires her authorial accomplishment.

According to Ricoeur, the dialogue between selfhood and sameness gives birth to the concept of identity. It is actually the notion of selfhood that can be problematic because Ricoeur presents it as ambivalent. Selfhood can represent one's identity as opposed to other identities, so an individual is unique in comparison to other individuals, and also the identity that is part of oneself but it is distinctive from other identities within that individual. Therefore, Ricoeur is constructing one's selfhood not only as an essential characteristic that makes one individual different from another, but also an intrinsic quality of individuals: the possession of various subjectivities. Cavendish actually puts forwards in *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* (1666) the very same concept of selfhood that Ricoeur defends:

There is so great a variety and difference amongst natural creatures, both in their perceptions and interior natures, [...] although all men have flesh and blood, and are of one particular kind, yet their interior natures and dispositions are so different that seldom any two men are of the same complexion. [...] Nay, as there is a different in the corporeal parts of their bodies, so in the corporeal parts of their minds, according to the old proverb, so many men, so many minds. For there are different understandings, fancies, conceptions, imaginations, judgements, wits, memories, affections, passions and the like. (2016: 19-20)

In the quotation above, Cavendish is candidly acknowledging the diversity of identities that coexist not only "amongst natural creatures", but also inside them; by the same token she is indirectly justifying the creation of a fictional space in which she strives "to reconcile fundamentally incompatible [...] philosophical systems" (Prakas, 2016: 129).

By all accounts, Cavendish is suggesting that as a “natural creature” she has been endowed the autonomy to engage in a creative process that serves to bring to terms mutually exclusive lines of thought as well as her discordant selfhood in a genuine manner. Concerning the purpose of producing fantastic literature, the famous satirist Jonathan Swift wrote:

I myself, the author of these momentous truths, am a person, whose imaginations are hard-mouthed, and exceedingly disposed to run away with his reason, [...] upon which account my friends never trust me alone, without a solemn promise to vent my speculations in this, or the like manner, for the universal benefit of the human kind. (2005: 444)

This quotation could be read as a self-parody or as an actual defense of his work. Nevertheless, I am inclined to think that Swift, as well as Cavendish, saw the need to provide explanations to their audience as to why their works were worth reading. However, if Cavendish was not graced by the seal of approval of her contemporaries, we can blame it on Cavendish’s extravagant personality as much as on her concern about the fragmentation of the self which, as Lisa Walters concludes, “more closely resembles contemporary postmodern preoccupations with plurality and deconstructions of unified notions of truth, self, and ideology” (2014: 393). It becomes obvious to most readers that variety seems to be spread across the whole narrative in different levels. In the previous chapter I mentioned the presence of diverse anthropomorphic creatures that established societies of virtuosi, whose function was to inform the Empress about their inquiries of the physical world they lived in. The characters of the Empress and the Duchess of Newcastle in *The Blazing World* mirror the complexity of Cavendish’s subjective frame of mind.

The apparent instability of Cavendish as writer and as authorial presence in the text reminds us of what the twentieth century French critic Michel Foucault explained in his

essay “What Is an Author?” For the purposes of this paper, I wish to highlight his treatment of the author as a function in the discourse.

writing unfolds like a game that invariably goes beyond its own rules and transgresses its limits. In writing the point is not to manifest or exalt the act of writing, nor is it to pin a subject within language; it is, rather, a question of creating a space into which the writing subject constantly disappears. (1984: 102).

Foucault implies that the author’s function is that of bringing into existence a room where the author’s self is simultaneously present and missing, and this is precisely what Cavendish does when she creates the characters of the Empress and the Duchess of Newcastle. After the Empress has had a conversation about God and spirituality among other topics with “the spirits”, the entities that preserved corporeal motions despite of their immateriality, the Empress asked them if they could assist her in writing a Cabbala, the ancient Jewish tradition of interpreting the Bible in an esoteric and mystic tone. In fact, the Empress asks the spirits to assign her a scribe that could materialize her analysis. The spirits give the Empress the choice of appointing any dead or living author such as Plato, Aristotle, Galileo or Descartes, yet the spirits advise her that those individuals had a major flaw. Although all of them “were very learned, subtle, and ingenious writers” (181), they would not be of service to the Empress for they were too dogmatic. Instead, the spirits suggest the Empress to consider “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 writing is sense and reason”. In the previous chapter, we have seen that the character of the Empress can be identified as Cavendish’s narrative alter ego, since they seem to advocate for the pursuit of natural philosophy as a means to achieve a better understanding of how the physical world works while simultaneously questioning the efficacy of experimental philosophy in the attainment of genuine natural knowledge. Nevertheless, the inclusion of another character

that epitomizes Cavendish herself sets forth her conviction that one's identity is made up of different selves, and that is noticeable when the soul of the Duchess is commanded to enter the body of the Empress to write the Cabbala, an instance in which Cavendish's selfhood contains sameness –The character of the Duchess of Newcastle– and otherness –the character of the Empress. Bronwen Price conceives the result of the Empress' and the Duchess' blend of souls as “indivisible, but embraces autonomy” (2016: 40), which seems to be a reading that clearly overlooks Cavendish's theories about matter and epistemology. The Empress and the Duchess become an independent entity whose external surface does not inform of the inner activity that is performed by the two separate selfhoods that inhabit the body. In addition, this union is disrupted whenever the Empress allows the Duchess to return to her world, hence the Empress' and the Duchess' intellectual merger is dissolvable.

Although the former excerpt of *The Blazing World* would suffice to illustrate how Cavendish's imagination authorizes her to implement her line of thought concerning the natural configuration of her identity and its multiplicity, Cavendish goes one step further and portrays what her distinct selfhoods are able to do. One of the occasions in which the Empress welcomes the Duchess' soul into her being, the Duchess discloses to the Empress that she desires to become the empress of her own world. The Empress then seeks the advice of the spirits in order to help the Duchess. When asked about the possibility to find a world without government, the spirits reply that there is none, however they offer the Duchess the opportunity to create an ethereal world. In fact, the spirits assert the following:

every human creature can create an immaterial world fully inhabited by immaterial creatures, and populous of immaterial subjects, such as we are, and all this within the compass of the head or scull; nay, not only so, but he may create a world of what fashion and government he will, and give the creatures thereof such motions, figures, forms, colours, perceptions, etc. as he pleases. (185).

The spirits persuade the Duchess when they explain that an individual cannot fully enjoy or be acquainted with a whole physical world because of their vastness and their variety. Another argument the spirits convey to the Duchess is that since that world will exclusively be established in her mind, the Duchess will have to face no one's "control or opposition" (185) and if she is not satisfied with her creation, she can modify it any time. The Duchess starts then her creative process by adopting the theories of various known philosophers (Thales, Pythagoras, Plato, Epicurus, Aristotle, Descartes and Hobbes), but every time the Duchess creates a space according to these authors' opinions she finds out weaknesses that displeased her. Finally, the Duchess employs her imagination to come up with an innovative world that pleases her. The Duchess' world consisted of "sensitive and rational self-moving matter, [...] which is the subtlest and purest degree of matter" (188). The Empress was also engaged in this world inventive exercise but she did not seem to find the right frame for it. To be able to have a reference, the Empress asks the Duchess to show her the world she had created and she becomes fascinated with it. The Duchess then offers her "rational motions" (189) to help the Empress create a world that resembled hers but including the Empress' identity. Here, Cavendish's characters are engaged in the exploration of their own subjectivities so as to design their own spaces whose certainty is verified by their own consciousness. The worlds that the Empress and the Duchess create are compatible with their consciousness and the rationale behind it can be explained through the contemporary Brandon Carter's anthropic principle:

Any universe that can 'be observed' must, as a logical necessity, be capable of supporting conscious mentality, since consciousness is precisely what plays the ultimate role of 'observer'. [...] Accordingly, the anthropic principle asserts that the universe that we, as conscious observers, actually do observe, must operate with laws and appropriate parameter values that are consistent with these constraints. This fundamental requirement could well provide constraints on the universe's physical laws, or physical parameters, in order that conscious mentality can (and will) exist. Such constraints could manifest themselves in particular values for the fundamental (dimensionless) constants of Nature (Roger Penrose, 2004: 1030).

The strong version of this principle speculates with the existence of an infinite array of universes that can shelter conjectures about the framework of the physical world we inhabit. The existence of a multiverse would in fact be a partial justification as to why laws of physics that are essential to understand how the world works have the configuration that we perceive and not a distinct one. The fact that Cavendish, almost three centuries before, embraced and defended the existing variety and multiplicity in nature and inside every creature in terms of consciousness does not fall very short from this postulation that is currently applicable for the development of string theory, for example. Going back to the authorial performance Cavendish accomplished in *The Blazing World*, the strategy she uses to enable herself to be “Margaret the First” is an explicit metafictional portrayal of authorship that is performed by the Empress and the Duchess in the two instances that I have included in this chapter –when the Duchess is appointed the Empress’ scribe and also when both characters are immersed in the creative process of shaping their own worlds. These metafictional situations are carried out by two characters whose narrative identities can lead to understanding how Cavendish’s concept of the self, characterised by fragmentation and variety, is intrinsically linked to Cavendish’s perception of nature and matter, made of different self-knowing parts that are always further divisible. Francis Bacon believed that in order to expand our knowledge and make it productive for us “a way must be opened for the human understanding entirely different from any hitherto known”, and this method should be suitable for our mental capacities to “exercise over the nature of things the authority which properly belongs to it” (1620: 7). Cavendish does find a technique to achieve what Bacon stated, but instead of looking at the physical world she set her sights on inspecting her selfhood in an original manner to obtain such sovereignty: She uses her imaginative faculty to develop a greater knowledge of her identity, and so taking control over her own subjective nature.

Conclusions

Margaret Cavendish was undoubtedly a woman whose intellect stepped out of the boundaries of her cultural and scientific milieu. Her materialist and panpsychist concept of nature might not be remarkably original for a seventeenth-century author, but the application of her views to create a literary work in which she could vindicate her authorial self is remarkably innovative. Her critique to experimental philosophy was mostly based upon her refusal to accept that subjectivity did not play a role in the exploration of nature when, as a matter of fact, it is rooted in our inherent essence. Moreover, Cavendish supported that observation without any rational process behind it would result in misleading information. Therefore, she deemed as futile the Royal Society's efforts to correct our vision by means of microscopes or telescopes.

By establishing that all natural constituents that exist in the physical world possess self-knowledge and autonomy and that natural creatures can obtain unequivocal certainty only by means of an exercise of reason and consciousness, Cavendish was departing from the contemporary mainstream line of thought championed by the Royal Society while redefining her own authorial identity. Therefore, Cavendish's natural philosophy authorizes her to be endowed with the necessary freedom to play with different narrative viewpoints, characters, and layers of meaning.

The Blazing World is by all accounts a celebration of subjectivity and introspection. The creation of an alternative world powered by her imagination is the confirmation that Cavendish cherished her philosophy because it authorised her to shape a concept of authorship that was not prevalent at that time. Cavendish succeeds in diminishing the effectiveness of the microscopes and telescopes of the Royal Society by representing the complexity of one's selfhood and projecting herself within her narrative.

Such optical implements were not made to study interiority and obtain a thorough account of the workings of natural creatures and phenomena. Consequently, Cavendish

takes advantage of it by creating an independent inner dominion in her mind that suits her authorial desire. Cavendish achieves this is by activating various inner subjective spaces in which selfhood is the tool to create that which in the physical world cannot exist.

Cavendish's authorial claim does not entail possessing genuine truths about the material world, mainly because she advocated that nature's greatness and heterogeneity made it fathomless. Conveniently, Cavendish resorts to the variety and multiplicity of nature to create her own space where she can morph into the Duchess of Newcastle the scribe, the Duchess of Newcastle the creator and sovereign of her own world, the Empress of the Blazing World, and the Empress the supreme ruler of her inner sphere. Self-created worlds give Cavendish and the characters of the Empress and the Duchess of Newcastle the advantage to act freely and creatively without being constrained by external principles of truthfulness, which ultimately enable them to be the sovereigns of their internal worlds in which none of them is subject to strict dictates of what can be true or what can be false. While seventeenth-century scientists contributed to building up scientific narrative devoted to empiricism and experimental philosophy, Cavendish stood firm and embraced a personalised self-confident narrative that supported and reinforced her authorial identity.

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