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The Reenchantment of Utopia and the Female
Monarchical Self:
Margaret Cavendish's *Blazing World*

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Margaret Cavendish, the first Duchess of Newcastle, stands out in English literary history as the first woman author not only to write but to publish profusely. In the tumultuous fifteen years between 1653 and 1668 Cavendish published (in folio) thirteen strikingly eclectic volumes of fiction, poetry, plays, essays, scientific treatises, and other nonfictional prose. One of the most compelling of these volumes is a utopian work, *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World* (1666).¹ Yet while an important contribution to the utopian genre, *Blazing World*, like many of the Duchess's other texts, has been bypassed in favor of works by her male counterparts. Dismissed by her contemporaries as the incomprehensible scribbles of "a mad, conceited, ridiculous woman," to quote Samuel Pepys, in our own century Cavendish's writings have often been unsympathetically treated as unintelligible, dull, and naive.² The fluid, fantastical, and fairy-tale qualities of *Blazing World* have perhaps made the text especially susceptible to scholarly scorn. Even its special distinction as the first utopia written by a woman in England has not encouraged historians of utopian thought to give *Blazing World* sustained, serious scrutiny. Frank E. and Fritzie P. Manuel devote only one sentence of their nine-hundred-page study of *Utopian Thought in the Western World* to the Duchess's *Blazing World*; it is for them a utopia "so private that [it] border[s] on schizophrenia."³ Studies devoted more exclusively to the seventeenth century share the same inattentiveness to Cavendish's utopia. J. C. Davis, for instance, focuses on utopian writing in England between 1516 and 1700, but he too devotes almost no space to *Blazing World*: he lists *Blazing World* in his bibliography, but offers no commentary on it elsewhere in his book.⁴

This essay means to redress such omissions by arguing several interlocking points in relation to Cavendish's text: first, that *Blazing World* is neither a self-indulgent "retreat into fantasy" nor a "ponderous tome," but rather a canny revision of the utopian social paradigm, driven by the competing demands of the Duchess's radical feminism and social conservatism;⁵ and

secondly, that Cavendish's complex engagement with the utopian paradigm in *Blazing World* results in a revision of the utopian genre that is at once culturally subversive and politically nostalgic and, as such, uniquely accommodates her construction of female subjectivity in imperial terms. The female self that emerges in *Blazing World* not only supports a new (if finally problematical) paradigm of female independence, but also significantly informs the idealized treatment of women's friendship in Cavendish's fantastical utopian kingdom.

In part, the omission of *Blazing World* from standard studies of the utopia can be attributed to the generic transgressiveness of Cavendish's text.⁶ As Davis and the Manuels acknowledge, *Blazing World* is a utopia; it is, however, a utopia that in many ways fails to conform to prevailing assumptions about the form. For most students of the genre, the utopia celebrates the attempt to rationalize human culture. Davis describes the utopia as "distinguished by its pursuit of legal, institutional, bureaucratic and educational means of producing a harmonious society";⁷ for James Holstun, the utopia is "the experimental site for the formation of a new cultural order . . . a human organization of space that will follow from human reason." The rationalized space of utopia is for Holstun also a disciplinary formation. Following Foucault's treatment of the prison and the asylum, Holstun defines the utopia in both its literary and nonliterary, or "applied," configurations as "a factory for the disciplinary production of subjectivities."⁸ Davis's and Holstun's definitions of the utopia generally enrich our understanding of the genre; they do not, however, greatly help to elucidate *Blazing World*. Unlike other utopias, including or especially those contemporaneous with it, Cavendish's ideal world does not domesticate human and physical nature into a rationalized cultural grid that can be easily managed and patrolled.

Cavendish's paradigm of felicitous community "reenchants" the demystified locus of utopia by giving its rationalized physical and psychic topography magical, mythological, and transcendent qualities. In so doing, it dissociates the utopia from the repressive force of discipline and newly associates it with a suspension of rationally conceived laws and institutionally imposed order. In this unrestrained site, Cavendish constructs a new utopian world, "framed in [her] own Mind, according as [s]he pleases," in which she takes "more delight and glory, then ever *Alexander* or *Caesar* did in conquering this terrestrial world" ("To the Reader," n. p.; Epilogue, p. 121).

We shall see that Cavendish's reenchantment of the utopia shapes her *Blazing World* in two key ways. It feminizes the utopia by giving her license—once the typically utopian effort to "normalize" human experience through rational, legal, and institutional means is abandoned—to address her complaint "that men from the first Creation usurped a Supremacy to themselves, although we were made equal by Nature: which Tyrannical Government

they have kept ever since.”⁹ In *Blazing World*, the “Tyrannical Government” of men is replaced by a magical and mythological mode of female rule. Cavendish’s utopia is governed by an all-powerful and magnificently accoutered Empress who, not unlike Apollo, traverses her kingdom in a “very Glorious” chariot, fashioned from green, blue, and white diamonds and “drawn by Twelve Unicorns, whose Trappings are all Chains of Pearl” (Part II, p. 33). At the same time, Cavendish’s reenchantment of utopia aligns the form with her aristocratic nostalgia for what could be called a “magical” past, for an idealized pre-Civil War England unrooted from actual history, in which the mystical sovereignty of monarchy prevailed over an undivided nation and when custom, tradition, and other rationally irreducible supports for social hierarchy were embraced by all classes. Along with its radical feminism, *Blazing World* ratifies the kind of patriarchalism that is articulated in Robert Filmer’s defense of kingship, *Patriarcha, or the Natural Power of Kings*, which celebrates the divinely appointed power of monarchy and equates obedience to God with submission to the king: the subjects of the *Blazing World* believe that

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. (Part I, p. 16)

The same equivocal conjunction between royalism and feminism that shapes Cavendish’s treatment of the utopian genre also underpins the imperial model of female subjectivity that the Duchess celebrates in *Blazing World*. It is a model that, as Catherine Gallagher aptly points out, emerges from the overlap between the ideology of absolute monarchism and that of the absolute self: “the paradoxical connection between the *roi absolu* and the *moi absolu*.”¹⁰ The figure of the absolute sovereign is internalized by the Duchess as a monarchical ideal of the independent woman who has complete dominion over herself.

In Cavendish’s writings, however, Gallagher argues, this imperial paradigm of the self-governing female subject leads less to an affirmation of female independence than to the division and cancellation of personal identity: it initiates “a regressive self-pursuit” that ends in “a classic *mise en abyme*.”¹¹ While valid, Gallagher’s focus on the solipsistic implications of Cavendish’s absolutist model of female selfhood directs important attention away from one of the central concerns of *Blazing World* and many of the Duchess’s other writings: the possibility of female friendship and community, a subject that Cavendish addresses with characteristic ambivalence. I shall show that, more than simply trap her in “the vortex of solipsistic regres-

sion,"¹² Cavendish's imperial model of female self inspires her depiction in *Blazing World* of perfect friendship as the "molecular" coupling of two independent female subjectivities, even while elsewhere in her utopia and other writings it drives the Duchess's efforts to distance herself from other women and to denounce her own sex. But like her reenchantment of the utopian genre, Cavendish's ideal of female self and community is finally destabilized by the competing interests of the royalist and feminist ideologies that jointly structure her world view.

While most utopias represent the attempt to confine nature and culture to rationally organized and institutionally controlled political spaces, Cavendish's *Blazing World* reenvisioning utopia as the locus of marvelous and inexplicable natural and cultural transformations. From the moment we follow Cavendish's central character, identified simply as "a young Lady" (Part I, p. 1), into the Duchess's ideal kingdom, we enter a world outside of logocentric time and history, a fluid, uncanny, and uncharted territory in which the boundaries between logically and ideologically incompatible ideas and experiences dissolve and new rationally unthinkable and culturally transgressive alliances emerge.¹³

The distance between the utopia and Cavendish's reinvention of it can be perhaps most clearly gauged by the depiction of nature in *Blazing World*. Nature in the utopian works that proliferated in England during the seventeenth century is usually systematically reshaped to serve experimentation in maximizing agricultural and human productivity. In Robert Burton's utopia, for instance, every bit of land is forced "by art" to yield all of its resources: "I will not have a barren acre in all my territories, not so much the tops of the mountains."¹⁴ New scientific approaches to the art of husbandry also resulted in a myriad of utopian schemes for applying technological and technocratic methods to the cultivation of the natural world. Thus in *Macaria*, Gabriel Plattes systematizes the exploitation of the mineral and agricultural resources in his utopian commonwealth by placing the management and control (although, unlike Sir Thomas More, not the ownership) of land under a central council.¹⁵ In Cavendish's utopia, however, nature conforms to no system or rationalized framework; it is obedient only to its own anarchic properties. "The Blazing World" is home to "strange Creatures," fantastic anthropomorphic animals of many brightly colored complexions, purple, green, and azure, among others, which demonstrate the rationally irreducible laws of nature in Cavendish's ideal world:

some were Bear-men, some Worm-men, some Fish- or Mear-men, otherwise called Syrenes; some Bird-men, some Fly-men, some Ant-men, some Geese-

men, some Spider-men, some Lice-men, some Fox-men, some Ape-men, some Jack-daw-men, some Magpie-men, some Parrot-men, some Satyrs, some Gyants, and many more, which I cannot all remember. (Part I, p. 15)

This kind of logically disruptive reorganization of nature provides a framework for Cavendish's counter-utopian treatment of culture and reconstruction of psychic and social space. The utopian genre generally reconciles the tensions between the internal and external dimensions of cultural experience by subsuming the psychological sphere into the social one. Stephen Greenblatt's observation that More "has greatly restricted any sense of *personal* inwardness" is true not only of *Utopia* but also of its descendants.¹⁶ Cavendish's foray into the fantastic, however, allows her to expand the utopian landscape of experience into the personal as well as the public domain.

This expanded utopian terrain can be charted most clearly in the Duchess's heroine. With her entry into the Blazing World, the distinctions between "inside" and "outside," under which she suffers in the old world that she leaves behind, no longer have currency. In her own world, the young Lady's inner excellence is not matched by her outward circumstances: she is abducted by a merchant who desires her visible wealth and beauty, but who refuses to honor the virtue of her personal being. By contrast, in the Blazing World, the inner excellence of the young Lady finds immediate veneration in the outside world, over which she is bequeathed absolute dominion. The Lady's harmonizing of private virtue, public honor, and political power pushes Cavendish's utopia in the direction of romance. Romance, as Michael McKeon points out, "justifies the attainment of place by the ascription of internal merit. It designates a true nobility and an aristocracy of worth."¹⁷ It is precisely this romance ethos of "true nobility" that Cavendish's heroine personifies. The social value of her private virtue is celebrated publicly by all the inhabitants of the Blazing World, rulers and subjects alike; it transcends and unifies class differences. The Bear-men, the first creatures she encounters in the new world, "flockt together to see this Lady, holding up their paws in admiration"; they instantaneously "entertained her with all kindness and respect" (Part I, p. 5). When she is taken to "Paradise," the imperial realm of the Blazing World, to meet the Emperor, he not only immediately recognizes her superior personal qualities, but also makes her both his wife and his ruler, giving "her an absolute power to rule and govern all that World as she pleased" (Part I, p. 13).

Cavendish replicates her integration of personal inwardness and social outwardness in terms of gender through the confluence she creates between public "male" and private "female" spheres of her utopia. As recent critics have noted, the seemingly discontinuous demands of the new capitalist

economy, reformed and Puritan views of marriage and family, and the new scientific efforts to control “Dame Nature” converged during the mid-1600s to compel a spiritualization of women into companionate helpmeets and to force an absolute bifurcation between the public and commercial world of men and the private and domestic world of women.¹⁸ In her utopia, Cavendish cancels these new gendered demarcations between public and private by casting her heroine in a variety of “male” roles, most notably that of warrior or general. Crossdressed in her imperial garb, she is as Empress an emblem not of domestic harmony but of military prowess, a figure reminiscent of Ariosto’s Bradamante, Spenser’s Britomart, and other literary Amazons and androgynes. She also recalls Elizabeth I, England’s androgynous “Amazonian Queene.”¹⁹ In detailing the Lady’s military costume, Cavendish not only links her heroine to the female kingship of Elizabeth, who donned battle gear to review the English troops at Tilbury in 1588, but she also symbolically evokes the androgynous “body politic” of Elizabethan England and a cultural moment, unlike her own, in which the lines demarcating gender boundaries were at least partially effaced:

In her left hand she held a Buckler, to signifie the Defence of her Dominions. . . . In her right hand she carried a Spear made of a white Diamond, cut like the tail of a Blazing-star, which signified that she was ready to assault those that proved her Enemies. (Part I, p. 14)

In the second part of the text, Cavendish’s Empress leads her navy to war when she comes to the aid of her native country, vowing to “destroy all [its] Enemies before this following Night” (Part II, p. 13), a vow she fulfills by winning a tremendous sea battle. The Empress’s show of “manly” strength does not, however, simply replicate “male” acts of military aggression.²⁰ Cavendish’s female warrior is a savior not conqueror. Indeed, Cavendish goes so far as to depict her as a kind of female Christ: carried above the ocean on the heads and backs of her Fish-men, “she seemed to walk upon the face of the Water” (Part II, p. 12).

In addition to commanding the battlefield, Cavendish’s heroine takes charge of the intellectual terrain of her new kingdom. The Empress establishes and heads her own scientific college, into which she recruits her male subjects, assigning to each anthropomorphic animal species a specialized discipline: the Bear-men are her experimental philosophers, the Bird-men her astronomers, the Spider- and Lice-men her mathematicians, and so on. This scientific college resembles and critiques both the Royal Society (to which the Duchess was extended an invitation, the only woman of the period to be awarded this honor) and its utopian inspiration, Salomon’s House in Bacon’s *New Atlantis*, an academy of male Elders dedicated to

enlarging “the bounds of Human Empire over nature.”²¹ In a challenge to the patriarchal order that underpins both institutions, real and fictive, Cavendish’s scientific college subjects the male scientific community to absolute female dominion, a situation, as Sylvia Bowerbank notes, that is “improbable even in the twentieth century.”²² The Empress solicits information from her scientific workers, who do only the investigative labor of science; she then assesses their observations and experiments and draws inferences from them. Yet just as her military prowess does not simply replicate “male” aggression, so the Empress’s keen intelligence and expertise in science manifest themselves in “female” terms. While Bacon declares that he means to enlist science to enter nature “like a general who means to take possession,” Cavendish confines her heroine’s scientific interests to noninvasive speculation and reflection or to precisely the kind of learning that Bacon repudiates as “contentious”: it does not “work upon matter, [but] . . . upon itself, as the spider worketh his web, then it is endless and brings forth indeed cobwebs of larning . . . of no substance or profit.”²³

Cavendish’s heroine also takes charge of the church. Under her guardianship, the spiritual privatizing of women in her new kingdom is abolished, and her female subjects are given more public and visible modes of religious engagement. After repudiating the men of the Blazing World for forcing the women to “stay at home, and say their Prayers by themselves in their Closets” (Part I, p. 17), the Empress establishes a new uncloistered religious order for women, of which she makes herself head. Unlike her male scientists, her female novices prove themselves to have “quick wits, subtle conceptions, clear understandings, and solid judgments.” These women become “in a short time, very devout and zealous Sisters.” Cavendish’s Empress is, however, not only a Mother Superior; through her “excellent gift of Preaching” the Empress also assumes the male role of a priest (Part I, p. 60).

Cavendish’s foray into the fantastic in *Blazing World* thus allows her to envision a future world in which the rational grid that the utopia places on human culture is cast aside in favor of a magical decompartmentalizing of logically incompatible categories of experience, figured forth most notably in the Duchess’s feminist blending of “male” and “female” roles. The same fantastical rewriting of utopia, however, enables Cavendish to articulate her aristocratic nostalgia for a magical past, for some purely imagined moment in pre-Civil War England when custom, tradition, bloodline, and other nonrational justifications of monarchy and social hierarchy prevailed without contest.

To put it another way, while the magical and marvelous qualities of *Blazing World* help Cavendish to feminize utopia, they also assist her efforts to de-

Puritanize it. Puritanism, especially in its most radical modes, took as its central target of reform the sacramental and traditional constructs of religious and political authority. In an effort to demythologize the powers of church and state, Puritan reformers sought to devote themselves and the world to a rational ideal of human experience through which the mystified, unregulated repertoire of customary and ritualized cultural assumptions and practices might be replaced by a methodical, precise, and disciplined system. In the 1640s and '50s the utopia, despite its Roman Catholic antecedents in More's text, proliferated among the various radical sects, and it provided an idealized depiction of exactly this kind of rationalized cultural system. As Holstun argues, Puritan utopia "presents itself as the genre of universal (but Eurocentric) rationalization."²⁴ In reenchanting the utopia, Cavendish reclaimed the genre for the royalist side as an instrument by which the magic of monarchy, custom, and tradition, which the Puritans had tried to eradicate through utopian visions of rationalized politics, culture, and religion, could be reinstated.

That magic is most demonstrable in Cavendish's presentation of the absolutist authority of imperial sovereignty, which, like other Restoration monarchists, she associated with God-like power to wrest order from chaos. Within her heroine, Cavendish reproduces the divine or, more specifically, Christological pretenses of the restored Stuart monarchy, as exemplified in *Astraea Redux* where Dryden welcomes Charles II as Christ:

That star that at your birth shone so bright
It stain'd the duller Suns Meridian light,
Did once again its potent Fires renew,
Guiding our eyes to find and worship you.²⁵

The return of Charles as Christ to the throne was also heralded by his apologists in Christological terms as the beginning of a divinely inspired dispensation. Joseph Swetnam, a preacher from Derby, associated the triumph of Charles's monarchy over the Cromwellian republic with the silencing of the oracles at Christ's birth and the triumph of the infant Christ over the gods of paganism: "heresie and blasphemy like *Apolloes* oracles at Christ his birth being silenced."²⁶ The accession of Charles II in 1660 marked, for Swetnam, the end of sectarianism and dissent and a new divinely inspired era of union, both religious and political.

Like Swetnam's Charles, Cavendish's Empress has divine attributes: the Emperor and the citizens of the Blazing World "conceived her to be some Goddess, and offered to worship her" (Part I, p. 13). She also manifests the divinely inspired nature of her absolute sovereignty through Christ-like

abilities to quell heresy and dissent and to establish both unity and univocality. In the passage noted above, in which the Empress appears as the Saviour of her native nation (“she seemed to walk upon the face of the Water”), she silences the paralyzing confusion of her former countrymen, “so many cross and different Opinions” (Part II, p. 11), by means of her God-like presence alone:

Which sight, when her Country-men perceived at a distance, their hearts began to tremble; but coming something nearer, she left her Torches, and appeared onely in her Garments of Light, like an Angel, or some Deity, and all kneeled down before her, and worshipped her with all submission and reverence. (Part II, p. 12)

She achieves similar unanimity in the intellectual sphere by closing the scientific academy she founds when the dissonance created by the differences of opinion among her scientific workers threatens to overwhelm the unity and order of her state: she follows the counsel that “’tis better to be without their intelligences, then to have an unquiet and disorderly Government” (Part I, p. 122). The transcendent authority of Cavendish’s Empress is, in short, shrouded in the same imperial mysteriousness as the Duchess’s own king. While Cavendish’s utopian kingdom recasts the public world of men in female terms, at the same time her paradigm of female dominion closely adheres to the prevailing ethos of male sovereignty.

Cavendish’s reenchantment of utopia thus creates a new generic space capable of accommodating her desire for, in Lisa Sarasohn’s words, female “dominance within a traditional social hierarchy,” a desire embodied by the vexed figure of the female prince.²⁷ This imperial figure also informs the representation of female subjectivity in the text. For Cavendish, every woman is capable of being an absolute sovereign, at least over her inward state, where she can literally subject herself and both rule and author the domain of her own person. In Cavendish’s prefatory remarks to *Blazing World*, she describes her desire to script her own subjectivity in monarchical terms:

I am not Covetous, but as Ambitious as ever any of my Sex was, is, or can be; which makes, that though I cannot be *Henry* the Fifth, or *Charles* the Second, yet I will 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 then not to be a Mistress of one, since Fortune and the Fates would give me none, I have made a World of my own. (“To the Reader,” n. p.)

Frustrated by the strictures on her sex, Cavendish translates her ambitions for worldly power into subjective terms, seizing upon the figure of queen—and more specifically, as we have seen, on the figure of Elizabeth I—one of the few “life scripts,” as Sidonie Smith has called it, available to women in the Renaissance and Restoration as a way to articulate that subjectification.²⁸ With this self-investiture as “Margaret the First” and the inward-directed force of absolute sovereignty gained through accession to her own private seat of power, Cavendish spells her rebirth as an autonomous and self-governing woman despite the cultural constraints thwarting her worldly ambitions.

This same conception of the private self as an arena in which women can simultaneously achieve both absolute sovereignty and personal freedom also underpins Cavendish’s fictive reinscription of her person near the end of *Blazing World* when the Duchess herself enters her utopia as secretary to the Empress, to whom she announces her desire for empire. The two ladies consult the Immaterial Spirits for a way to fulfill this ambition, and they are told that while the Duchess can neither inherit nor conquer an empire, she could become an empress by creating her own subjective kingdom, in which her sovereignty would in fact be more perfect than in a worldly empire:

Why should you desire to be Empress of a material world, and be troubled with the cares that attend Government? when as by creating a World within your self, you may enjoy all both in whole and in parts, without controale or opposition; and may make what world you please, alter it when you please, and enjoy as much pleasure and delight as a world can afford you? (Part I, p. 98)

At the same time that she mimes the discourse of imperial absolutism, Cavendish converts that discourse into a celebration of the unfettered female subject.

The integrity and autonomy celebrated in the construction of subjectivity in this passage is further underscored by the originality that the “fictionalized” Duchess claims for her immaterial world. As a female realm, the microcosmic kingdom of her self can have no male antecedents: “no patterns would do her any good in the framing of her World” (Part I, p. 101). One by one, she casts aside the cosmological theories of Thales, Pythagoras, Plato, Epicurus, Aristotle, Hobbes, and Descartes as inadequate blueprints for her own subjectively crafted kingdom. Her mind is a realm complete unto itself, self-directed, self-governing, and self-begot.

This fictive image of imperial selfhood converts the “true,” modest, and retiring self-image that Cavendish constructed in her autobiography, *A True Relation of my Birth, Breeding, and Life* (1656), into a powerful, yet also problematical, paradigm of female independence.²⁹ In *A True Relation*, as

Smith has argued, Cavendish's self-inscription adheres closely to the more traditional feminine ideal in its emphasis on perfect quiescence and reclusivity.³⁰ Repeatedly emphasizing the sheltered and cloistered aspects of her personal experience, the Duchess figures her life primarily in the imagery of conventual retreat. Her childhood is staged in the enclosed space of an entirely female world, her father having died when she was an infant. Of her sisters she writes that they "did seldom make Visits, nor never went abroad with Strangers in their Company." Their self-reliance and interdependence create a spiritual sanctuary of peace and harmony: "themselves in a Flock together agreeing so well, that there seemed but one Minde amongst them" (p. 373).

This domestic sanctuary is shattered with Cavendish's entrance into the public sphere when she accepts an appointment as maid of honor to Queen Henrietta Maria at the exiled Stuart court in France. Cavendish describes herself outside the cloister of her family as painfully shy and unworldly: she "had no Foundation to stand, or Guide to direct me, which made me afraid, lest I should wander with Ignorance out of the waies of Honour, so that I knew not how to behave myself. . . . I was thought a Natural Fool, indeed I had not much Wit" (p. 374). She recreates the conventual environment of her childhood in her "not Amorous . . . [but] honest and honourable" marriage to William Cavendish (p. 375). Cavendish charts the fourteen and one-half years that she and her husband spent in exile on the Continent, though mostly in Antwerp, which she characterizes as "the most pleasantest and quietest place [for the duke] to retire himself and ruined fortunes in" (p. 379). After the Restoration, the couple retired to the northern estate of Welbeck Abbey, far from the court in London, and into another secluded, enclosed, and silent domestic space, in which she "could most willingly exclude myself, so as Never to see the face of any creature, but my Lord, as long as I live" (p. 390).

In *Blazing World* the silent and carefully circumscribed subjective space mapped out in her autobiography is reshaped into a boundless, discursive arena in which the female subject can demonstrate its unqualified singularity and verbal power as mistress over itself. Within this new utopian site Cavendish also radically reconfigures the intimate, conventual bond between her sisters as the perfect friendship between her Empress and her own fictionalized persona. If for Cavendish the female subject is absolute monarch over its inward kingdom, female friendship is the intimate pairing of two such singular, self-governing, incorporeal subjectivities. When the Duchess presents her immaterial world to the Empress, "Her Majesty was so ravished with the perception of it, that her soul desired to live in the Duchess's World," but the Duchess urges her instead to make her own spiritual kingdom (Part I, p. 101). The two ladies achieve an ideal "Platonick

Friendship” as two perfectly matched and perfectly autonomous, self-created souls:

the Emperess [s soul] imbraced and saluted her [the Duchess’s soul] with a spiritual kiss . . . and truly their meeting did produce such an intimate friendship between them that they became Platonick Lovers, although they were both Females. (Part I, pp. 90, 93)³¹

True community is represented by Cavendish as the intimate bond between self-sufficient female atoms.³²

Ironically, the same paradigm of the imperial female subject that enables this atomic theory of female friendship and community also inspires Cavendish’s fierce attacks against her own sex. Sarasohn attributes the Duchess’s antifemale diatribes to “Cavendish’s despair at her own position and that of her sex.”³³ While such despair represents an important psychological source of Cavendish’s conflicting attitudes toward women, these conflicts also result from the ideological double bind into which she is driven by her imperial model of the female subject. This model allows her to celebrate the self-sufficiency of women both as individuals and in friendship, but its close adherence to an absolutist paradigm of royal power also requires her to distance herself from other women. If the absolute sovereignty of Cavendish’s Empress gives her the autonomy to rule herself and to enjoy the “molecular” friendship I have been describing with the Duchess, who is equally autonomous, it also demands that she protect her imperial singularity by allowing no other woman “employment in Church or State” (Part I, p. 18). As a female author, Cavendish achieves in the act of writing the same imperial singularity as her Empress by replicating the paternal discourse that objectifies women as “Other,” thus distancing her from other women. In the preface to *The Worlds Olio* (1655), she refutes the claim for women’s natural equality to men, which, as we have seen, she elsewhere champions:

There is great difference betwixt the Masculine Brain and the Feminine. . . . and as great a difference there is between them as there is between the longest and strongest Willow, compared to the strongest and largest Oak.³⁴

While allowing her to depict true community as the bonding of independent female atoms, Cavendish’s imperial model of female autonomy paradoxically also inspires her antifemale arguments for male authority and control.

Cavendish’s conflicting representations of women do not, of course, all issue from the same generic and political pressure points. In her *Orations* (1668), a staged debate among different female speakers on the issue of

women's equality with men, antifemale argument serves entirely different formal and ideological functions than in *Blazing World* and in other works of Cavendish. A text that participates in what Linda Woodbridge has described as the "formal controversy" on female nature, the *Orations* presents arguments on both sides of the question of women's equality.³⁵ Some of the speakers maintain that women should "Unite in Prudent Counsels, to make our Selves as Free, Happy, and Famous, as Men"; some argue that men are "more Ingenious, VVitty, and Wise than VVomen, more strong, Industrious, and Laborious than Women, for Women are Wittless, and Strengthless, and Unprofitable Creatures."³⁶ Like many writers of such debates, Cavendish presents herself as detached from the arguments she rehearses in the *Orations*. She demonstrates her ability to refute and support women's equality with men with equal conviction, even as she suggests, as Moira Ferguson notes, that "she sympathizes with more than criticizes women and the tribulations they face."³⁷

In *Blazing World*, however, these same conflicting positions on women's nature produce greater tension in Cavendish's imperial paradigm of female subjectivity, as manifested in the text in both empress and authoress. An inviolable and unitary locus of knowledge and power, Cavendish's female subject is completely autonomous, yet capable of equitable female friendship and community; as such, it challenges the gendered relations between independence and dependence, power and weakness, public and private, which had been recently—and strictly—drawn in the Duchess's own historical moment. Informed by a patriarchal model of male sovereignty, however, the same paradigm underpins Cavendish's antifemale objectifications of "woman" and negates the ideal of female friendship and community she celebrated in *Blazing World*.

Cavendish's construction of female subjectivity and the utopian world she creates to accommodate it thus splinter under pressure of competing ideological assumptions. While her royalism and feminism converge to produce the ideal of female monarchy that she offers in *Blazing World* as a model for both social and personal experience, the Duchess's feminist desire for self-government and female community is finally undermined by her aristocratic investment in monarchy or, more precisely, by her adoption of the patriarchal ethos of absolutism that monarchy, both male and female, mystifies and enshrines.

NOTES

¹ Margaret Cavendish, *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World* (London: A. Maxwell, 1666). All references to *Blazing World* are to this edition and are noted within the text.

² Samuel Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, ed. Robert Latham and William Matthews (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), IX, 123. Cavendish was generally known to her contemporaries as “Mad Madge of Newcastle” (*The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, VIII, 163, n. 3). In a letter to William Temple dated April 1653, Dorothy Osborne writes of Cavendish: “the poor woman is a little distracted.” She elaborated upon that statement in May of the same year when she claimed, after reading Cavendish’s first volume of poetry, that “there are many soberer People in Bedlam,” in *Letters to Sir William Temple*, ed. Kenneth Parker (London: Penguin Books, 1987), p. 73. John Evelyn’s wife, Mary, describes Cavendish’s conversation as “airy, empty, whimsical and rambling . . . terminating in nonsense, oaths, and obscenity,” in “A Letter to Mr. Bohum,” *Diary and Correspondence of John Evelyn*, ed. William Bray (London: M. W. Dunne, 1910), pp. 731–32.

In our own century, Virginia Woolf says that Cavendish’s writings are shaped by “a vision of loneliness and riot . . . as if some giant cucumber had spread itself over all the roses and carnations in the garden and choked them to death.” For Woolf, Cavendish had “a wild, generous, untutored intelligence, but she frittered her time away scribbling nonsense and plunging deeper into obscurity and folly,” in *A Room of One’s Own* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1934), pp. 106, 107.

The last ten years have seen a significant increase in serious inquiry into the Duchess’s writings. See Sylvia Bowerbank, “The Spider’s Delight: Margaret Cavendish and the ‘Female’ Imagination,” *English Literary Renaissance*, 14, No. 3 (1984), 392–408; James Fitzmaurice, “Fancy and Family: Self-Characterizations of Margaret Cavendish,” *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 53, No. 3 (1990), 198–209; Catherine Gallagher, “Embracing the Absolute: The Politics of the Female Subject in Seventeenth-Century England,” *Genders*, 1 (Spring 1988), 24–39; Sara H. Mendelson, *The Mental World of Stuart Women: Three Studies* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987); Delores Paloma, “Margaret Cavendish: Defining the Female Self,” *Women’s Studies*, 7, No. 1–2 (1980), 55–66; Linda R. Payne, “Dramatic Dreamscape: Women’s Dreams and Utopian Vision in the Works of Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle,” in *Curtain Calls: British and American Women and the Theater, 1660–1820*, ed. Mary Anne Schofield and Cecilia Macheski (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1991), pp. 18–33; Jacqueline Pearson, “‘Women may discourse . . . as well as Men’: Speaking and Silent Women in the Plays of Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle,” *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature*, 4, No. 1 (1985), 33–46; Lisa T. Sarasohn, “A Science Turned Upside Down: Feminism and the Natural Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish,” *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 47, No. 4 (1984), 289–307; Hilda Smith, *Reason’s Disciples: Seventeenth-Century English Feminists* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), among other recent titles. In none of these studies, however, does *Blazing World* receive sustained attention.

³ Frank E. and Fritzie P. Manuel, *Utopian Thought in the Western World* (Cambridge: Belknap-Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 7.

⁴ J. C. Davis, *Utopia and the Ideal Society: A Study of English Utopian Writing 1516–1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). Elisabeth Hansot, *Perfection and Progress: Two Modes of Utopian Thought* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1974); George Kateb, *Utopia and Its Enemies* (London: Collier-Macmillan, 1963); Melvin J.

Lasky, *Utopia and Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976) also contain no commentary on *Blazing World*.

⁵ Bowerbank, p. 402; Marjorie Hope Nicholson, *Voyages to the Moon* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1948), p. 224.

⁶ See Rosalie Colie, *The Resources of Kind: Genre-Theory in the Renaissance*, ed. Barbara K. Lewalski (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), and Lewalski, ed., *Renaissance Genres: Essays on Theory, History, and Interpretation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), on the ideological and ethical implications of genre and counter-genre formation in the Renaissance.

⁷ Davis, p. 371.

⁸ James Holstun, *A Rational Millennium: Puritan Utopias of Seventeenth-Century England and America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 69, 67.

⁹ Cavendish, "The Preface to the Reader," *The Worlds Olio* (London: J. Martin and J. Allestrye, 1655), n. p.

¹⁰ Gallagher, p. 25.

¹¹ Gallagher, p. 32.

¹² Gallagher, p. 33.

¹³ See Tzvetan Todorov's discussion of "the genre of the marvelous" in *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), pp. 41-58, for analysis of the generic implications of the nonrational conceptual categories that govern the structure of fantasy literature.

¹⁴ Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, I (London: Everyman-J.M. Dent, 1932), 100.

¹⁵ Gabriel Plattes, *A Description of the Famous Kingdom of Macaria* (London: F. Constable, 1641). The authorship of this text is of some dispute. While the STC lists Samuel Hartlib as the author, recent scholars, most notably Charles Webster in *Utopian Planning and the Puritan Revolution: Gabriel Plattes, Samuel Hartlib and "Macaria"* (Oxford: Research Publications of the Wellcome Unit for the History of Medicine, 1979), have argued convincingly for Plattes as author. I have followed Webster in attributing the text to Plattes.

¹⁶ Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashionings: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 44.

¹⁷ Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel 1600-1740* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), p. 143. As a kind of romance heroine Cavendish's Lady closely resembles Spenser's Una, whose perfect virtue similarly inspires public acclaim and merits courtly devotion and regal title in a mythological kingdom. After saving Una from the rapacious Sansloy, the fauns and satyrs of the "forrest wilde" prostrate themselves before her and "Do kisse her feete, and fawne on her with count'nance faine" and "Do worship her, as Queene, with oliue girlond croud," in *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A. C. Hamilton (London and New York: Longman, 1977), I, vi, 12-13.

¹⁸ Joan Kelly-Gadol maintains that "a new division between personal and public life made itself felt as the state came to organize Renaissance society, and with that division the modern relation of the two sexes made its appearance," in "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, ed. Renate

Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1977), pp. 139–64. See also Jean Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman: Women in Social and Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), chapter 3, and Roberta Hamilton, *The Liberation of Women: A Study of Patriarchy and Capitalism* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1978).

¹⁹ James Aske, *Elizabetha Triumphan* (London, 1588), quoted in Leah S. Marcus, *Puzzling Shakespeare: Local Reading and Its Discontents* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 63. Marcus discusses the cultural implications of Elizabeth I's androgynous sovereignty in chapter 2.

²⁰ Delores Paloma makes a similar point in connection with Cavendish's plays in "Margaret Cavendish: Defining the Female Self," p. 57.

²¹ Francis Bacon, *Works*, ed. James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis, and Douglas Denon Heath, III (London: Longman and Company, 1859), 156. See Samuel I. Mintz, "The Duchess of Newcastle's Visit to the Royal Society," *Journal of English and German Philology*, 51, No. 2 (1952), 168–76.

²² Bowerbank, p. 403.

²³ Bacon, *Works*, IV, 23; III, 285–86. See Bowerbank for an illuminating study of the figure of the spider in Cavendish's work as a metaphor for her approach to knowledge and writing.

²⁴ Holstun, p. 21; my debt throughout this discussion of Puritanism is to Holstun's provocative study of Puritanism and utopia.

²⁵ John Dryden, *Poems*, ed. James Kinsley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), I, 23, ll. 288–91.

²⁶ Joseph Swetnam, *David's Devotions upon his Deliverances* (London, 1660), p. 8, quoted in David Quint, "David's Census: Milton's Politics and *Paradise Regained*," in *Re-membering Milton: Essays on the Texts and Traditions*, ed. Mary Nyquist and Margaret W. Ferguson (New York: Methuen, 1988), p. 133. See Quint's discussion of Swetnam's text, pp. 132–33.

²⁷ Sarasohn, p. 301.

²⁸ Sidonie Smith, *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 31.

²⁹ *A True Relation of my Birth, Breeding, and Life* appears as a section of Cavendish's *Natures Pictures Drawn By Fancies Pencil* (London: F. Martin and F. Allestrye, 1656), pp. 368–91. All references to *A True Relation* are to this edition and are noted within the text.

³⁰ I am indebted in this discussion to Smith's theoretical approach to women's autobiography in *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography* and to her application of that approach to Cavendish's *A True Relation* (chapter 3).

³¹ The version of this passage in the later edition of *The Blazing World* (London: A. Maxwell, 1668), "the Empress's Soul embrac'd and kiss'd the Duchess's Soul with an Immaterial Kiss. . . finding her not a flattering Parasite, but a true Friend" (Part I, p. 121), focuses on patronage and friendship rather than, as in the 1666 text, on the sexuality of the two female friends and spiritual lovers.

³² This view of friendship may reflect her atomistic theory of physical matter, which Sarasohn describes as "very extreme" (pp. 291, 297) but which Cavendish came to repudiate as a justification for political anarchy.

³³ Sarasohn, p. 298.

³⁴ Cavendish, "The Preface to the Reader," *The Worlds Olio*, n. p.

³⁵ Linda Woodbridge, *Women and the English Renaissance: Literature and the Nature of Womankind, 1540–1620* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), Part I.

³⁶ Cavendish, *Orations of Divers Sorts, Accommodated to Divers Places* (London: n. p., 1662), pp. 225, 227–28.

³⁷ Moira Ferguson, "A 'Wise, Wittie and Learned Lady': Margaret Lucas Cavendish," in *Women Writers of the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Katharina M. Wilson and Frank J. Warnke (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989), p. 314.