

## Politics, Authorship, and Philosophy: Teaching Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World* in the Diverse Graduate Classroom

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## Politics, Authorship, and Philosophy: Teaching Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World* in the Diverse Graduate Classroom

### Abstract

This essay explores how Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World* works differently when taught and read on its own and in combination with Cavendish's other works. Focusing specifically on the graduate classroom, I examine and present strategies for teaching the book alongside works by other early modern women and for teaching it in a single-author course. While in isolation, *The Blazing World* allows for discussions that focus primarily on questions of gender, genre, class, and politics, read in tandem with Cavendish's other works, in particular her philosophical writings, *The Blazing World* becomes a source for reflections on questions of creaturely identity, nature, and interdisciplinarity.

### Keywords

Literature, Margaret Cavendish, Novel, Philosophy, Teaching

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The richly layered nature of Margaret Cavendish's most important work, *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World* (1666), is never more obviously in evidence than in the college classroom.<sup>1</sup> This unusual, much-studied novel combines a wide range of genres and concerns. Starting as a romance, it quickly moves into science fiction and utopia to become an imaginative work of natural philosophy and finally a political fantasy. For this reason, the book allows for discussion of many subjects that are relevant in the classroom, from the scientific revolution to same-sex desire and from royal absolutism to early modern discourses of race and ecology. It comes with fascinating paratextual materials that inspire discussions of early modern authorship and the relationship between reason and what Cavendish calls "fancy." Because of the many possible directions in which the text takes us, it is extremely useful for teaching and it deserves a place as the culminating work on any syllabus, whether in a survey, a course on early modern women writers, a course that pairs Cavendish with another author (like John Milton), or in a single-author course that concentrates on Cavendish alone.

Over the past fifteen years, I have taught *The Blazing World* in different courses at California State University, Long Beach, a large, Hispanic-serving public institution with a highly diverse student body. Our English department serves both undergraduates (the majority of whom go on to become middle or high school teachers) and MA students, who are evenly split between those who are currently teaching, those who aspire to teach at a community college, and those who plan to apply for a PhD program. Many students find Cavendish, with her self-depiction as a "natural" rather than a classically educated thinker, more accessible than her contemporaries. I have taught the novel in three different courses at the graduate level, though the framing and pedagogical use of the novel detailed below would also work well in senior-level undergraduate courses. In each of these courses, I have used the Broadview edition, edited by Sara Mendelson, either as found in the anthology *Paper Bodies*, co-edited by Mendelson and Sylvia Bowerbank, or in its expanded and updated single edition by Mendelson. Both versions feature additional selections, such as Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1627), an informative introduction, and helpful footnotes.<sup>2</sup> In what follows, I argue that *The Blazing World* is strikingly adaptable to varying teaching contexts and discuss its place in three graduate-level courses in turn.

### **The age of Milton seminar**

My first experience teaching *The Blazing World* many years ago was in my graduate seminar "Literature in the Age of Milton." The class culminates in about six weeks of reading *Paradise Lost*, a text most students are eager to get to,

having read and often loved the poem as undergraduates. Before we arrive at Milton, we discuss important contemporaries. I have varied the syllabus over the years I've taught the course, which sometimes highlights canonical readings such as the poems of John Donne and Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* and at other times includes women writers (using the excellent edition of *Women Poets of the English Civil War* by Sarah Ross and Elizabeth Scott Baumann). I like to assign *The Blazing World* as the last text before we get to *Paradise Lost* so that Cavendish's novel can speak to and inform our reading of the epic directly. Especially in versions of the course that concentrate on the English Civil Wars, Cavendish represents a strong royalist counterweight to Milton's republicanism. While gender is the subject of much of our comparison, the juxtaposition of Milton and Cavendish also enables the class to explore each author's complex stances on the philosophical, scientific, political, and religious controversies of the period.

*The Blazing World* and *Paradise Lost* take their inspiration from the genres of romance and travel narratives, show an investment in scientific debates (including the subjects of atoms and astronomy), and are partly set in Paradise, while displaying a controversial ambition in terms of authorship—Milton for poetically rewriting the bible and Cavendish for being a woman writer who desires fame. I invite students to consider how in each text, a protagonist (Adam in *Paradise Lost*, the Empress in *The Blazing World*) gets to ask questions of a knowledgeable interlocutor (Rafael and the animal men and the spirits), allowing us to think about the nature of the questions they ask and the limits of what they are allowed to know. Practically, we list the questions that are being asked, and students divide into groups that focus on categories of questions and answers, such as questions on theology and questions on science. In *The Blazing World*, the Empress asks her many theological questions of the spirits, enabling Cavendish to articulate her skepticism about human knowledge of God, at least as detected through reason. The striking disappearance of the spirits and their unwillingness to answer certain questions about God can be fruitfully compared with Milton's hesitation to depict God as a character in the poem (e.g., "May I express thee unblamed?"; *Paradise Lost*, 3.3) and Rafael's depiction of certain types of knowledge as off-limits (8.167–177). In both, the concept of God raises more questions than answers.

More specifically, students are often interested in learning about the scientific revolution and the different debates about astronomy, articulated in both *The Blazing World* and *Paradise Lost*. Milton's description of warring atoms in book 2 (2.898–906) can be compared with Cavendish's complex relation to atomism both in her earlier poetry and in the novel, while his use of Lucretius in

constructing a creation narrative (7.276ff) contrasts with Cavendish's satirical commentary on Epicurus as the thinker behind an imaginary world (*Paper Bodies* 214). Milton's emphasis on creation as procreation and his introduction of feminine metaphors into Genesis may be juxtaposed with Cavendish's striking lack of reflection on procreation and motherhood. Particularly in a course in which Milton is paired with women writers, Cavendish's sudden and fleeting mention of the Empress's eldest son only in the context of who gets to wear jewels (*Paper Bodies* 62) is remarked on by students, who see similarities between Cavendish's apparent disinterest when it comes to maternity and Eve's reluctance about being "call'd / Mother of human race" (4.474–75).

A reading of Catherine Gallagher's by-now classic essay on the novel as an expression of the royalist female author's "absolute self" helps generate discussions on the impact of politics on identity and the relevance of gender to authority. Milton's anti-absolutism, often linked to his description of Satan as an earthly emperor or exotic sultan who aspires to the kind of power only God should have, can be usefully read alongside Cavendish's emphasis on singular rule and religion. Furthermore, Cavendish's sense of women as "no subjects" and therefore freer than men is strikingly similar to Milton's depiction of Eve as "so absolute" (8.547) that she appears to need no authority figure.<sup>3</sup> We may complicate Gallagher's approach to Cavendish as an author who wrote in isolation with Rachel Trubowitz's argument on *The Blazing World* as a dialogue with others, a "canny revision of the utopian social paradigm, driven by the competing demands of the Duchess's radical feminism and social conservatism" (229), to uncover how both Cavendish and Milton problematize assumptions of the utopian genre and construct tensions between female subjectivity and patriarchal authority.

Other points of contact also become the subject of class discussion, depending on what students are interested in. Milton and Cavendish were both fascinated by ideas of mixing and mixture, employing alchemical metaphors while commenting negatively on alchemy (for instance in *Paradise Lost* 3.599–605 and *Paper Bodies* 185). Additionally, Cavendish's long section on the reversal of aging using a substance akin to the elixir suggests her interest in alchemy as a thought experiment, a subject that can be particularly productively explored if students are also reading Jonson's *The Alchemist* and Donne's "Love's Alchemy." Finally, Milton's descriptions of the War in Heaven with its magnificently violent moments of pointless destruction and particularly his poetically impressive description of the final defeat of the rebellious angels by the Son (6.746–866) can be read alongside Cavendish's descriptions of the victories of the gloriously powerful Empress in the second book of *The Blazing World* (*Paper Bodies* 235–

45). While students are sometimes taken aback by the glorification of extreme violence in both, Cavendish's explicit presentation of the Empress's power as theatrical, driven by the help of her Fish-men, inspires us to question the depictions of absolute rule and physical domination in Milton. How theatrical is the Son's arrival on the chariot? Perhaps we, the readers of Milton's poem, end up questioning his meaning as much as the onlookers do Cavendish's Empress's significance when they debate her status: "some said she was an Angel; others, she was a Sorceress; some believed her a Goddess; others said the Devil deluded them in the shape of a fine Lady" (*Paper Bodies* 238).

Paper topics for this class have included absolutism in *The Blazing World*, *Paradise Lost*, and *Tenure of Kings*; representations of war in the novel and the epic; and depictions of marriage in Milton and Cavendish (along with Milton's divorce pamphlets). I can also imagine longer projects on their creative responses to the scientific revolution and on representations of God. Assignments could require engagement with criticism that compares the two, such as work by Shannon Miller, Lara Dodds, and Stephen Hequembourg. Whereas Miller examines the relation of both Milton and Cavendish to the new science through their depictions of Eve, Dodds takes us to some of their earlier works to show that Cavendish probably read and imitated Milton's early poetry. Hequembourg explores the limits of the monist materialism that underpins their approach to the world and shows how it affects their conceptions of poetic creation. The work of these scholars shows how comparative explorations of Milton and Cavendish can unfold and stimulates reflection on the connections between the two.

### **The seminar on early modern women**

In my graduate course on early modern women, we read Cavendish towards the end of the semester, after having encountered the full generic variety of women's writing, from poems, plays, and letters to mother's legacies, recipe books, and prophecy. Questions of authorship, genre, textual production, and editing are the basis of much discussion, alongside the themes of social class, race, gender, sexuality, and motherhood. This class departs from the Milton seminar in that I experiment with hands-on and experiential learning as students engage in paleography, read recipe books and letters, and write, edit, and "publish" blog posts. While the semester ends with a traditional research essay, the blog posts familiarize them with more popular modes of writing. Each student writes two blog posts on one woman or one theme, text, poem, recipe, pamphlet, or letter. These posts have to discuss an author or a work that is not on the syllabus, using Laura Lunger Knoppers's *The Cambridge Companion to Early Modern Women's Writing* for inspiration. They should inform general readers of the existing

research but also find an angle that is relatively original and interesting while offering at least some close readings of women's writing. The blog is not published officially, but students access each other's posts, and they enhance class discussion generally. While the logistics can be tricky, it is a valuable exercise that creates a sense of a scholarly community in the classroom. Where Cavendish is concerned, working on and with each other's research on a wide variety of female-authored texts allows us to see both how she builds on the writings of other women and her individual, often unconventional ways of addressing the concerns she shares with them.

Cavendish's poems, letters, orations, and autobiography are all included (in full or excerpted) on the syllabus. *The Blazing World* features in a section on prose fiction along with selections from Mary Wroth's *Urania* and a reading of the chapter "Women, the Material Book and Early Printing," by Marcy North, which usefully surveys the presence of early modern women's writing in the book trade and discusses the formats in which women's writing appeared. In this context, publication and authorship become topics for discussion, and Cavendish's self-representation both in the paratexts and in the fiction itself, along with questions of same-sex desire and marriage, are central.

Given our focus in this course on how women's writings were textually transmitted and the presence of numerous print and manuscript sources on the syllabus, we explore the significance of Cavendish's status as a print author of high social status. North's discussion, which only mentions Cavendish briefly, shows how unusual the folio format was for women writers. She calls the "authorship model" associated with Cavendish and Aphra Behn not applicable to "the vast majority of women authors" or to large numbers of male authors (68–69). North also highlights the extent to which folio publication by Cavendish, Wroth, and Elizabeth Cary must have looked "all the more transgressive to their detractors, not just because women were using print, but because they were choosing a grandiose (even provocative) format" (71).

The print history of *The Blazing World*, as Liza Blake has explained, is complex. While the work was twice included as an appendix to *Observations of Natural Philosophy* (in 1666 and 1668), it was also printed in a separate version. The former includes the frequently reprinted preface to the reader, in which she explains why she has appended a work of fiction (or "fancy") to her philosophical tract, anticipating possible objections. The latter, by contrast, includes an address "To all Noble and Worthy Ladies," in which Cavendish explains that this separate publication stands alone because "most Ladies take no delight in Philosophical Arguments" (1668, n.p.). Comparisons of the two forms in which the text appears

help us examine Cavendish's varying self-presentation as an author, a discussion that is enriched by close readings of her frontispieces. We see, as Blake puts it, "how Cavendish was packaging her book differently for different audiences, and how she understood the function of the *Blazing World* differently as its own piece, and as a piece attached or 'joined' to her treatise" (5). These paratexts allow for both textual and visual engagement with paratexts (or their absence) in publications by other women writers, as we trace the various personae that women could adopt in print. Emerging discourses of authorship can thus be mapped onto Cavendish's works.

Along with an analysis of Cavendish's self-presentation, the paratextual materials also direct us to an analysis of the presence of William Cavendish and his endorsement and authorization of his wife's authorship, a subject Valerie Billing explores in her essay on *The Convent of Pleasure* for this collection.<sup>4</sup> Students are often interested in comparing Margaret and William as they appear paratextually and in the fiction itself, where Margaret has a dual presence as the Empress and as "herself," a scribe to the Empress and thus in service to another version of herself. The Platonic love between the Empress and Margaret, as expressed in their Platonic kiss and the triangular relationship with William, can also be connected to the homoeroticism of Katherine Philips's poetry and the imaginative and political uses to which such queer presentations can be put in early modern women's writing.

### **The single-author seminar**

The approaches to *The Blazing World* enumerated above are all relevant in the single-author seminar, but coming at the end of a semester of reading many of Cavendish's works, the discussion is deepened in a different way. Connections between the novel and Cavendish's politics can be made based on a reading of her poems, her *Life of William*, and her autobiographical *A True Relation of My Birth, Breeding, and Life* (*Paper Bodies* 41–63); authorial self-presentation can be traced over the course of her long career; and queerness can be discussed in relation to her drama, especially to *The Convent of Pleasure*, as Billing explains in her essay on teaching the play to undergraduates. I have taught this course once, in the online format due to the COVID-19 pandemic. One way in which we situate Cavendish's texts in their contemporary contexts is through presentations in which students discuss the work of a contemporary. These writings are thematically related to what we are reading by Cavendish, and they highlight one or two quotations to allow the entire class to engage in the discussion. Students present on other women writers, but also on authors like Ben Jonson, Francis Bacon, René Descartes, Thomas Hobbes, and Henry More. All this helps us to



realize the extent to which Cavendish's works engage with philosophical and creative debates of the seventeenth century.

The main difference between teaching the novel in courses with multiple authors and in a single-author course is our full encounter with Cavendish's interdisciplinarity. In no other course has the class been as interested in the Empress's dialogues with the members of her varying societies, whose racialized make-up is related to her philosophy in a helpful essay we read by Sujata Iyengar (more on this below). This is largely because we prepare for our readings of the novel by reading large selections from the Broadview edition of *Grounds of Natural Philosophy*, edited by Anne Thell. While the novel originally appeared appended to her *Observations*, I opted for *Grounds* instead because of this edition, which is both relatively affordable (always a major concern for my students) and excellently edited, with a very informative introduction. Rather than concentrating on literary concerns, we acquaint ourselves with the different kinds of questions philosophers ask of texts and more specifically with the nature of Cavendish's interventions in philosophical debates of her time. Readings include the highly accessible chapter on creatures in Deborah Boyle's *Well-Ordered Universe* as well as Liza Blake's excellent 2017 essay on *Grounds*, in which she discusses Cavendish's approach to disciplinary separation, using the very concept of the creature, discussed by Boyle at length, to argue that Cavendish finds new ways of combining, rather than separating, disciplines. In a short-paper assignment, students are asked to relate *Grounds* to any other work by Cavendish we have read (and this comes before we read *The Blazing World*), using Boyle or Blake or another work of criticism on *Grounds*. Students write on a wide range of subjects, from broader topics such as the depiction of nature in *Grounds* and *Poems and Fancies* and her paratextual self-presentation in *Grounds* and *Sociable Letters* to more specific ones such as her approach to the body and self-love in *Grounds* and *True Relation*.

Encountering *The Blazing World* with an understanding, however rudimentary, of Cavendish's natural philosophy means that students can move beyond disciplinary boundaries to ask new questions of the literary text. For example, in a group assignment in class, students look at a particular type of creature (bird man, bear man, and so on) and connect the question-and-answer sessions of the Empress with a section from *Grounds*, to consider the disciplinary implications of a representation that uses reason versus one that uses fancy. We also spend a class session watching and responding to a presentation by Beatrice Bradley held in one of the Online Olio sessions organized by members of the International Margaret Cavendish Society. Bradley's talk focuses on Cavendish's philosophical speculation on the existence of "restoring beds," in which bodies can be restored

to youth, in the Appendix to *Grounds* and the representation of the reversal of aging in *The Blazing World*. She models how literary scholars might approach the philosophical and the literary text, bridging the gap between reason and fancy, and, as Blake suggests, showing that we can take our cue from Cavendish in our approach to disciplinarity by considering how one may interact with another (16-17). Final essays for the course can use *Grounds* to apply concepts like irregularity, motion, and the creature to our literary readings, to formulate original and interesting arguments.

## Challenges

Essays on teaching tend to highlight success stories and model productive strategies in the classroom. I have done that here, but I would also like to offer a brief reflection on the challenges in presenting Cavendish's work to students at a diverse university in the twenty-first century. The main obstacle in reading and discussing Cavendish for my students is her status as an aristocratic white woman, which potentially alienates them from her work and can cause a reluctance to engage with it all. Some students, understandably, view Cavendish as an out-of-touch eccentric lady whose ideas are purely a product of class privilege. Adding additional readings on women's experiences during the Civil Wars to the syllabus, such as excerpts from a book like Ann Hughes's *Gender and the English Revolution*, may in future help students get further context for Cavendish's situation, though their concerns with her elitism and racism are likely to persist, and rightly so.

When it comes to Cavendish's whiteness and racism, foundational and more recent scholarship on early modern women and race can provide helpful avenues for class discussion. Iyengar's article offers a solid introduction to early modern definitions of race, showing that there is a wider historical and scientific context for Cavendish's use of men with various skin colors in the novel. Read in conjunction with Cristina Malcolmson's chapter on race in *The Blazing World* and the short but crucial section of the second edition of *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* on Blackness (Sig. Q4v-R1r), students can see that Cavendish's exact position on the question of race, both in the novel and in her philosophy, is a topic for scholarly debate. They can begin to address questions such as how race is represented differently in generically divergent contexts, how race is related to Cavendish's utopianism as well as her scientific investments, and how class and race bias intersect. Other scholarship, such as Kim Hall's *Things of Darkness* and Urvashi Chakravarty's recent essay on women and slavery in *Renaissance Quarterly*, while not directly on Cavendish, nonetheless impresses on us the need to focus not just on those figures in Cavendish's novel

that are marked off as non-white but also to explore Cavendish's own whiteness and that of the leading women in her book. Students may learn to appreciate that broad labeling of a work or a writer as racist is not where interpretation ends and that we need to read closely to understand the different forms that thinking on race took in the seventeenth century, to place Cavendish's work in the longer history of race-making in relation to gender and class.

While it is imperative to acknowledge and explore Cavendish's unquestionable elitism, her racism, and her often maddeningly contradictory statements, it is also important to appreciate her radically new ideas and the way she challenges our expectations and assumptions about consistency, reason, empathy, and literary aesthetics. I like to point out that engaging with literature is not necessarily about finding a reflection of your own world and ideas but should also involve a deep exploration of the worlds, values, thoughts, and emotions of people who are utterly different from you. Still, the potential problems with reading Cavendish in a twenty-first-century classroom were most difficult to overcome in the single-author seminar, probably because I started the semester with Cavendish's autobiography and her *Life of William*, both of which were perceived by some students as overly defensive and elitist. These texts remain important to an understanding of Cavendish's politics and personal history as well as her generic experimentation, but in the future, I will likely opt to place them later in the semester, instead perhaps beginning with her *Poems and Fancies*, to familiarize students with the range of different ideas in her work before encountering her biography.

Each class works differently, of course, but in the case of the single-author seminar I taught in 2021, the philosophy eventually helped students open their minds to what Cavendish has to offer. Not only did they take her philosophy seriously, but they also enjoyed discussing it and felt encouraged to see the connections between Cavendish's texts. This was a surprising outcome to me: I was least familiar with her philosophical writing and worried that it might be too dense and difficult for us as a group. Instead, it turns out that having read *Grounds*, the students were ready to close read the sections of *The Blazing World* that are usually hardest to teach and interested in discovering for themselves the relations between reason and fancy that Cavendish establishes throughout her oeuvre.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> This essay contributes to Part I of the “Concise Collection on Teaching the Works of Margaret Cavendish,” guest edited by E Mariah Spencer, *Aphra Behn Online*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2024. To read the essays in this collection, follow this link: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/abo/vol14/iss1/>. Part II will be published in Fall 2024.

<sup>2</sup> For undergraduates, particularly in a survey class, it can be a disadvantage that this edition uses original spelling. Even though Cavendish’s writing is accessible, when paired with male authors, this editorial practice can give the impression that her writing is more flawed than that of authors like John Milton, who are invariably given a modernized edition. For graduate students, some explicit discussion by the editor of her editorial practices and the book’s textual history would have been helpful, especially considering the new work that is being done in this field by Liza Blake (2021).

<sup>3</sup> Cavendish’s description of women as positioned outside of the legal and political system and therefore outside of normal notions of subjectivity is articulated in one of her *Sociable Letters*, which are also on the syllabus. Cf. *Paper Bodies*, 66.

<sup>4</sup> For interesting scholarship on this collaboration, see Jeffrey Masten, Alexandra Bennet, and Valerie Billing.

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