

"A World of her own Invention": Teaching Margaret Cavendish's *Blazing World* in the Early British Literature Survey and Beyond

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Abstract

Margaret Cavendish has only recently been included in the canonical literature anthologies and even then, the samplings of her prolific writings are severely truncated. However, even this small taste of Cavendish's poems and excerpts of *A Description of a New World called The Blazing World* leave early British literature survey students hungry for more. Frequently, students in the survey choose to focus on Cavendish's writing for their research projects in which they practice feminist and queer readings and engage with Cavendish as a key player in utopian and science fiction genres. Beyond the survey course, *Blazing World* works wonderfully in courses focused on Renaissance Utopias as well as transhistorical utopian and dystopian fiction and serves as the perfect frame text for literature and gender courses that focus on female world making. In the gender and literature course, *Blazing World* pairs excellently with more contemporary and intersectional feminist world makers including Octavia Butler, Toni Morrison, and Alison Bechdel.

Keywords

Romance, Utopia, Gender, Science Fiction, Teaching

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I have been teaching Margaret Cavendish in literature courses for over a decade and while I have highlighted her plays in special topics courses, her utopian romance *A Description of a New World called The Blazing World* (*Blazing World*), recently excerpted in anthologies, has become a central text in my early British survey courses and beyond.¹ I currently teach at a predominantly white R2 institution in the Midwest and the majority of my classes are comprised of upper-division English majors, most of whom are from our geographical region and many of whom are first-generation college students. Stylistically, *Blazing World* challenges my students, especially with lengthy sentences and paragraphs. However, they are still drawn to Cavendish's eccentricities and innovations, particularly within the patriarchal context of the early British literature canon. I reserve about six hours within a sixteen-week course to devote to Cavendish and *Blazing World*. Despite the limited space, *Blazing World* tends to resonate through the rest of the semester, and often becomes a primary text for research papers.

Most of this essay will detail how *Blazing World* fits into the early modern British survey course and the types of connections and discoveries students might make because of its inclusion. I will then provide two examples of how the generically hybrid text can fit within more focused courses, specifically a seventeenth-century British literature course devoted to "Renaissance Utopias" and a Literature and Gender course in which *Blazing World* helps establish a continuum of literary women worldmakers and furthers the aim of making space for women in genres and subgenres often perceived as male dominated. In these courses, I recommend a full version of the text such as Sara H. Mendelson's 2016 Broadview edition, which I make available to my survey students when they want to explore and engage with the text more fully.

Cavendish in/and the canon and *Blazing World* summary

Margaret Cavendish has only recently been included in the canonical literature anthologies and even then, the samplings of her prolific writings are severely truncated. *The Norton Anthology of Sixteenth- and Early Seventeenth-Century British Literature* includes an exceptionally brief excerpt of *Blazing World* with a couple of poems from *Poems and Fancies*, and an excerpt from *A True Relation of my Birth, Breeding, and Life*. The *Broadview Anthology of British Literature* (Concise Edition, Volume A) pairs a slightly fuller excerpt of *Blazing World* alongside a selection of Cavendish's poems and letters. Despite these bite-sized offerings, even this small taste of Cavendish has left many students hungry for more. Indeed, when taught in a survey course, *Blazing World* has become a gateway text to recruit students into courses ranging from early modern English

topics courses to literature and gender courses devoted to discussing women's worldbuilding and gendered spaces.

Because *Blazing World* has only been recently offered canonical billing, I will provide a brief plot summary. In her letter "To the Reader," Cavendish justifies adding this "Piece of Fancy" to her "Philosophical Observations" to "delight her reader with variety" and she suggests that her work is divided into three parts: the first "Romantical," the second "Philosophical," and the third "Fantastical" (Broadview 59).² She then begins with the tale of a beautiful woman abducted by a love-sick merchant and his ship full of men. In a tempest, the ship is blown off course towards the North Pole. All on board freeze to death except the young woman who is saved by the "light of her Beauty, warmth of her Youth, and the Protection of the Gods" (61). The ship crosses the North Pole into the eponymous Blazing World where the woman meets the Bear-men and other hybrid inhabitants and their Emperor. She quickly becomes Empress. The romance then transitions into the philosophical as the new Empress explores the utopian world and interrogates the animal-men about their government, religious beliefs and practices, as well as the natural sciences and philosophies. The Empress then employs the soul of The Duchess of Newcastle (Cavendish herself) as her scribe in her attempts to make a Cabala. The Duchess ultimately advises a poetical approach, and then expresses the desire to govern her own world. Rejecting male models, she settles on creating her own world of the mind. The end of the first part of *Blazing World* then drifts into the fantastical as the women return together to the Duchess's beleaguered seventeenth-century England. Then, in part two, the narrative fully embraces the fantastical as the Empress spectacularly returns to her native land, dressed as a deity and leading an armada to save her former home from attack.

The variety with which Cavendish proclaims to delight her readers, and the blending of genres and forms make *Blazing World* a particularly dynamic text to study in the early British literature survey course and beyond.

***Blazing World* in the early British survey course**

While there are pros and cons to using an anthology, the addition of *Blazing World* (1666) within the respective Norton and Broadview anthologies devoted to early British literature has made that choice a bit easier for the early British survey, which often necessitates sampling. Furthermore, it works well with themes of nation building and sovereignty as umbrella categories to consider depictions of class, race, and gender dynamics. Ideally, students will also begin to interrogate the very canon associated with such survey courses. *The Broadview*

Anthology offers a glimpse into how women punctuate a white male canon at once playing within generic and thematic traditions and sometimes pushing against them. Cavendish now takes her place within a small but fierce contingent of women writers including Marie de France, Margery Kempe, Elizabeth I, Mary Queen of Scots, Amelia Lanyer, and Aphra Behn. We can certainly group these women together to compare representations of gender and topics that are historically associated with women writers. However, these women are all also placing themselves within and playing with the male traditions that define early British literature.

The *Broadview* excerpt of *Blazing World* includes a portion of Cavendish's letter "To the Reader" focused on the three-part generic division of romance, philosophy, and fantasy cited above. In the passages that follow, we find the basic story of the young woman's abduction, eventual arrival in the *Blazing World*, and quick marriage to the emperor. This is followed by her introduction to its inhabitants and first impressions of their government and religious practices. The final two excerpts focus on the Empress soliciting the Duchess of Newcastle as her scribe, after which they create their own worlds.

A fruitful first exercise to open a discussion of *Blazing World* can involve asking students to track the categories Cavendish delineates in her opening letter within the excerpt. Where do they locate the "Romantical," the "Philosophical," and "Fantastical" and how do these potentially overlap? Arguably, the fantastical portion, which involves journeys back to the Duchess's and Empress's native lands, respectively, has been left out of the excerpt, and requires some explanation; however, the students will most likely point to the colorful inhabitants and animal-men hybrids in the philosophical section as fantastical elements of the narrative, and this allows them to see more fully the way the genres blend. For example, they will have encountered supernatural and fantastical descriptions of foreign kingdoms in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, interrogated the island fantasies that at once resemble travel narratives and utopian writings of the shipwrecked characters in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, and grappled with Elizabeth I's rhetorical attempts to legitimize a woman's rule within a patriarchal system. Like Elizabeth, Cavendish creates a space for herself by co-opting the language and themes of her male predecessors to create a world ruled by an Empress.

The labels students usually list, given this context, include romance, utopia, travel narratives, epic, and science fiction. As they grapple with how to label Cavendish's hybrid work, they note how she is writing herself into a predominantly male canon. They can then understand the ways in which she at

once plays within established genres—including romance, utopia, and travel narratives—and expectations and how, in some cases, she pushes against such structures to create her own spaces, influencing a more dynamic continuum across genres and time periods.

While the continued discussion of *Blazing World* can take various forms after this opening framework, generally the discussion divides into intersecting topics: romance, which I will focus on first, followed by utopia, natural philosophy, and gender.

Romance

In a chronological survey of early British literature, *Blazing World* complicates discussions of romance genres. Starting the course with examples of medieval romance such as Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, the Pearl Poet's *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and Marie de France's *Lanval* allows students to consider the history of a genre that they now associate with contemporary romantic comedies. In the first half of the semester, students will have learned the origins of the genre rooted in the romance languages that then become tied more specifically to tales of knightly chivalry and problems of gendered sovereignty and conquest.

While *Lanval* may shift the romance focus on male chivalry to desire, most students are left somewhat dissatisfied with what they hoped would be a deconstruction of narratives objectifying women to amplify the salvation of a male character through various trials. Supplementing anthology offerings with Shakespeare's late romance *The Tempest* can also help students trace this shifting genre and tie it more clearly to New World encounters and travel narratives including Michele de Montaigne's *Of Cannibals*. While Shakespeare's Miranda is still clearly the objectified woman in a man's revenge plot, the potential to read agency in her savvy rhetorical demands on her father and Ferdinand, despite her implicit containment within a closed patriarchal system, allows students to imagine women manipulating oppressive systems to their own ends. In small groups, I often ask students to identify moments of female agency and to question what agency might look like given the clear patriarchal context of these literary texts. These discussions prepare them to think about Cavendish's empress and how she might wield her authority, which then paves the way to thinking about Cavendish's innovations.

As we consider romance in *Blazing World*, I put the students in conversation with scholars Lee Cullen Khanna and Marina Leslie. In "The Subject of Utopia:

Margaret Cavendish and her *Blazing World*,” Khanna argues that *Blazing World* deconstructs and then inverts the basic elements of the romance plot and suggests that the text is “structured by its representation of the struggle for discursive authority and its figurations of female power” (18). I excerpt Khanna’s key claims about this deconstruction, along with a reminder of the basic disaster→exile→restoration structure using slides to set up further group discussion. The students at this point will have become versed in the dichotomies of virtuous virgins and vilified queens in the previous romances and will also have read the ways in which Elizabeth I had to position herself within a masculinist discourse of power. Khanna’s discussions of deconstructed romance and figuration of power, then, help them forge these connections more fully. Leslie, who also draws on Khanna’s claims about deconstruction, compares *Blazing World*’s structure to *The Tempest* to “illuminate the nature of Cavendish’s revision of the typical romance plot of disaster, exile, and restoration” (12). Leslie sets up clear connections between texts that both open with frustrated rape attempts and tempests, and argues that “in both texts, the female role is central to political consolidation in the New World and the possibility of restoration in the Old World. Cavendish’s boldest revision,” she claims, “is simply to make the woman the agent as well as the instrument of these processes” (13). Leslie goes on to highlight the way Cavendish valorizes the iciness of the aloof Petrarchan mistress, which students would recall from their sonnet analyses earlier in the semester, as well as the omission of a father figure that ultimately allows the Empress to play the roles of virgin, heroine, and magus within her romance. To facilitate such discussions, I introduce Leslie’s claim about the comparison to *The Tempest* and have the students work in groups to compare their previous analysis of Miranda, particularly her rhetorical agency with her father and independent spirit, to our readings of the Empress.

Putting students in conversation with scholars such as Khanna and Leslie can take several forms. Frequently, I briefly introduce the main arguments of their essays and then use these to frame discussion questions about the ways Cavendish follows and breaks traditional forms. We also explore other connections students see among the romances. This helps them anticipate questions of agency and genre in Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko*, which pairs well with *Blazing World*. Another strategy for helping students enter scholarly conversations such as these is to assign them the task of summarizing a section of Leslie’s essay, for example, and then having them respond to it and potentially expand on it. The first four pages where she sets up Khanna’s sense of deconstructed romance and comparisons to *The Tempest* are manageable as a good introduction to reading scholarly analysis. This assignment also has the advantage of preparing them for a comparative research paper at the end of the term.

Utopia, natural philosophy, and a woman's place

An opening focus on Cavendish's romance innovations and her revisions of such structures lend well to a discussion of how *Blazing World* also participates in and reworks utopian traditions, as well as her interest in participating in discussions of natural philosophy that extend beyond the literary world. In the survey course, I do not include Thomas More or Francis Bacon on the syllabus, but instead introduce their utopian writings as I frame our studies of *The Tempest* and *Blazing World*. Students receive an overview that includes More's coinage of the term "utopia" as well as a sense of his early literary interlocutors in this emerging genre. For Bacon, I introduce definitions of "empiricism" and provide an overview of his utopian Bensalem in *The New Atlantis*. Depending on time and focus, More, Bacon, and others could easily be included alongside Cavendish.

Because the detailed interrogations of the *Blazing World*'s inhabitants most closely aligned with utopian genres are not included in anthology excerpts, utopian themes will naturally receive less space compared to those of romance and broader questions of race, gender, and genre in the survey course.³ Class discussions of utopia, then, will most easily focus on government, religion, and gender with perhaps an overview of natural philosophy, all of which can set up biographical elements of Cavendish's writing. Without much framing, when asked what they can intuit about the Empress's and by extension Cavendish's own political and religious beliefs based on the excerpts, students easily settle on monarchy and monotheism. They cite the statesmen's rationale that "it was natural for one body to have but one head, so it was natural for a politic body to have but one governor; and that a commonwealth which had many governors was like a monster of many heads" and furthermore "a monarchy is a divine form of government, which agrees most with our religion" (72). Just from this passage, students can deduce that Cavendish is infusing her own royalist politics and Christian religion into the utopian society. This is reinforced a few lines later when the statesmen explain that they believe "there is but one God, whom we all unanimously worship and adore with one faith, so we resolved to have but one Emperor, to whom we all submit with one obedience" (72). While the *Blazing World*'s basic political and religious systems conveniently align with Cavendish's own, the Empress pointedly critiques women's exclusion from the country's congregations especially when compared to seeming inclusivity elsewhere in the society.

In terms of biography, this emphasis on women's religious exclusion allows students to consider Cavendish's own desire to fit not only into a literary world dominated by men but also into an emerging scientific society of natural

philosophers. Cavendish was significantly the first woman to visit The Royal Society, but she was also derided by its members and infamously described by Samuel Pepys as a “mad, conceited, and ridiculous woman” (qtd. in Leslie 6).⁴ Such context at once illuminates Cavendish’s focus on women’s exclusion from congregations and helps them see the Empress’s survey of the *Blazing World*’s own form of a Royal Society in a different light. She creates a world in which a woman is not derided for inquiries into and debates over natural philosophy. It amplifies the employment of a fictionalized Cavendish as scribe to the Empress, instead of men “wedded to their own opinions” like the classical philosophers including Plato and Aristotle or the “self-conceited” modern writers Hobbes and More (118-119). In rejecting the assistance of men often associated with utopian ideologies and worldmaking, Cavendish also writes herself into their company as she sets apart her own worldmaking and philosophies from such models.

In connecting Cavendish to her male contemporaries, as well as to the longer history of utopian writing, Kate Lilley, in her essay “*Blazing Worlds: Seventeenth-Century Women’s Utopian Writing*,” reminds us:

Both the writing and reading of utopias has until recently been thought of as the province of well-educated men, exploring and debating the possibilities for systematizing happiness—their happiness—within an ‘enlightened’ public sphere which, in part, defined itself through the exclusion of women as agents, and by contrast with a feminized private sphere. Only the figure of woman has currency from this public sphere as a muse/scribe for the lettered male imagination. (103-04)

Like the romance opening in which Cavendish transforms a woman from victim to heroine, in grappling with utopian models, she figures women as both agents and scribes. Even while embracing husbands, emperors, and the patriarchal models associated with Cavendish’s royalist and Protestant beliefs, her fictional women reject male models in favor of “world[s] of [their] own invention” (125).

Including *Blazing World* in the early British literature survey, then, can not only help students imagine the way early modern women might play within and break from male literary and philosophical traditions, but it also creates space for them to complicate assumptions about the history of such genres and conventions through comparative and theoretical analyses. The number of students that have gravitated towards Cavendish as they think about topics such as gendered chivalry and female sovereignty has been staggering. They actively enter conversations with scholars including Khanna, Leslie, and Lilley in their interrogation of romance and utopian genres. They also increasingly opt to read full editions of

Blazing World as they engage non-normative readings of the relationship between the Empress and Duchess and interrogate Cavendish's satirical treatment of Plato's conversation of souls.⁵ If this were not enough inducement to fully embrace *Blazing World* as a staple within the survey, as I have suggested above, many of these students are subsequently drawn to courses devoted to topics focused on Renaissance utopias and feminist worldmaking, respectively.

***Blazing World* in an early modern/Renaissance utopias course**

In a topics class, we have much more room to focus on the full text of *Blazing World* and to put Cavendish more directly into conversation with her contemporaries, as well as predecessors and utopian/dystopian afterlives. A course devoted to early modern utopias does well to begin with a brief overview of utopian thinking before Thomas More coined the term with his 1516 publication of *Utopia*. Excerpts from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Vergil's *Eclogues*, and *Genesis* can set up early examples of golden ages and earthly paradise, while excerpts of Plato's *Republic* offer a clear model for later utopias and the medieval "Land of Cockaigne," a satirical critique. Gregory Claeys and Lyman Tower Sargent's *The Utopian Reader* editions provide excellent pre-selected models and may be worth assigning depending on course design. This sets the foundation to focus on early modern/Renaissance utopias starting with More's *Utopia* and including texts such as Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis*, Tommaso Campanella's *City of the Sun*, Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Christine de Pisan's *The Book of the City of Ladies*, and Henry Neville's *Isle of Pines*. A selection of these texts can lead up to and inform students' engagement with *Blazing World*, which can then be followed by Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*. I also include selected travel narratives and sometimes excerpts of Milton's *Paradise Lost* to round out a sense of how utopian writing develops alongside and is often born out of writings focused on exploration, conquest, and colonialism.

Using a full text of *Blazing World* allows students to engage with Cavendish's detailed descriptions of government, religion, marriage, and warfare compared to More's *Utopia*. They also note her distinctive employment of such themes and her examinations of natural sciences and philosophy among the *Blazing World*'s hybrid men compared to Bacon's college of sages in *New Atlantis*. Furthermore, when put in conversation with these male writers, students observe how Cavendish complicates a woman's place in such imagined worlds and destabilizes utopian binaries, as Khanna reminds us. Indeed, in her focus on the worldmaking central to the Empress and Duchess's collaboration, Khanna "addresses several aspects of utopian fiction that speak to the intersection of gender and genre. Instead of the opposition of unsatisfactory 'reality' to a better or more perfect

society, characteristic of the dominant utopian tradition,” she notes, “the reader discovers a continuous process of making and unmaking worlds. Multiplicity, not binary opposition, constitutes the utopian methodology” (23-4). Outlining Khanna’s sense of binary blurring prepares students to reflect on such oppositions in previous texts, which in turn motivates them to think about the ways Cavendish depicts processes and debates differently.⁶

For example, focusing on the debate over the Bear-men’s devotion to telescopes and microscopes, the Empress initially demands their destruction, arguing that the instruments are “false Informers, and instead of discovering the Truth, delude your senses” (79). However, hearing the Bear-men’s petition that the glasses employ their senses and promote friendly debate, she allows them to keep the instruments as long as their philosophical fights remain in scholarly settings. Students are often confused by the apparent rejection of scientific inquiry in this scene. It helps to establish the way Cavendish at once draws on the amplified images, such as the head of the drone fly, in Robert Hooke’s *Micrographia* (1665), and critiques Bacon’s conceptions of nature as passive and feminized, rather than vitally active.⁷ In a survey, Cavendish’s exclusion from the ranks of the Royal Society helps provide some rationale for her focus on women’s worldmaking, but with additional room to focus on the details of her philosophical narrative, we can more fully stage the debates in which she inserts herself.

Analysis of such debates and other comparisons among utopian texts can be encouraged in regular reading responses and discussion boards. As in the survey course, students often find Cavendish an enticing interlocutor as they consider questions of gender and agency in speculative utopian genres. To engage students more fully with their analyses of early modern utopias, I also assign presentations throughout the term in which they are tasked with thinking about utopian “afterlives,” or modern utopian/dystopian texts and how they draw on and/or diverge from the tenets of utopian creations that we have studied. Student presentations have focused on a range of “texts” including George Orwell’s *1984*, Veronica Roth’s *Divergent* book series, Roald Dahl’s *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, Pink Floyd’s *The Wall*, and the Olivia Wilde’s film *Don’t Worry, Darling*. Cavendish’s innovations help them think more fully about utopian continuums.

***Blazing World* in a literature and gender course**

Despite the clear value of including *Blazing World* in an early British literature survey and an early modern topics course, perhaps the most rewarding venue for

the text, and one that attracts non-English majors, is a literature and gender course. I conclude this essay, then, with an overview of such a course I recently taught for the first time. When assigned the course, I immediately went to work figuring out how to make *Blazing World* central while ensuring that the syllabus was intersectional. I framed the course with the Duchess's resolution to make a "world of her own invention" (125) in the face of male philosophical models and then began the course with one of Cavendish's most famous detractors, Virginia Woolf. Despite her weary classification of Cavendish's "wild, generous, untutored intelligence," that "poured itself out higgledy-piggledy in torrents of rhyme and prose, poetry and philosophy, which stand congealed in quartos and folios that no one ever reads" (64-5), it is this unwieldy variety and refusal to fully submit to established male genres that casts Cavendish as a pioneer for women writers including Woolf herself. Indeed, Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* with which I open the course, establishes the need for a woman to have "money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (4), which echoes Cavendish's own project of establishing and recuperating spaces for women and their creative endeavors. This need for space includes and extends beyond the literal walls of a room and becomes a project of recuperating women's literary voices, a call that Woolf takes up in her lecture and is later furthered by feminists in the 1980s, and continues today. Starting with these seemingly obvious connections allows students to explore the ways early women writers like Cavendish forced themselves into literary networks and helped to create new, and reshape existing, genres. Indeed, opening with a 17th-century text before moving to early 20th-century feminist texts and ultimately to contemporary texts, helps students understand that origins of feminist literary and theoretical works and movements.

To establish the intersections of gender and genre in relation to Cavendish, I turn to Nicole Pohl's "'Of Mixt Natures': Questions of Genre in Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World*" and her description of Cavendish's genre blending as "hermaphroditic." Pohl argues that the assumption underlying Cavendish's use of the term "hermaphrodite" in various works "is a concept that surpasses the plain biological character of the sexes. 'For Cavendish,' she avers, 'this gendered subjectivity applies to all forms of cultural representation'" (55). She claims that in *Blazing World* specifically, Cavendish "deconstructs these notions of gendered subjectivity by creating a transgressive literary form in her utopia" (55). This takes some unpacking but helps students see Cavendish as a pioneer of women's worldbuilding and as the mother of new genres, including science fiction of which *Blazing World* is now often cited as a first example. The sense of gendered transgression appeals to students, many of whom are particularly fascinated by the relationship dynamics between the Empress and Duchess, as well as with their husbands. Cavendish's deconstruction of boundaries and her satirical invocations

of platonic love again invite non-normative readings of *Blazing World* that ultimately promote intersectionality (see Valerie Billing's contribution to this collection for a more detailed consideration of Cavendish in queer studies). Within this course, then, Cavendish serves as a touchstone, igniting and fostering a future society of women transgressors, while modeling our own modes of creativity and interrogation as intersectional feminist scholars.

To this end, I put Cavendish in conversation with Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-Paper" and *Herland*, Octavia Butler's *Dawn*, Toni Morrison's *Paradise*, and Alison Bechdel's graphic novel *Fun Home*, among other texts. As with my pairing of Cavendish and Woolf, I interlace these literary texts with the voices of feminist theorists including Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Hélène Cixous, and Audre Lorde.⁸ The first essay asks students to frame their readings of a literary text with a feminist theoretical concept. In this way they might see how a recuperation of Cavendish can challenge Woolf's critique of her unfettered writing style. Additionally, throughout the course, students create their own commonplace books, pulling out literary and theoretical moments that speak to them, confuse them, and fascinate them. This project allows them to assemble their own catalogue of "higgledy piggledy" connections from a collection of women's writing and to make sense of their reading process and inspirations along the way. I give students quite a bit of freedom in terms of formatting their "books." They need to be able to turn them in via Canvas and must follow the passage selection criteria, which then serve as a way to evaluate the quality of their completed commonplace books. I also give points for creativity. The criteria are as follows:

- A passage that clearly ties to or complicates our discussions of gender and literature.
- A passage that confuses you in some way.
- A passage that connects clearly to other readings or to classroom discussions.
- A passage that uses particularly evocative language.

I generally require three quotations for each reading. Many of the students create websites for their final project with linked pages to the texts and include images they feel capture the themes of their quotations. Other students have created PowerPoints, Pinterest pages, or even assembled hardcopy journals that they then photograph and upload to Canvas. The students always impress me with their creativity and this project has become one of my favorite ways to prompt students to engage closely with the course texts and to reflect on their own reading processes.

Ultimately, *Blazing World*, whether in a survey course or a more focused topics course, becomes a touchstone for understanding how women have created spaces for themselves within a literary canon that actively excluded them. Long before feminist writers called for the space and means to produce their own worlds, Margaret Cavendish did just that. Including her utopian vision within a variety of courses, helps to establish the ways women writers have always found avenues to infiltrate and influence male literary networks, a disruption that paved the way for future inclusive networks of worldmakers, including our students.

Notes

¹ 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.

² All *Blazing World* quotation are taken from Sara H. Mendelson’s 2016 edition.

³ Students often note the description of “ordinary men” with diverse complexions—though “not white, black, tawny, olive-, or ash-coloured” (71)—and diverse in shape, size, and figures. They are generally not sure what to make of this; does it signify a sense of inclusion, even of the non-human? While the anthology excerpts and notes do not dwell on these descriptions, it can be helpful to contextualize scholarly discussions of race during the early modern period. Scholarly treatment of race in *Blazing World* is far from robust; however, Sujata Iyengar’s “Royalist, Romanticist, Racialist: Rank, Gender, and Race in the Science and Fiction of Margaret Cavendish” is a good place to start. In this essay, Iyengar argues that we can see a distinction between color and species in the opening description of the *Blazing World*’s inhabitants and further that Cavendish is entering into an emergent debate that connects skin color to race. Iyengar goes on to note that Cavendish’s fictional worlds affirm her Royalist beliefs that social rank should be esteemed above other categories including religion, gender, and race. Also helpful is Iyengar’s “Race Thinking in Margaret Cavendish’s Drama” as it considers “race thinking,” a concept she borrows from Hannah Arendt, alongside gender and sexuality in her readings of Cavendish’s plays. Iyengar’s intersectional investigation of Cavendish’s writing pairs well with Kim F. Hall and Gwynne Kennedy’s “Early Modern Women Writing Race” in *Teaching Tudor and Stuart Women Writers* in which Hall and Kennedy explicitly seek to recognize the linkage between gender and racial oppression in the period as a necessary context for reading early modern women authors. Christina Malcolmson’s *Studies of skin color in early Royal Society* focuses on the role of skin color in the experiment and observations of England’s Royal Society and can add some context to the debate Iyengar calls up and ties nicely to discussions of Cavendish’s own nods to the Royal Society in *Blazing World*.

⁴ I create a brief slide show to introduce students to The Royal Society and basic Cavendish background. I often let the students talk about their experience of the text before setting up the biographical elements and how they factor into her worldmaking. Once we see how she has basically placed herself in charge of a fictionalized Royal Society, the students are often amused by what they describe as self-inserted fan fiction.

⁵ Many of my students gravitate toward queer readings of the relationship between the Empress and Cavendish's fictional counterpart. In class we talk about queer readings as analysis that both resists or deviates from standard heteronormative readings of texts as well those that focus on othered forms of sexuality.

⁵ I usually excerpt this Khanna quotation and put it on a slide to set up small or large group discussions about forms of multiplicity and blurring.

⁶ Hooke's illustration can be found on page 81 of Mendelson's Broadview edition.

⁸ I use excerpts from Gilbert and Gubar's *Madwoman in the Attic*, Cixcioux's "The Laugh of the Medusa," and I assign a paper Lorde gave at Amherst College in 1980 titled "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference." Over the years, I have copied excerpts like these from modern feminist anthologies and uploaded them to Canvas as PDFs, but depending on the course and the balance of theory to literature, you could easily assign a feminist reader.

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