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SAA Cavendish: Genre and Gender abstract

This paper surveys the importance of the concept of heresy, or wrong religion, to Margaret Cavendish across her *Orations of Divers Sorts* (1662) and *Blazing World* (1666). Notable from the get-go for its absence—in these texts Cavendish never uses the word, which writers of every religious and political stripe lobbed frequently and freely on either side of the Restoration—heresy is nonetheless a fixation of Cavendish in this period. Through the language of "atheism," "faction," "disputation," and "enforcement," she engages fully in the political and theological conversations over promoting right religion which scholars have long noted other figures—Marvell, Milton, Dryden—contributed to and intervened in.

'Conversations' proves exactly the right word for describing Cavendish's own interventions in the roiling anxieties in the 1660s over the personal religion and religious policies of Charles II. The disputatious but mannered form of her *Orations* models a polite back-and-forth among parties that resolves in a third speaker, presumably offering Cavendish's preferred option, striking a middle way between the two. See for instance Cavendish's witty *via media* between the extremes of persecution and total liberty of conscience in the 41st oration: "give them leave to follow their several opinions in their particular families, otherwise if you force them you will make them furious, and if you give them an absolute liberty you will make them factious."¹

The Blazing World translates the specially titled individual positions of the *Orations* into continuous literary conversation between the Empress and her menagerie of strange subjects. Her warning to "the magpie-, parrot- and jackdaw-men, which were her professed orators and logicians," is especially resonant: "Confine your disputations to your schools, lest besides the commonwealth of learning, they disturb also divinity and policy, religion and laws, and by that means draw an utter ruin and destruction both upon church and state."² Important to note is that Cavendish herself energetically participated in philosophical debates that, in their engagements with vitalism and materialism, invested fully in the very speculation that the Empress of *The Blazing World* is keen to stamp out.

A gendered and indeed a classed method of disputation seems to be Cavendish's preferred escape from this conundrum. The Empress chooses a diegetic Cavendish as a conversation partner over a list of "self-conceited" male philosophers "who would scorn to be scribes to a woman."³ And through a combination of charisma, craft, and rhetoric—all of these, for Cavendish, feminized traits—the Empress is able "by art, and her own ingenuity" not only to "convert the Blazing World to her own religion, but kept them in a constant belief without enforcement or bloodshed."⁴ *The Blazing World* models a bloodless persuasion of would-be factious believers, Cavendish's favored, but, of course, fictional, solution to a real problem in the 1660s.

¹ Margaret Cavendish, *Orations of Divers Sorts*, in *Political Writings*, ed. Susan James (Cambridge: CUP 2003), p. 168.

² Margaret Cavendish, *The Blazing World*, in *The Blazing World and Other Writings*, ed. Kate Lilley (New York: Penguin, 2004), pp. 160, 162.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

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The 'Micro-Utopias' of Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World* (1666).⁵

This paper argues that Margaret Cavendish's penchant for the minute, the microscopic and the atomic is based on her recognition of interior and unobservable potential which is most thoroughly explored in her utopian fiction, *The Blazing World*. This interest in the small seems at first in tension with her distrust and dislike for microscopy but is in fact directly related. *The Blazing World* notably responds to Robert Hooke's *Micrographia* (1665), the first major and extremely expensive publication of the Royal Society which focused on the findings of microscopy, and rebukes its work as monstrous, misrepresentative, and purposeless.⁶ Cavendish's fascination with the micro, minute and small instead focuses on what cannot be seen or known by observing scientists. As Mary B. Campbell has noted, Cavendish's Empress in *The Blazing World* can be seen to identify not with the observing eye behind the microscope, but with the observed and the objectified domestic creatures subjected to Hooke's investigation: a somewhat unsurprising affiliation for one of the most observed women in Restoration England.⁷ Thus, the way notions of the microscopic feature in *The Blazing World* reflect on Cavendish's notions of potentiality drawing from an idea of science as 'probable' knowledge which opens up avenues to be explored through utopian fiction as well as her conceptions of gender.⁸ In this paper I argue that Cavendish takes up the genre of utopian fiction as an ideal model for exploring potential whilst simultaneously refuting the microscopic eye's access to the other world of the small and subjected. Her fiction suggests that those small items which the microscope simply enlarges contain vast interiors of potential that can only be expressed by creative subjectivity and fancy. In this way, despite aligning women with microscopic creatures incapable of taking up too much space in society, I propose that Cavendish's utopian fantasies of the minute refute contemporary science's reductionist view of knowledge and ownership and put forth instead a feminist science of potentiality.

⁵ I took the term 'micro-utopias' from the discussion of Cavendishian motion in John Rogers, *The Matter of Revolution: Science, Poetry, and Politics in the Age of Milton* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1996), 192–93.

⁶ Anna Battigelli, *Margaret Cavendish and the Exiles of the Mind* (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1998), 97–98.

⁷ Mary B. Campbell, *Wonder & Science: Imagining Worlds in Early Modern Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 144.

⁸ Brandie R. Siegfried, 'Cavendish and the Novel', in *A Companion to the Cavendishes*, ed. Lisa Hopkins and Tom Rutter, Arc Companions (Leeds: Arc Humanities Press, 2020), 368.

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In 1666, Margaret Cavendish imagined Bear-Men, Fish-Men, people with blue skin, and more in *The Blazing World*, which scholars now recognize as one of the earliest works of science fiction in English. In her famous preface to the text, Cavendish referred to *The Blazing World* as “a work of Fancy,” which she deliberately published as the second half of her scientific treatise, *Observations on Experimental Philosophy*. As a form of the imagination, “fancy” has long been associated with the arts. Cavendish’s two-part publication, however, asserts her commitment to fancy as a poetic and a scientific concept. Writing at a time when her gender excluded her from England’s newly formed scientific institution the Royal Society, Cavendish envisions a kind of fancy that empowers cognitive discoveries independent of a physical laboratory. Through a close reading of the episode wherein the Duchess and the Empress build and dissolve their own imaginary worlds, this paper will show how Cavendish theorizes fancy as speculative but rationally-based imagination that furthers knowledge.

If a history of science story in early modern England might begin with Francis Bacon and end with Isaac Newton, a history of fancy story looks entirely different. Once fancy determines the archive, we see that the rise of experimental philosophy does not happen independently in the 17th-century. Rather, literature and science, or romance and natural philosophy, are co-created in the early modern period, and fancy provides a way into both. Where Rosalie Colie has shown the “resources of kind” for genre theory, then, my paper turns to Cavendish’s generically hybrid *sammelband* to argue for the “resources of fancy.” Fancy fosters not only literature but also varied forms of thinking, including kinds of thinking that later would be characterized as scientific. Although Cavendish’s references to “fancy” in *The Blazing World* are scattered, this paper attempts to begin to join them.