

2015

The (Re)Naturalization of Margaret Cavendish: Making Active the Relationship between Nature and Female Subjectivity in *Blazing World*

Daniel P. Richards
Old Dominion University, dprichar@odu.edu

Julie Chappell (Ed.)

Kamille Stone Stanton (Ed.)

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/english_fac_pubs



Part of the [Literature in English](#), [British Isles Commons](#), [Metaphysics Commons](#), and the [Philosophy of Mind Commons](#)

Original Publication Citation

Richards, D. P. (2015). The (re)naturalization of Margaret Cavendish: Making active the relationship between nature and female subjectivity in "Blazing World". In J. Chappell & K. S. Stanton (Eds.), *Spectacle, Sex, and Property in Eighteenth-Century Literature and Culture* (pp. 83-103). AMS Press, Inc.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the English at ODU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of ODU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@odu.edu.

*The (Re)Naturalization of Margaret
Cavendish: Making Active the
Relationship between Nature and
Female Subjectivity in Blazing World*

DANIEL P. RICHARDS

I am 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 endeavour to be Margaret the First.

—Margaret Cavendish

LITERARY critic Bronwen Price makes a sizable understatement when she writes that Margaret Cavendish's *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World* (1666) "does not address contemporary ideas in a straightforward way; it continually requires us to adjust our perspective, disconcertingly alternating between positions."¹ Nowhere has this shown to be truer than in previous analyses conducted on the issue of female subjectivity in Cavendish's utopian narrative. Similarities, however, can be extracted from these analyses, one of which being that the common conception of how Cavendish figures female subjectivity is in many ways similar to her depiction of nature in *Blazing World*. The relationship is most often figured in terms of reflection or mirroring; for example, the atomistic view of nature as having worlds within worlds reflects the *mise en abyme* that takes place in the multiple (and possibly endless) division and regression of female subjectivity within the souls and created worlds of both the Duchess and the Empress. The literally infinitely complex and interconnected

depiction of nature mirrors the way scholars have read Cavendish's plunge into exploring the depths of female subjectivity.

Critics such as Catherine Gallagher, Sandra Sherman, Rachel Trubowitz, and Lisa Sarasohn have shown that the portrayal of female subjectivity in *Blazing World*, like nature, is susceptible to much change and seemingly infinite alteration. However, the implication—as stated above—is that while both nature and female subjectivity are fluid, their relationship is relatively stagnant, consistently described as “mirroring” or “reflecting” one another. I find this way of reading the relationship between the two to be simplistic, failing to account for the mobility and movement each endures throughout the course of the text. The aim of this essay is to outline the dynamic connections Cavendish makes between nature (largely defined in its ecological sense) and female subjectivity in *Blazing World*, configuring the relationship more in terms of cause and effect, where both nature and female subjectivity push and pull on one another, (re)positioning themselves in a progressive way throughout the text. Due to this way of understanding their relationship, the female self finds itself in a variety of different subject positions, thereby shattering the mirror that is said to consistently exist between nature and female subjectivity. I argue that while Cavendish repudiated the dominance that experimental philosophers sought over nature, it is the physical utilization of nature that eventually mobilizes the female subject to a position of complete power and dominion, revealing, as will be shown, an uncontested Baconian rise to power over nature.

In any discussion of subjectivity in Cavendish, it is necessary first to understand the perspective of her contemporaries and of modern science at the time she wrote *Blazing World*. Her construction of subjectivity is defined in large part by its critique of experimental philosophy, and specifically Robert Hooke's seminal *Micrographia* (1665). In this work, Hooke suggested that the eyepieces of telescopes and microscopes functioned as correctives to the “infirm and corrupt senses through which we know the world.”² For him, they offered the utopian promise of “mastering” the world; through them could be found “a new visible World discovered to the understanding.”³ According to Anna Battigelli, the Baconian reformation in natural philosophy that Hooke proposed in the preface to *Micrographia*

insistently subordinated the operations of the mind to the exact observations of the eye aided by an optical glass, for it required neither “strength of Imagination, [n]or exactness of Method, [n]or depth of Contemplation . . . [so much as it required] a sincere Hand and a faithful Eye to examine, and to record. The things themselves as they appear.”⁴ Hooke portrays his ideal natural philosopher as a scribe whose single function is to record observations with a “sincere Hand” what is seen through the microscopes and telescopes with his “faithful eye”; there is little to no room for the unreliability of the mind to interfere with this process. What follows in the rest of the text is a collection of pieces of the “new world” that Hooke found as he gazed through the eyepieces of microscopes and telescopes. His precise drawings of fleas, ants, worms, the face of the moon, and a variety of other items from the natural world revealed not only the empiricist within, but also a cycle of inquiry that left little room for what Hooke understood to be the faulty operations of sense, memory, or reason.⁵

[A]ll uncertainty, and mistakes of humane actions, proceed either from narrowness and wandering of our Senses, from the slipperiness or delusion of our Memory, from the confinement or rashness of our Understanding, so that 'tis no wonder that *our power over natural causes and effects is so slowly improv'd*, seeing we are not only to contend with the obscurity and difficulty of the things whereon we work and think, but even the forces of our own minds conspire to betray us . . . These being the dangers in the process of humane reason, the remedies of them all can only proceed from the real, the mechanical, the experimental Philosophy of discourse and disputation, that whereas that chiefly aims at the subtilty of its Deductions and Conclusions. (emphasis added)⁶

Hooke's *Micrographia* shows us his exclusive focus on the external world, as well as his dismissal of deductive thinking. He was of the mind that scientific endeavors had for too long been infiltrated by the unreliability and vagueness accompanied by sense and reason. This text signaled not only his fervent desire to portray both science and the scientist in terms of mechanistic activity but also his zeal in putting forth the utopian promise to “command” the natural world—one which Cavendish opposed.

Only one year after Hooke's *Micrographia* was published, Cavendish published her response to Hooke and the Royal Society in *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy: to which is added, The Description of a New Blazing World* (1666). This volume was aimed at attacking specifically the use of optical instruments and more generally the experimental philosophy program and the Royal Society itself. Her opposition to experimental philosophy is evident throughout *Observations*, yes, but the way in which she is opposed to experimental philosophers in the prefatory material of *Blazing World* is most significant. Cavendish's husband, William Newcastle, in many ways acted as the mediating subject between the Duchess and the exclusionary Royal Society. He showed support to both his wife and to the Society to which he belonged. The subjectivity assumed by Cavendish is indicated immediately at the beginning of the text in the prefatory poem written by her husband. The experimentalists directed their energies to what they considered to be matters of fact, that is, that which is "discovered rather than invented."⁷ But whereas William Newcastle's contemporaries used geographical imagery and tropes to emphasize the discovery of new worlds, he focuses attention on his wife's invention of new worlds:

Our Elder World, with all the Skill and Arts,
 Could but divide the *World* into three Parts:
Columbus then for Navigation fam'd,
 Found a new World, *America* 'tis nam'd:
 Now this new World was found, it was not made,
 Onely discovered, lying in Times shade.
 Then what are *You*, having no *Chaos* found
 To make a *World*, or any such least ground?
 But your creating Fancy, thought it fit
 To make your World of Nothing, but pure Wit.
 Your *Blazing-world*, beyond the Stars mounts higher,
 Enlightens all with a Coelestial Fier.⁸

Cavendish's *Blazing World* is a new world like Columbus's New World, but whereas Columbus's was found, Cavendish's world is made. William Newcastle's focus on the created worlds in Cavendish's text highlights her interest in a different sort of space from the space being

mapped, measured, and ultimately discovered by the experimental philosophers. Cavendish is interested, as her husband makes clear, in the worlds that the mind creates. From this passage, we know that Cavendish defines her role as author in opposition to the image of the experimentalist gazing into his microscope: instead of peering through a glass in order to serve as observer of nature, Cavendish looks inward, freely exercising her subjective use of perspective over the worlds within her head.⁹

Julie A. Eckerle argues that the preface is a space used by women of the period to authorize themselves, a space where women created and established new identities for themselves as authors.¹⁰ Cavendish makes it clear even before the fiction begins that she intently desires to lead or rule, indeed to exert power in a meaningful way. While she admits that the realities of the world have relegated her to the inner workings of her own mind, her desire to attain a dominant positioning is evident. Immediately following the piece written by her husband, Cavendish continues in the "To the Reader" prefatory section to explain why she has made this shift inward. She claims that her ambition in the external world has caused her to turn to the imaginary worlds of her mind: "And although I have neither power, time, nor occasion to conquer the world as Alexander and Caesar did; yet rather than not be Mistress of one, since Fortune and the Fates would give me none, I have made a World of my own: for which no body, I hope, will blame me, since it is in every ones power to do the like."¹¹ This passage acts as a useful framework for the rest of the text in that the narrative is being set up as an exploration into female subjectivity. Cavendish makes it clear in the prefatory material that *Blazing World* is an exclusive product of her brain and fancy; she is locating it entirely within the subjective realm of her imagination. In this way, she is guarding it, herself, and her innermost fantasies and desires from making Hooke-like claims of objective certainty regarding the external world. To the same extent that she is guarding herself from objectivity, she is exposing her desires. While making it more difficult to trace sound argumentation and identify "true" belief systems, utopian texts unequivocally reveal the passionate idealizations of the mind.

Returning to her response to *Micrographia*, we know that Cavendish's objections to the use of microscopes and telescopes focused

primarily on problems of perception and epistemology. She claimed that magnification could distort an image, a claim that according to Battigelli held some truth since cracked or imperfect lenses could literally distort an object.¹² More problematic than broken lenses for Cavendish, however, was that which could *not* be seen through the microscope. If, she explains, an artist were to draw the portrait of a beautiful lady by peering at her through the lens of a microscope, the artist would be unable to represent the lady's beauty accurately.¹³ Because the use of the microscope went "no further then the exterior Parts of the Object presented,"¹⁴ it presented only an external view of the object, which should not be mistaken for the object's essence. Quite frankly, Cavendish viewed Hooke's claim that optical instruments could improve the erroneous "process of humane Reason" as fallacious: "[W]e have no power at all over natural causes and effects." No art can "inform us of the Truth of the Infinite parts of Nature." To claim as much is to claim that "man [is] a degree above Nature." Finally, she argues that the "Experimental and Mechanick Philosophy cannot be above the Speculative part, by reason most Experiments have their rise from the Speculative, so that the Artist or Mechanick is but a servant to the Student."¹⁵ No glass, no matter how sophisticated, could eliminate all the defects of a viewer or that viewer's subjectivity.

Cavendish makes a distinct effort to distance herself from Hooke and other experimental philosophers along the subjective/objective continuum. While Hooke seeks to master and control the natural world through objective observation, Cavendish is forced to turn inward, toward her female self in a way that is shaped by the exclusionary nature of the Royal Society and of scientific inquiry in general. For the male objective-observer figure of which Hooke is a prime example, nature becomes something that can be mastered and subjected to the needs and demands of superior humanity. It can be dissected, observed, and painstakingly recorded into volume after volume of written journals. Nature is part of a mechanical process in which the objective observer is indeed separated, distanced through a relationship of domination/submission. Whereas Hooke uses his lens to observe items from the physical world, Cavendish uses her narrative to preserve what she can of the subjective musings of the self.¹⁶ If her arguments about the inescapability of subjectivity fell upon deaf ears

in the scientific community, then she would preserve subjectivity through the actual writing of her utopian piece. For Battigelli, this reflects her freely exercising the use of subjective perspective. It allows us to enter a world that shows Cavendish's ambitions portrayed in a safe, protected space.

How does Cavendish's portrayal of female subjectivity relate to her depiction of nature in *Blazing World*? Unsurprisingly, Cavendish's depiction of nature is in stark contrast to how nature was depicted in the utopian works that proliferated in England during the seventeenth century. Such works, according to Rachel Trubowitz, "usually systemically reshaped [nature] to serve experimentation in maximizing agricultural and human productivity."¹⁷ She uses the example of Robert Burton's and Gabriel Plattes's depiction of nature in their utopias. In Burton's, 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 mountains."¹⁸ Also at this time, new scientific methods were applied to the cultivation of the natural world. In Plattes's *Macaria*, the exploitation of the mineral and agricultural resources is systematized in the utopian commonwealth by placing the land's management under the power of one centralized government body. Trubowitz differentiates these depictions of nature from that of Cavendish's by writing that in Cavendish's utopia, "nature conforms to no system or rationalized framework; it is obedient only to its own anarchic properties."¹⁹ "The Blazing World" is home to "strange Creatures," fantastic anthropomorphic animals of many brightly colored complexions, from purple to green to azure, which "demonstrate the rationally irreducible laws of nature in Cavendish's ideal world."²⁰ Bronwen Price also writes that Cavendish's depiction of nature is inordinately complex. She writes that "the most assured conclusion that is reached [by the Empress and the inhabitants] about nature is its impenetrability; nature has no point of origin or closure, but comprises many-in-one, existing in a constant state of flux, forever reforming and transforming itself."²¹

This "many-in-one," "reforming," and "self-transforming" of nature has been typically aligned with figurations of female subjectivity in *Blazing World*. When the Empress decides that she wishes to write a "cabala," she summons the soul of the Duchess of Newcastle to be

her scribe, for she is a “plain and rational Writer” who uses her “Sense and Reason” in her writings.²² The two souls of the Empress and the Duchess interact with each other throughout the text and eventually become Platonic lovers. The two souls enter in and out of each others’ boundless bodies with ease, embody one body at a time, and even join the Duchess’s husband’s soul as the three of them converse within his body. When the Duchess’s soul reveals that she too wishes to be an empress over a world, the Empress tells her that she should create worlds that are more governable, such as those within the mind. At this point Cavendish has created a world in which a representation of female subjectivity has just created her own utopian world within the narrative. Resembling a classic *mise en abyme*, many scholars have rightfully found connections between the depiction of nature and the portrayal of female subjectivity. Geraldine Wagner writes in her analysis of female subjectivity in *Blazing World* that “the truth of her own multiple nature coincides with what she has said earlier of nature itself, calling it ‘but one infinite, self-moving body.’”²³ Wagner, among others, finds the correlation between Cavendish’s philosophy and the creation of a multiplicitous but united female subjectivity. Yet, while drawing such connections is very useful, the relationship between nature and female subjectivity ends at characterizing it as reflection or mere similarity. Situating the analysis on this idea of mirroring is stagnant and fails to recognize the progressive push in the narrative. The Empress is a motivated character who desires to achieve goals, and as such, the relationship between the female self and nature is always shifting. Wagner and Price acknowledge that both nature and female subjectivity are dynamic, but do not outline how the actual relationship and the way they relate changes as the narrative progresses.

The first direct interaction of the Empress (then the “young Lady”) with nature comes when she is captured by the merchant at the very beginning of the text, signaling a potential loss of autonomy and appropriation of the body. Nature eventually comes to the rescue, so to speak, for this stolen woman:

But alas! those few men which were in it, not knowing whither they went, nor what was to be done in so strange an adventure, and not being provided for so cold an adventure . . . were all frozen to death,

the young Lady onely, by the light of her beauty, the heat of her youth, and Protection of the Gods, remaining alive.²⁴

The forces of nature act out of divine justice in this passage. Although the young Lady was spared by nature and its intervention, the point remains that the young Lady was subjected to the will of nature. Nature exerted control over her by revealing its power over the outcome of human lives. This power can even be aligned with the power exerted over her by the foreign merchant, in that the young Lady's capture came from "execut[ing] his design."²⁵ In the same way then, the young Lady's protection from nature still resulted from nature's design. The female self, in relation to the forces of nature, is (perhaps unknowingly) submissive to the larger design of nature.

Saved by the Bear-men and on her way to "Paradise," Cavendish foreshadows the power struggle that takes place between nature and the young Lady in her first interaction with nature as it exists in the Blazing World: "[A] certain Engine, which would draw in a great quant[it]y of air, and shoot forth wind with a great force . . . for it served against the raging waves, like Canons against an hostile Army, or besieged Town; it would batter and beat the waves in pieces."²⁶ The depiction of nature here as entirely oppositional to the inhabitants (and to a certain extent the young Lady) serves as a platform for how we should understand nature in the Blazing World. Nature here is distant from its characters. It is described as a "hostile Army" and, later on, as an enemy: "[T]hey had no other enemies but the winds."²⁷ Far from being shown as the young Lady's savior as it was in the opening passages, nature is portrayed as something to face against, as if the inhabitants and nature in the Blazing World are at odds and constantly in a power struggle. There is a transition from nature as a force that doles out justice to nature as a force that sets itself against its inhabitants. It is now operating within a framework of a power struggle. The young Lady remains distant from nature and is submissive to nature's will in a very physical way, that is, nature is a physical force that has both saved her and been her enemy.

When the young Lady is appointed Empress of the Blazing World, she still remains subject to nature but this time more in terms of the mind than the body: "[A]lthough she came out of another

world, yet was she but a mortal; at which the Emperor rejoicing, made her his Wife, and gave her an absolute power to rule and govern all that World as she pleased.”²⁸ This point in the text has been the focus of many feminist scholars’ analyses of *Blazing World*, one of which is Catherine Gallagher. In her essay “Embracing the Absolute,” Gallagher takes deeply into consideration Cavendish’s self-construction as an autonomous female subject, and how her autonomy is formed at the intersection between the competing philosophies of Toryism and feminism. Cavendish explicitly links her gender to this absolutist model of subjectivity by claiming at the beginning of *Blazing World* that restrictions on her worldly ambitions have directed her inward:

I am . . . 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 endeavour to be, *Margaret* the First; and although I have neither power, time, nor occasion, to conquer the world as *Alexander* and *Cæsar* did; yet rather than not to be Mistress of one, since Fortune and the Fates would give me none, I have made a World of my own: for which no body, I hope, will blame me, since it is in every ones power to do the like.²⁹

Gallagher writes of this passage that, somewhat “paradoxically, it was in the ideology of absolute monarchy that Cavendish found a model of the absolute, sovereign private self.”³⁰ It is a paradoxical connection between what she calls the “*roi absolu*” and the “*moi absolu*” that forms the foundation of her subjectivity. In the story, which can be read as Cavendish’s fantasy for imperial power, the empress rules alone—her ministers are eunuchs and no other woman is allowed to have employment in Church or State. The Emperor gives her an absolute dominion over his realm and his subjects worship her as if she were a divinity. According to Sarasohn, “this is a classical reversal of male–female roles, and an expression of Cavendish’s desire for dominance within a traditional hierarchy.”³¹ *Blazing World* is focused on the image of the monarch, and since the only model of political being available to women at all in the text is that of monarch, a woman’s ambition can only take the absolute form. According to Gallagher, Cavendish’s “mode of constructing [the Empress’s] gender,

then, not only directs her absolutism toward the domain of the self but also generates that desire for absolute domain in the first place by obviating the alternative—political subjecthood.³² This positioning of the Empress in power over the Blazing World is not meant to be externalized. That is, the power obtained by the Empress is not one that is forcefully exerted onto her surroundings. This power structure is misleading because, as Gallagher argue, the Empress is merely exerting power over herself. The female subject position, although placed in a location of power, does not wield such power beyond the confines of her own mind.³

Another way in which nature is depicted highlights yet another figuration of the female subject. While this essay avoids any deep study into Cavendish's metaphysics, Sarasohn writes that, "since the duchess had abstracted God so thoroughly from her metaphysics, nature was left with an extraordinarily large sphere of action."³³ This position is made evident in *Observations*:

Tis true, God is the first Author of motion, as well as he is of Nature; but I cannot believe, that God should be the prime actual movent of all natural creatures, and put all things into local motion, like as one wheel turns all the rest; for God's power is sufficient enough to rule and govern all things by absolute will and command, or by a Let it be done, and to impart self-motion to Nature to move accordingly to his order and degree, although in a natural way.³⁴

Once God has infused nature with the power of regulating motion, nature operates in an almost entirely autonomous manner. God takes a "hands-off" approach to nature, a noninterventionist method of control. In her essay "A Science Turned Upside Down," Sarasohn discusses how woman's relationship with man seems analogous to nature's relationship with God in terms of a woman's domesticated place in the home as a housewife.³⁵ Similarly, I apply this concept to the "household" of the governmental structure in the Blazing World. When the Empress first entered into the new world, she was immediately appointed Empress and given dominion over its creation. For the rest of the text, the Emperor appears minimally, if it all, until near the end where the souls of the Empress and the

Duchess of Newcastle return from a prolonged visit to the Duchess's world. The Emperor does not intervene on the actions and wishes of the Empress at all throughout the story; yet, it cannot be forgotten that the Emperor was the giver of the power in the first place. The Empress did not attain her power for any reason intrinsic to her, with perhaps the exception of her beauty (just as one would choose a wife based on beauty). The Emperor (man) is aligned with God, the Empress (woman) with nature, thereby forming their relationship in an analogous manner to Cavendish's metaphysical belief in the noninterventionist characteristic of God. The female subjectivity formed in relation to the idea of monarch, as outlined by Gallagher, is one that is aligned with the place of nature in the order of the universe. The Emperor is the "invisible force" that initiates the motions of having a female subject position of power. In this framework, the Empress has still yet to exert any power over nature. In this relationship, the female subject, in fitting metaphorically with Sarasohn's powerless yet entirely autonomous description of a housewife, is aligned with nature. There is no power struggle between the female self and nature in this figuring, for they are on the same level of being.

The first real scientific positioning of the female subject in relation to nature is as inquirer into the workings of the natural world. The female subject is portrayed as scientific observer of an infinitely complex nature. A large portion of the first part of the book is devoted to an elongated series of questioning by the Empress to the various creatures of the world. One largely noted and highly significant part of the "relentless questioning"³⁶ is when the Empress and the Bear-men are discussing the nature of the cosmos, and particularly of stars. The Bear-men are avid users of and believers in the function of the telescope, but the Empress is getting increasingly frustrated by the disputes they are causing:

After they had thus argued, the Empress began to grow angry at their Telescopes, that they could give no better Intelligence; for, said she, now I do plainly perceive, that your Glasses are false Informers, and instead of discovering the Truth, delude your senses; Wherefore I command you to break them, and let the Bird-men trust onely to their

natural eyes, and examine Celestial objects by the motions of their own sense and reason.³⁷

This passage highlights Cavendish's questioning of Hooke's assumptions regarding epistemology and perception. For the Empress, as for Cavendish, she believes that the use of telescopes causes more disputes and arguments than existed before, and that the natural eyes we were given to reason with are more "regular" than any "Glasses" that (Bear-)men could create.³⁸ Such instruments like the telescope cause people to waste their time in delusions as opposed to an honest search for truth. This honest search for truth, the Empress shows us, is based on the democratic accumulation of observations rather than through man-made instruments. Lee Cullen Khanna argues that although the Empress reforms, "corrects," and enlightens some of her people's ideas and practices, "she also learns, accepting the authority of various professional insights with admiration."³⁹ The type of knowledge and how it is accumulated or shared is in stark contrast to how it is portrayed in Bacon's *New Atlantis*. The Empress in *Blazing World* establishes and heads her own scientific college into which she recruits her male subjects according to their own specialized discipline—the Bear-men are her experimental philosophers, the Bird-men her astronomers, the Spider- and Lice-men her mathematicians, and so on. Opposed to this, Salomon's House in Bacon's *New Atlantis*, which is essentially an academy of male elders, is dedicated to enlarging "the bounds of Human Empire over nature."⁴⁰ The Empress, framing her scientific endeavors in more "female" terms, limits her scientific interests to more noninvasive speculation and, after hearing everyone's opinion, reflection. This is precisely the kind of learning Bacon deems contentious because "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 lerning . . . of no substance or profit."⁴¹ While a useful comparison, in her approach to scientific inquiry the Empress seems less concerned to exert power *over* nature, indeed less concerned to objectify and concretize knowledge of nature as Bacon would. Price rightfully asserts that the Empress gains satisfaction in what is beyond comprehension: "The Empress's relentless questions thus result not so much in an accumulation of knowledge, but rather slide

towards an arena of other possibilities, which refuse to 'overcome' the difficulties and obscurities of nature."⁴² This noninvasive speculation toward science, indicative of a larger scientific epistemology against objectifying nature, shows yet another shift in the female subject. Although the Empress was given complete dominion and power over the Blazing World, she does not seek power over nature in the form of knowledge: "The Emperess confessed that she observed Nature was infinitely various in her works, and that though the species of Creatures did continue, yet their particulars were subject to infinite changes."⁴³ Cavendish places the all-powerful Empress below nature, contrasted to Bacon's and particularly Hooke's desire to operate above it. The complex and ever-changing depiction of nature in the Blazing World relegates the Empress to a subject position underneath the functioning of nature. Her mind cannot grasp the vastness and intricacies of nature, and, rather than having nature become (in Baconian terms) the empire of the mind, the mind becomes the empire of nature.

The interconnectedness of nature and all its beings leads the female subject to occupy a variety of different positions in relation to nature. From nature saving the innocent young Lady from having her selfhood stolen away in the opening sequence, to depicting the female subject as an enemy of nature, to raising the female subject to a monarchical position of power, to aligning the female subject with nature, to having the female subject become submissive to the complex reality of nature as it presents itself to the sense and reason, the relationship between the female subject and nature is one that is malleable, dynamic, and causal rather than merely reflective or similar. The complexity of the situations presented is purposeful to show the variety of roles the female has in relation to nature. There are multiple figurations that consistently reposition the female subject. It is not stagnant but ever shifting and contingent upon circumstance.

While this essay has spent ample time comparing Cavendish to Hooke and his positions in *Micrographia*, it has yet to significantly contrast Cavendish to Francis Bacon, a fellow writer of utopian fiction and, like Cavendish, a "problematic and ambiguous" figure in the history of science. Somewhat surprisingly, there are parallels between the two that go beyond the opposition normally attributed to them. Evelyn Fox Keller writes in *Reflections on Gender and Science* that beyond

a doubt Bacon's vision was "of a science leading to the sovereignty, dominion, and mastery of man over nature."⁴⁴ For Bacon, this reflected a return to man's initial power over nature immediately following Creation. Keller's focus on the sexualized dialectic between mind and nature, male and female, the dominating and the submissive, is very useful, albeit complicated. While it is difficult to extract Baconian thought without taking the accompanying overtones of a sexualized dialecticism, the most significant point to take from his utopian work, *New Atlantis*, is that with all the advances in science and technology, he sought not to change the natural world but rather to change man's *relation* to the natural world, that is, to raise the subject position of man to dominator.⁴⁵ This is a very productive idea to transfer to the reading of Cavendish's *Blazing World* in that with the shift inward, she sought not so much to alter her surroundings but alter her subjectivity, particularly in relation to nature. For Bacon, dominion over nature did not mean altering the ways of the natural environment but rather how to use the natural environment "naturally" in order to raise mankind back into its rightful position as dominator over the earth.⁴⁶

The connection between Bacon's ideas and Cavendish's text becomes further substantiated during the oft-ignored part of the narrative where the Empress achieves a Baconian mobile rising and repositioning to a position of dominion. Near the end of the narrative, the Empress is informed that her country of origin ("E") is under siege by surrounding nations and towns. Upon finding this out, the Empress exits the confines of the *Blazing World*, finds a way through the one narrow passage that acts as the connector between the worlds, and eventually approaches the shipmen representing her home nation:

The appointed hour being come, the Emperess appear'd with Garments made of the Star-stone, and was born or supported above the Water, upon the Fish-mens heads and backs, so that she seemed to walk upon the face of the Water, and the Bird- and Fish-men carried the Fire-stone, lighted both in the Air, and above the Waters.⁴⁷

The Navy representing her country trembles at the sight of her, thinking she is a deity or some type of angel. The Empress uses such measures to approach the Navy because she wants to reveal her power

to the kingdom of which she was once “a Subject.” She made it clear that she was not returning to the Blazing World until the entire world had submitted to her former nation. Her next move was to reveal her ultimate power to the neighboring nations, those which threatened her own. To do this, she commanded the Fish-men to “destroy all strangers Ships that traffick’d on the Seas; which they did according to the Emperess’s Command.”⁴⁸ And while this act of power confused the other nations, they still refused to give in to the demands of the Emperess, which were that they submit to her former nation.

Frustrated and angered, the Emperess devised a plan. Having the Bear-men use their telescopes to seek out those neighboring towns that had yet to submit, she ordered the Bird- and Worm-men to place “Fire-stones” under the foundation of every house.⁴⁹ They followed their commander’s wishes and upon first rainfall, the natural weaponry ignited, causing chaos among the inhabitants of the towns and eventually a massive portion of the land on which they could live to become barren:

At last a rain came, and upon a sudden all their Houses appeared of a flaming Fire . . . which struck such a Fright and Terror into all the Neighbouring Cities, Nations, and Kingdoms, that for fear the like should happen to them, they and all the rest of the parts of that World granted the Emperess’s desire, and submitted to the Monarch and Sovereign of her Native Country, the King of E S F I.⁵⁰

While no people were killed or injured, the Emperess did not hesitate to use any *natural* means necessary to exert her power over other nations. Through the use—and one could argue the exploitation—of natural resources, the female subject is elevated to a position of ultimate domination over both nature and humanity. As Keller points out, it is clear that Cavendish took great joy in this “vicarious self-promotion,” which for Keller can be read as a critique of Bacon’s claims that science had altruistic aims.⁵¹ I offer another reading. I argue that the Emperess’s utilization of natural resources to elevate her to power is not ironic or critical, but rather a partial adherence to the ways in which Bacon outlines how one gains and exhibits power over nature. For Bacon, the “aim of science is not to violate but to master nature by following the

dictates of the truly natural."⁵² Bacon believes that in order to have power over nature, one must have an understanding via technology and experimental philosophy of its proper and "natural" workings. If the physical environment is used for its proper purpose, then humanity can achieve dominion over nature. Cavendish's lofty ambitions outlined in the prefatory material manifest themselves through her depiction of the Empress and her desire to protect her country by appearing to be their savior. While Keller does offer a position of critique, she also points out that "*The Blazing World* manifests both Cavendish's political conservatism and her greater connection with class . . . divisions. Cavendish never sought to challenge or undermine the social structure of her country."⁵³ Cavendish attained the level of dominance she saw best fit for women—dominant monarch. This domination includes the domination and power over nature. The female subject is portrayed as absolutist monarch over all—the political circumstances and natural resources she had access to.

The passage above that relates to the ambitions of the Empress can be contrasted interestingly with a passage out of Bacon's *The Great Instauration*, in which he outlines three types, or degrees, of ambition:

The first is those who desire to extend their own power in their native country, a vulgar and degenerate kind. The second is of those who labor to extend the power and dominion of their country among men. This certainly has more dignity, though not less covetousness. But if a man endeavor to establish and extend the power and dominion of the human race itself over the universe, his ambition . . . is without a doubt both a more wholesome and a more noble thing than the other two. *Now the empire of man over things depend wholly on the arts and sciences. For we cannot command nature except by obeying her.* (emphasis added)⁵⁴

Through science and art man can find the power to transform not so much the world as his relation to the world.⁵⁵ Bacon makes it clear that this rising takes place on the shoulders of scientific and technological advances. What is singular about the rise to power of the Empress is that she achieves a Baconian rise to power without the use of arts or science, but through the natural resources already provided by nature (that is, Fire-stones, Fish-men, etc.). Despite the fact that the Empress

rose to power, she did so in a humble manner in that she did not attain such a lofty position based on her own intellect or skill, but on the created elements of the *Blazing World*. Cavendish's portrayal of the upward rising of the female subject to a position of dominion *without* the utilization of arts or sciences successfully dismantles the Baconian paradigm, which relied immensely on the reasoning and arts of men. Cavendish consistently reveals to the reader throughout the text that her ambitions are to be in a position of power, to become Margaret the First. Due to the reality of the world she lived in and the circumstances of her life, achieving such power was to take place within the mind, manifesting itself as the utopian text *Blazing World*. In the narrative, the Empress is given the opportunity to have the wealth of power Cavendish desires. Careful not to contradict her positions outlined in the preceding *Observations* as well as in the story itself of the futility of scientific instruments in observing nature, Cavendish portrays the Empress achieving the Baconian rise to power ("obeying" nature and its rightful purposes to achieve a position of dominion) sans the scientific instruments or any of the arts of men. This significantly disrupts the paradigm put forth by Bacon primarily because Cavendish did not outright reject his position through the depiction of the Empress, but rather adhered to his thoughts on dominion over nature, making the ascent to power without any aid of men whatsoever. Nature was the sole facilitator in the change in subject position and should be viewed as the driving force pushing the Empress upwards toward a position of dominion.

The relationship between female subjectivity and nature is one that is dynamic in nature, not merely reflective. The upward mobility to a position of power by the Empress is directly facilitated by nature, thereby signifying a Baconian position in relation to nature without the use of any scientific advancement, which in the process dismantles in a very singular way the scientific vision of Francis Bacon. The tendency to view the relationship between female subjectivity and nature as one characterized in terms of reflection or analogy can be accurate at times but does not present a holistic view of the ways in which each is figured or depicted in *Blazing World*. The variety of differentiated instances provided were intentionally disjointed to show how the actual relationship between both female subjectivity and

nature is dynamic and ever-changing. Although Cavendish portrays the Empress achieving a strong sense of power, she does not retract or compromise any of her positions held against Robert Hooke and his "objective" experimental philosophy. She shows how instruments are of no use and have no pragmatic value to the Empress and her endeavors. The rise of the Empress exposes the reader to Cavendish's passionate ambitions that were stifled by the environment and circumstances of her life. This shift inward toward the self voids the objective world and any attempts of taking her world away from her. The Empress's rise to power is protected and kept safe by the impermeable subjective sheath that surrounds the narrative. The Empress's rise to power near the end of the narrative is the truest form of feminism that can be found in *Blazing World* not merely because the Empress occupies the most powerful position in a masculinized hierarchy which Cavendish sought to maintain⁵⁶ but because she achieved such status without the use of technology or the arts—the mere toys of men.

NOTES

- 1 Bronwen Price, "Journeys Beyond Frontiers: Knowledge, Subjectivity and Outer Space in Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World* (1666)," in *The Arts of 17th-Century Science*, ed. Claire Jowitt and Diane Watt (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002), 127–28.
- 2 Hooke, Robert, *Micrographia* (New York: Dover Publications, 1961), 43.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 43.
- 4 Anna Battigelli, *Margaret Cavendish and the Exiles of the Mind* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998), 92.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 92.
- 6 Hooke, *Micrographia*, 44–45.
- 7 Battigelli, *Exiles of the Mind*, 103.
- 8 Margaret Cavendish, "The Description of a New World, Called a Blazing World," in *Paper Bodies: A Margaret Cavendish Reader*, ed. Sylvia Bowerbank and Sara Mendelson (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, Ltd., 2000), 151.
- 9 Battigelli, *Exiles of the Mind*, 104.
- 10 Julie A. Eckerle, "Prefacing Texts, Authorizing Authors, and Constructing Selves: The Preface as Autobiographical Space," in *Genre and Women's Life Writing in Early Modern England*, ed. Michelle M. Dowd and Julie A. Eckerle (Hampshire, England: Ashgate, 2007), 98.
- 11 Cavendish, *Blazing World*, 153–54.
- 12 Battigelli, *Exiles of the Mind*, 85.

- 13 Margaret Cavendish, "Observations upon Experimental Philosophy; to which is added, The Description of a New Blazing World," *EEBO: Early English Books Online*, <http://eebo.chadwyck.com/home> (March 14, 2009), 30.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 8.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 5–7.
- 16 Battigelli, *Exiles of the Mind*, 95.
- 17 Rachel Trubowitz, "The Reenchantment of Utopia and the Female Monarchical Self: Margaret Cavendish's *Blazing World*," in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 1, 2 (1992): 232.
- 18 Robert Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1971), 98.
- 19 Trubowitz, "Reenchantment," 232.
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 Price, "Journeys," 133.
- 22 Cavendish, *Blazing World*, 208.
- 23 Geraldine Wagner, "Romancing Multiplicity: Female Subjectivity and the Body Divisible in Margaret Cavendish's *Blazing World*," *Early Modern Literary Studies* 9, 1 (2003): 8.
- 24 Cavendish, *Blazing World*, 154.
- 25 *Ibid.*
- 26 *Ibid.*, 158.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 159.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 162.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 153–54.
- 30 Catherine Gallagher, "Embracing the Absolute: Margaret Cavendish and the Politics of the Female Subject in Seventeenth Century England," in *Early Women Writers: 1600–1720*, ed. Anita Pacheco (London: Longman, 1998), 135.
- 31 Lisa T. Sarasohn, "A Science Turned Upside Down: Feminism and the Natural Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 47 (1984): 301.
- 32 Gallagher, "Embracing the Absolute," 138.
- 33 Sarasohn, "Science Turned Upside Down," 295.
- 34 Cavendish, *Observations*, 30.
- 35 Sarasohn, "Science Turned Upside Down," 296.
- 36 Price, "Journeys," 133.
- 37 Cavendish, *Blazing World*, 170.
- 38 *Ibid.*
- 39 Lee Cullen Khanna, "The Subject of Utopia: Margaret Cavendish and Her *Blazing-World*," in *Utopian and Science Fiction by Women: Worlds of Difference*, ed. Jane L. Donawerth and Carol A. Holmerten (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1994), 20.
- 40 Trubowitz, "Reenchantment," 235.
- 41 *Ibid.*
- 42 Cavendish, *Blazing World*, 133.
- 43 *Ibid.*, 177.

- 44 Evelyn Fox Keller, *Reflections on Gender and Science* (New York: Yale University Press, 1985), 34.
- 45 *Ibid.*, 35.
- 46 *Ibid.*, 37.
- 47 Cavendish, *Blazing World*, 237.
- 48 *Ibid.*, 239.
- 49 *Ibid.*, 241.
- 50 *Ibid.*, 241.
- 51 Eve Keller, "Producing Petty Gods: Margaret Cavendish's Critique of Experimental Science," *ELH* 64 (1997): 464.
- 52 Keller, *Reflections*, 36.
- 53 Keller, "Producing Petty Gods," 466.
- 54 Francis Bacon, "The Great Instauration," in *Francis Bacon: The New Organon and Related Writings*, ed. Fulton Henry Anderson (New York: Prentice Hall, 1961), 29.
- 55 Keller, *Reflections*, 35.
- 56 Sarasohn, "Science Turned Upside Down," 301.