

Carmen Borbély

## The Extravagance of Form in Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World*

---

**Abstract:** With its inquiry into the conditions and possibilities of female authorship, Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World* (1666) tends to be read as a gendered variation on, or a parodic departure from, the Baconian prototype of the early modern politico-scientific utopia. At the same time, the text's dialogism, formal heterogeneity and self-reflexivity have spurred theoretical claims surrounding utopia as one of the formal precedents sedimented into the bedrock of novelistic fiction. This study takes up some of these arguments and ponders the possibility of exploring Cavendish's work as an early instancing of the anarchetypal decentredness of novelistic form.

**Keywords:** Margaret Cavendish; Utopia; Novel as Theory; Anarchetype; Form.

### CARMEN BORBÉLY

Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania  
carmen.borbely@ubbcluj.ro

DOI: 10.24193/cechinox.2024.46.11

*By this poetical description, you may perceive,  
that my ambition is not only to be Empress,  
but Authoress of a whole world.<sup>1</sup>*

*Imaginations high, like cedars, show,  
Where leaves of new inventions thick do  
grow.<sup>2</sup>*

Early modern utopias, Nicole Pohl argues in her survey of this “polygeneric and polymodal literary genre,” seek to re-envision polities in *archbistic* or *anarchistic* terms, either by absolutising the prerogatives of sovereignty or by maximising freedom outside the purview of authoritarian control.<sup>3</sup> Published in 1666, a year cemented in the English nation's memory as the miraculous time of reprised restoration from the blaze of a calamitous fire and, equally, from that of a rapacious Civil War and turbulent Interregnum, Margaret Cavendish's *The Description of a New World, Called The Blazing World* subverts the prerequisite of consistency with the formal conventions of either utopia or any of the other genres aggregated in its palimpsestic cartography of emancipated female imagination: romance, the philosophical tale, fantasy, autobiography, satire, blazon, court masque and so on.<sup>4</sup> With its implicit

reference to straying off centred structures or rambling beyond or beside the norm, the “extravagance of form” in my title aims to capture this excess of figurality whereby Cavendish attempts to imagine the discursive matrix that could best convey the fluidity of her writerly imagination, yet instead of sifting through this generic melange, she embraces it as the decentred backdrop for the mobile (re)configuration of an identity in flux.<sup>5</sup> This decentred and decentring aesthetic is consonant with the concept of anarchetype, applicable, as Corin Braga shows, to works whose “lack of organisation opens up the possibility for their going haywire structurally speaking.”<sup>6</sup> Unlike archetypal works, whose structure is cohesive and homogeneous, Braga states, anarchetypal texts tend “to work against, and to constantly disrupt, worn-out models and schemes.”<sup>7</sup> While this drive towards formal innovation is, indeed, visible in Cavendish’s impatience with replicating stultified narrative schemes, anarchetypal divergence from generic benchmarks would deserve to be explored in relation to the ensemble of novelistic experiments of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, prior to the canonical stabilisation and docilisation of this innovative streak in the realist novels of the nineteenth.

As an example of what Julie Park calls the elasticity of subjectivity reflected in the “self-conscious permutations of fiction that drift rather than march into fixed forms of realism,”<sup>8</sup> *The Blazing World* shuns association with either of the utopian paradigms of individual vs. communal identity proposed by Pohl. Even as it imagines retrieving the ideal of an enlightened absolute monarch (spatially, via a fantastic interstellar or interior voyage, or temporally, through a return

to the auratic splendour of Elizabeth I’s reign), the text flinches from an unqualified endorsement of autocracy and advocates alternatives of limitless creative freedom for the female protagonist’s triplicate self (Empress-Duchess-Authoress).<sup>9</sup> William Newcastle’s dedicatory poem affixed to the beginning of this work intimated as much, in stating that authoriality trumped authority and that Columbus’s discovery of the New World paled before his wife’s construction of a “World of Nothing, but pure Wit.”<sup>10</sup>

An elegant solution to this interpretive predicament has been proposed by Catherine Gallagher, for whom the ontological undecidability of selves and worlds in Cavendish’s utopia is the upshot of a strategy of infinite regression designed to counter the perceived failures of absolutism in the existing world(s) with the “superior alternative of making worlds in the mind.”<sup>11</sup> Indeed, in the narrative, the trope of usurpation and restoration, redolent of the deep lacerations wrought upon England’s political body by the traumatic events of the 1640s, is the mark of an embattled monarchy in crisis not just for the Lady who is fortuitously (and felicitously) bestowed with imperial privilege as soon as she alights in Paradise, the Blazing World’s main city, but then must preserve the illusion of her divine splendour by acting as chief artisan of royal encomium to prevent squandering her political capital. This crisis of monarchical legitimacy also tinges the restored king, “Charles the Second,” in the fictional Duchess’s native England, as revealed in the extended allegorical scene in which Fortune, inimical to the Duke of Newcastle, is put on trial for failing to adequately compensate this loyal subject. Not

least, the Empress's planet of birth faces global conflagration as the ruler of "E F S I" is attacked by the neighbouring nations, but these destabilising forces are then violently intimidated into obedience with her spectacular assistance.

Featured in the last section of *The Blazing World*, the splendid display of the Empress's figure in sidereal poses drawn from the Baroque repertoire of court masques (her body is emblazoned with scintillating star-stone and paraded on a flotilla lined with flaming fire-stone), and the astounding arsenal of war technologies she deploys, might indicate that this could easily pass for eschatological fiction, were the punitive or redeeming homecoming expedition the sole teleological end in sight. Narrative closure, of course, does not occur at this point, and it is difficult to ascertain whether it is at all intended to happen in a text that potently articulates the image of an "infinite recessing of worlds within worlds."<sup>12</sup> This can be seen in the final scene, in which the Duchess's inner eye awakens to catch a glimpse of the Empress turned from martial leader into pensive epicurean. Active and transformative engagement with the world is followed by a gesture of contemplative retreat,<sup>13</sup> as the female monarch resumes introspection scouring the night sky in search of other blazing-stars:

One time the Duchess chanced to discourse with some of her acquaintance, of the Empress of the Blazing World, who asked her what pastimes and recreations Her Majesty did most delight in? The Duchess answered, that she spent most of her time in the study of natural causes and effects, which

was her chief delight and pastime, and that she loved to discourse sometimes with the most learned persons of that world; and to please the Emperor and his nobles, who were all of the royal race, she went often abroad to take the air, but seldom in the daytime, always at night, if it might be called night; for, said she, the nights there are as light as days, by reason of the numerous blazing-stars, which are very splendid, only their light is whiter than the sun's light.<sup>14</sup>

Here is where what Gallagher defines as the "privatisation of the absolute"<sup>15</sup> emerges in full view. Instead of ending with the destruction of E F S I, the narrative focus glides in and out the minds of the Duchess and the Empress, who at times convene in Platonic congress inside the material confines of the Duke's own head, while at other times pursue the solitary task of thinking other selves and worlds into existence. Imagination, Cavendish confesses in the Dedication to *Bell in Campo* (a play devoted not just to upholding the virtues of a commonwealth owed to the Amazonian exploits of "noble heroickesses," but also to validating the idea that authoresses can possess wit and "ingenuity for inventions") en-acts fictive worlds that become co-extensive with "my brain the stage."<sup>16</sup> Like this and other texts authored by Cavendish that offer competing strands of political and aesthetic agency to women, *The Blazing World* engages with different scenarios of "extraordinary and flamboyant self-invention" to offset, as Anna Battigelli says, a sense of disenchantment with the self-imposed mask of an "isolated exile" who is seeking refuge in the "inner worlds

of her mind.”<sup>17</sup> In closing her “poetical description” (a fictional narrative that flouts the rather tenuous distinctions between utopia and anti-utopia)<sup>18</sup> with a scene that resumes the recursive pyrotechnics of *mise en abyme* metafictionality, Cavendish outlines an intriguing poetics of the novel (or, rather, of the novel-to-be) in which the principle of authorial sovereignty is interlaced with an astute consideration of the need to liberate literary form from the constraints of precedent if readers are to partake of this aesthetic (and political) game of fictionalisation.

In their introduction to “The Novel as Theory,” published in the summer 2020 issue of *The Eighteenth Century*, Kathleen Lubey and Rebecca Tierney-Hynes argue that the eighteenth-century novel’s “particular brand of self-conscious formal experimentation allows us to see, in sharp relief, form as history.”<sup>19</sup> In other words, the novel’s hectic propensity to challenge generic fixity created the possibility of “alignments between the formal structures of the artwork and the complex forms of a rapidly shifting social world.”<sup>20</sup> Apprehending its own form as a formless aggregate of prose, poetry or drama whose boundaries can be continuously de- and re-figured to make narrative amenable as an epistemic technology or a way of knowing a world in ceaseless transformation,<sup>21</sup> Cavendish’s “fiction” advertises itself as a “description of a *new world*” and foregrounds its own self-reflexivity by providing readers with the categorial filters through which they may ascertain the extravagance – in the sense of motility and volatility – of form: “the first part whereof is *romancical*, the second *philosophical*, and the third is merely *fancy*, or (as I may call it) *fantastical*.”<sup>22</sup>

Cavendish’s *Blazing World* might indeed fit this view of the novel as a multi-form literary mode that was instrumental to cognitively mapping a swiftly transforming socio-political world. It should be noted that the issue of form is addressed in one of the lengthier sections of *The Blazing World* that may be seen as a compensatory scientific utopia insofar as it challenges the ideological tenets of a deeply patriarchal society bent on preserving the precarity of women’s aspirations to have the singularity of their intellectual efforts acknowledged.<sup>23</sup> This section is usually read as a corrective correlative to Francis Bacon’s unfinished and – from the perspective of a female thinker slighted by the new science establishment<sup>24</sup> – slanted account of an all-male intellectual enclave in *The New Atlantis* (1627). Here Cavendish has her protagonist dwell on utopian reforms she feels are needed to improve a world that is already perfect in its paradisaical splendour. Acting as the Maecenas of her newly founded scientific academy (something of a royal menagerie comprised of anthropomorphic animals or zoomorphic humans), the Empress is pictured mounting a point-by-point rebuttal, at times with near Gulliveresque satirical undertones, of the experimental philosophy adopted by England’s Royal Society.<sup>25</sup> In her interrogation of the bear-men, the use of optical technologies (telescopes, microscopes, artificial glasses) to magnify or contract shapes is repudiated as an affront to the artless, truth-disclosing natural eye, since the only way they can represent objects is to distort their form into a fallacious and less than truthful “figure.”<sup>26</sup> The critique of the experimental philosophers’ artful yet futile ingenuity is conducted as a carefully plotted performance

by the Empress, whose histrionics include swooning at the sight of the frightful creatureliness of magnified fleas and lice, and displaying cold condescension when seeing whales diminished to the size of a sprat, elephants to that of a flea, and ostriches as small as mites.<sup>27</sup> The dichotomy ocular reliability / specular unreliability is part of Cavendish's deep-seated distrust in the Baconian project to "enlarg[e] the bounds of Human Empire" over Nature.<sup>28</sup> The ultimate proof of the deficient or faulty mimetics of optical instruments is that they cannot "spy out a vacuum, with all its dimensions, nor immaterial substances, non-beings, and mixed-beings, or such as are between something and nothing."<sup>29</sup> Simply put, not only are visual technologies bound to mis-represent form, but they also cannot invent or produce it. Only anti-mimetic imagination, a faculty joined at the hip to reason, as the authorial preface emphasises, has this figural potential of actualising the latency of form.<sup>30</sup>

As Lara Dodds has amply demonstrated in her analysis of the theoretical paratexts in Cavendish's oeuvre, form or figure – in its twofold distinction from formlessness and substance – can offer a key conceptual frame for comprehending the writer's lyrical, dramatic and narrative works not least because of its pivotal role in giving shape to reality through acts of world-making: "Form is one of the four principles that underlie all reality. Nature deputises Form [...] and her companions, Motion, Life, and Matter, to perform the act of Creation."<sup>31</sup> In *The Blazing World*, the dialogue invoked above, whose significance is exacerbated by the otherwise discreet narrator's triple attempt to adjust the readers' responses to the matter of form,<sup>32</sup>

is resumed with another set of hybrid beings, the worm-men. These act as the natural philosophers of the Empress, who

desired to be informed, what opinion they had of the beginning of forms? They told her Majesty, that they did not understand what she meant by this expression, for, said they, there is no beginning in nature, no not of particulars, by reason nature is eternal and infinite, and her particulars are subject to infinite changes and transmutations by virtue of their own corporeal, figurative self-motions; so that there's nothing new in nature, nor properly a beginning of any thing.<sup>33</sup>

The claim of the contiguity of natural forms echoes Cavendish's insistence, in *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, the scientific treatise printed together with her utopia, that the imagination invents new forms only insofar as it attunes itself to Nature's fancy. In a study that ushered in a long-needed reconsideration of Cavendish's artistic imagination, Sylvia Bowerbank was seeking to put to rest imputations of oddity and nonsensical obscurity against a writer unjustly excluded from canons of literary craftsmanship. The vindicating conceit the critic resorted to, that of "natural wit unrestrained," up-ended correlations of female fancy with chaotic artlessness or "anarchic formlessness" and encouraged readers to zoom in onto the delicately textured architectonics of the cavalier writer's works.<sup>34</sup> As an authoress, Bowerbank noticed, "Cavendish glories in the malleability, multiplicity, and uncertainty of thoughts and desires, contending that, to reproduce nature truly, a

text should be as playful, as free, as various, as copious, and as unpredictable as nature herself is.<sup>35</sup> Even as it is incontestable that Cavendish closely patterned the inter-linked volleys of her narrative imagination on the miniaturised textility of a silkworm's cocoon or a spider's cobweb,<sup>36</sup> it is equally evident that, with its syncopated canter across literary and non-literary modes and forms, Cavendish's fiction may be a litmus test for the notion that the modern novel arose not by way of abrupt generic innovation<sup>37</sup> but as the effect of growing experimentation with the ever more pliable and, to some extent, volatile genre patterns of late seventeenth-century prose narratives.<sup>38</sup>

The product of a mind that is averse to replicative imitation and committed to assiduously inquiring into the imagination's power to create newness,<sup>39</sup> Cavendish's transgeneric fiction tends to be excluded not just from Ian Watt's influential account of the novel's rise on the shared ground of formal realism, but also from literary histories tributary to it, which have conventionally (mis)read the effervescent re-conceptualisations and re-configurations of novelistic form over the course of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-centuries through the lens of a full-blown realism that was actually institutionalised only much later, in the nineteenth century.<sup>40</sup> Illustrating the "inherent generic instability of the novel form,"<sup>41</sup> Cavendish's narratives could shed light on the consolidation of the novelisation impulse, which, according to J. Paul Hunter, irrupted in waves until its sedimentation through self-reflexive engagements with form in the mid-eighteenth century novel.<sup>42</sup> Various critics have already made a case why *The Blazing World* should be acknowledged as the

"first libertine novel by a woman,"<sup>43</sup> or why even while operating outside the aesthetic of formal realism, the text displays an intriguing mix of the marvellous and the verisimilar, of the fabular and the serious, as can be seen in the rendition of the political turbulences afflicting even the most stable monarchical reign, or the imperilled code of cavalier loyalty and the reversal of values in what the Duchess calls the Blinking World of Wit, that is, post-Restoration England, with its recognisable comedy theatres and litigation courts.<sup>44</sup> It may also be possible, as Jason H. Pearl claims, that Cavendish's idiosyncratic doubt, which comes to the fore in her handling of form in relation to substance, is the most ostensive mark of her novelistic sensibility, since she exemplifies a Bakhtinian parodisation and incorporation of extant genres into the novel, "deconstruct[ing] precisely the conventions she adopts," and "subjecting the lunar voyage and its utopian implications to unyielding scepticism."<sup>45</sup>

Written just as other (proto)novelists of the Restoration period, like Aphra Behn, John Bunyan and William Congreve, began trialling out a swirl of self-referential forms that lent themselves to mapping psycho-affective interiority, Cavendish's heteroclitic fictions explore the possibility of unmooring the self – characteristically figured through its variegated, albeit absolute singularity<sup>46</sup> – from the reductionism of empiricist framings of identity. Not just in shorter texts, such as "Assaulted and Pursued Chastity," included in *Nature's Pictures* (1656), but also in *The Blazing World*, the female self, majestically singular in its manifold instantiations, demands to be multiply enframed.<sup>47</sup> Authored at a time when, as Roger Pooley says, the self tended



to be “suspected rather than indulged as an object of attention,” particularly in the case of a woman ostensibly paralysed by the ambition to have her scientific and artistic merits publicly recognised,<sup>48</sup> Cavendish’s utopian text skilfully wields framing and frame-breaking devices to contemplate the identity of self and world as a mesh of overlapping similitudes and incongruities.

Moreover, in recent presentist genealogies of the novel, utopia is associated with a “mode of imagining” the self in relation to the world, for instance, with a way of envisaging individual subjectivity in the context of a political body whose restructuring is attuned not just to the dissipating political capital of autocratic monarchies, but also to emergent social contract theories.<sup>49</sup> As outlined by Peter Boxall, for example, the history of the modern novel ought to expand far outside the formalist hypothesis championed by Ian Watt in his designation of realism as the sole narrative mode that could hope to capture the changing habits of thought of middle-class individuals.<sup>50</sup> Should early modern texts like William Congreve’s *In-cognita* (1692), self-styled as a “novel,” or Cavendish’s self-conscious congregate of narrative forms be excluded from the lineage of novelistic fiction because they fail to speak to the socio-cultural concerns of middle-class liberalism and individualism consecrated by Watt’s still impactful account of literary history, particularly in light of the fact that such texts exploit with exacerbated self-awareness the conditions for the emergence of the novel’s multigeneric form? While not labelling such texts as novels, Boxall commandingly argues that pre- and post-Restoration fiction, including Cavendish’s utopian tapping into

an aesthetic of aristocratic excess, laid the cornerstone for the novel-in-the-making. Discussing the “the rise, in the early modern period, of a certain kind of prose fiction, a mode of imagining that went on to become the novel,” Boxall shows that utopia crucially forged the possibility of “a kind of prosthetic imagination, that is able to make [...] non-being thinkable, and to find in such non-being the foundation of a form of self-ownership.”<sup>51</sup> It is thanks to the “unstable alloy” of “fact and fiction,” or of “the referential and the non-referential” characteristically energising “utopian fictions” that “the structural apparatus of the novel imagination” could be wrought into existence.<sup>52</sup>

Although it may pass for a quirky, unconventional utopia, *The Blazing World* interthreads a colossal array of forms on its extravagant canvas. As insistently revealed by the author, romance, philosophical dialogue, and fantasy, to name just a few of these formal patterns, are strung along like the multiverse elements of her utopian fiction, whether one thinks of the planets orbiting in alignment with the orrery of the author’s imagination, or the suite of subterranean worlds descending to the empire’s city centre, Paradise. Most significantly, as Salzman notes, the complex and layered paratext accounts for much of its “large component of narrative self-consciousness.”<sup>53</sup> In effect, as Michael McKeon shows, the novel’s emergence on the cusp of the eighteenth century was concurrent with changing notions of genre, which had come to be understood less as the code of an “enabling hermeneutic” and more as the parameter of a “constraining taxonomy,” a set of rigors and conventions that novelistic fiction could, and, indeed, inevitably would, resist

and break.<sup>54</sup> The novel's "genreness" was, in other words, predicated on the paradox of its methodical "genrelessness," considering that "the novel lacks generic identity because it parasitically" – albeit self-consciously, as McKeon insists – "takes its form from the traditional genres it parodies."<sup>55</sup> Cavendish's "decentred" aesthetic is grounded in a compositionist stance that prefigures the novel's absorptive appetite for forms and its predisposition to incorporate other genres that, as Bakhtin would say, it invites "into its own peculiar structure, re-formulating and re-accentuating them,"<sup>56</sup> revealing their conventional strictures and limitations, or repurposing them so as to reflect its complex ideational

content. Because it lends itself to being anatomised as an inaugural novelistic text, *The Blazing World* inevitably draws awareness to the prospect of anarchetypal play with, or unsettlement of, form representing not just a dynamic of some novels shooting off the beaten track of formal realism, but of all novels that "drift," at a closer or more distant remove, from that cohesive yet authoritarian beacon.

*This work was supported by a grant  
of the Romanian Ministry of Research,  
Innovation and Digitalization,  
UEFISCDI, project number  
PN-III-P4-PCE-2021-1234.*

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bacon, Francis, "New Atlantis," in *Three Early Modern Utopias*, edited by Susan Bruce, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 149-187.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail, *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1981.
- Battigelli, Anna, *Margaret Cavendish and the Exiles of the Mind*, Lexington, The University Press of Kentucky, 1998. Kindle.
- Bowerbank, Sylvia, and Sara Mendelson (eds.), *Paper Bodies. A Margaret Cavendish Reader*, Peterborough, Broadview, 2000.
- Bowerbank, Sylvia, *Speaking for Nature. Women and Ecologies of Early Modern England*, Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004.
- Bowerbank, Sylvia, "The Spider's Delight: Margaret Cavendish and the 'Female' Imagination," in *English Literary Renaissance*, 14(3), 2008, p. 392-408.
- Boxall, Peter, *The Prosthetic Imagination. A History of the Novel as Artificial Life*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- Braga, Corin, "Anarchetype: Reading Aesthetic Form after 'Structure'," in Alexandru Matei, Christian Moraru, and Andrei Terian (eds.), *Theory in the "Post" Era: A Vocabulary for the 21st-Century Conceptual Commons*, New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2022, p. 121-140.
- Campbell, Mary Baine, "The Blazing World: Literary History, Genre, and the Inner World," in Lisa Walters and Brandie R. Siegfried (eds.), *Margaret Cavendish. An Interdisciplinary Perspective*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2022. Kindle.
- Cavendish, Margaret, *The Description of a New World, Called The Blazing World and Other Writings*, edited by Kate Lilley, New York, New York University Press, 1992.
- Cavendish, Margaret, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, edited by Eileen O'Neill, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Cavendish, Margaret, *Bell in Campo. The Sociable Companions*, edited by Alexandra G. Bennett, Peterborough, Broadview, 2002.



- Cavendish, Margaret, Duchess of Newcastle, *Poems and Fancies with The Animal Parliament*, edited by Brandie R. Siegfried, Toronto, Iter Press, 2018.
- Dodds, Lara, *The Literary Invention of Margaret Cavendish*, Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 2013.
- Dodds, Lara, "Form, Formalism, and Literary Studies: The Case of Margaret Cavendish," in Pamela S. Hammons and Brandie R. Siegfried (eds.), *World-Making Renaissance Women Rethinking Early Modern Women's Place in Literature and Culture*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2021, p. 136-150.
- Gallagher, Catherine, "Embracing the Absolute: Margaret Cavendish and the Politics of the Female Subject in Seventeenth-Century England," in Anita Pacheco (ed.), *Early Women Writers 1600-1720*, Longman, 1998, p. 111-132.
- Hunter, J. Paul, *Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth-Century English Fiction*, New York, Norton, 1990.
- Lilley, Kate, "Blazing Worlds: Seventeenth-Century Women's Utopian Writing," in Clare Brant and Diane Purkiss (eds.), *Women, Texts and Histories 1575-1760*, London and New York, Routledge, 1992, p. 101-132.
- Lubey, Kathleen, and Rebecca Tierney-Hynes, "Introduction: The Novel as Theory," *The Eighteenth Century*, Volume 61, Number 2, Summer 2020, p. 141-148.
- McKeon, Michael, *Historicizing the Enlightenment. Volume 2: Literature, the Arts, and the Aesthetic in Britain*, Lewisburg, Bucknell University Press, 2023.
- Mendelson, Sara H., "Introduction," in Margaret Cavendish, *A Description of the Blazing World*, Peterborough, Broadview, 2016.
- Park, Julie, "Introduction: The Drift of Fiction," *The Eighteenth Century*, Volume 52, Numbers 3-4, Fall/Winter 2011, p. 243-248.
- Pearl, Jason H., *Utopian Geographies and the Early English Novel*, University of Virginia Press, 2014.
- Pohl, Nicole, "Utopianism after More: the Renaissance and Enlightenment," in Gregory Claeys (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 51-78.
- Pooley, Roger, *English Prose of the Seventeenth Century, 1590-1700*, London and New York, Longman, 1992.
- Rees, Emma L. E., "Triply Bound: Genre and the Exilic Self," in Line Cottegnies and Nancy Weitz (eds.), *Authorial Conquests. Essays on Genre in the Writings of Margaret Cavendish*, London, Associated University Presses, 2003, p. 23-39.
- Salzman, Paul, *English Prose Fiction 1558-1700. A Critical History*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1985.
- Seager, Nicholas, *The Rise of the Novel. A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism*, London, MacMillan, 2012.
- Seelig, Sharon Cadman, *Autobiography and Gender in Early Modern Literature. Reading Women's Lives, 1600-1680*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Seidel, Michael, "The Man Who Came to Dinner: Ian Watt and the Theory of Formal Realism," in *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, 12 (2000), p. 193-212.
- Watt, Ian, *The Rise of the Novel. Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1957.
- Webster, Erin, *The Curious Eye. Optics and Imaginative Literature in Seventeenth-Century England*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2020.
- Woolf, Virginia, *A Room of One's Own*, London, Grafton, 1977.

## NOTES

1. Margaret Cavendish, *The Description of a New World, Called The Blazing World and Other Writings*, edited by Kate Lilley, New York, New York University Press, 1992, p. 224.
2. Margaret Cavendish, "The Actions of the Mind Similised," in *Poems and Fancies with The Animal Parliament*, edited by Brandie R. Siegfried, Toronto, Iter Press, 2018, p. 256.

3. Nicole Pohl, "Utopianism after More: the Renaissance and Enlightenment," in Gregory Claeys (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 51.
4. For a more comprehensive inventory of the "contemporary genres on display in the novel, see Sara H. Mendelson, "Introduction," Margaret Cavendish, *A Description of the Blazing World*, Peterborough, Broadview, 2016, p. 21. On utopia as a form in crisis in Cavendish's work, see Lara Dodds, *The Literary Invention of Margaret Cavendish*, Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 2013, p. 122.
5. This idea is indebted to Kate Lilley's assessment of *The Blazing World* as "an extravagant text which revels in the self-consciously fantastic representation of opulence, ornament, novelty and variety as well as the rhetoric of description and amplification, accounting and recounting," in Introduction to Margaret Cavendish, *The Description of a New World, Called The Blazing World and Other Writings*, edited by Kate Lilley, New York, New York University Press, 1992, p. xxiv.
6. Corin Braga, "Anarchetype: Reading Aesthetic Form after 'Structure'," in Alexandru Matei, Christian Moraru, and Andrei Terian (eds.), *Theory in the "Post" Era: A Vocabulary for the 21st-Century Conceptual Commons*, New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2022, p. 124.
7. *Ibidem*.
8. Julie Park, "Introduction: The Drift of Fiction," *The Eighteenth Century*, Volume 52, Numbers 3-4, Fall/Winter 2011, p. 247.
9. Pohl notices that Cavendish's ambivalent utopian stance derives from an imperfect overlap between state and domestic politics. She highlights that, on the one hand, the text's royalist agenda is revealed by the way in which the Empress holds on to joint political and ecclesiastical power to stave off "the disruptions of the Civil War" but that, on the other hand, the disruption of conventional gender paradigms could not be avoided in a text advocating women's "intellectual perfectibility," *op. cit.*, p. 62. On Cavendish's ternary worlds, protagonists and narrative structure as an innovative departure from the bipartite schema of precursor utopias (pitting the real against an imaginary society), see Mendelson, *op. cit.*, p. 24.
10. Cavendish, *The Description*, p. 121.
11. Catherine Gallagher, "Embracing the Absolute: Margaret Cavendish and the Politics of the Female Subject in Seventeenth-Century England," in Anita Pacheco (ed.), *Early Women Writers 1600-1720*, Longman, 1998, p. 142.
12. *Ibidem*.
13. Anna Battigelli, *Margaret Cavendish and the Exiles of the Mind*, Lexington, The University Press of Kentucky, 1998. Kindle.
14. Cavendish, *The Description*, p. 221-222.
15. *Ibidem*.
16. Margaret Cavendish, *Bell in Campo. The Sociable Companions*, edited by Alexandra G. Bennett, Peterborough, Broadview, 2002, p. 47-48, 25.
17. Battigelli, *op. cit.*
18. Cavendish, *The Description*, p. 224.
19. Kathleen Lubey and Rebecca Tierney-Hynes, "Introduction: The Novel as Theory," *The Eighteenth Century*, Volume 61, Number 2, Summer 2020, p. 142.
20. *Ibidem*, p. 145.
21. As Emma L. E. Rees shows, Cavendish disengaged from the demands of compliance with prescriptive formal constraints and opted for "innovative generic play [...] to accommodate her own political agenda." See Emma L. E. Rees, "Triply Bound: Genre and the Exilic Self," in Line Cottagnies and Nancy Weitz (eds.), *Authorial Conquests. Essays on Genre in the Writings of Margaret Cavendish*, London, Associated University Presses, 2003, p. 27.
22. Cavendish, *The Description*, p. 124.
23. See Lilley, *op. cit.*, p. xxiv-xxv.
24. On Cavendish's transgression and transcendence of the rigid gender dictates of her time and on *The Blazing World* as the "first fictional portrayal of women and the new science," see Sylvia Bowerbank

- and Sara Mendelson (eds.), *Paper Bodies. A Margaret Cavendish Reader*, Peterborough, Broadview, 2000, p. 23-26.
25. In her prologue "To the Reader," Cavendish describes her utopia as a fictional supplement, a diversion or a "piece of fancy" added to her *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, a scientific tract that provided her with an opportunity to engage in vicarious intellectual debates with the members of the Royal Society and critique their excessive reliance on technological innovation. The "modern experimental and dioptrical writers" she takes issue with include Robert Hooke, with his extolment of the artificially enhanced eye in *Micrographia* (1665), or Robert Boyle, with *Experiments and Considerations Touching Colours, with Observations on a Diamond that Shines in the Dark* (1664), in Margaret Cavendish, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, edited by Eileen O'Neill, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 10.
  26. Cavendish, *The Description*, p. 144. On Cavendish's sceptical positioning in relation to empiricism's alliance with the hegemonic bias of visual technologies, see Erin Webster, *The Curious Eye. Optics and Imaginative Literature in Seventeenth-Century England*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2020, p. 85-102.
  27. *Ibidem*, p. 145.
  28. Francis Bacon, "New Atlantis," in *Three Early Modern Utopias*, edited by Susan Bruce, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 177.
  29. Cavendish, *The Description*, p. 145.
  30. "The end of reason, is truth; the end of fancy, is fiction: but mistake me not, when I distinguish fancy from reason; I mean not as if fancy were not made by the rational parts of matter; but by reason I understand a rational search and enquiry into the causes of natural effects; and by fancy a voluntary creation or production of the mind, both being effects, or rather actions of the rational parts of matter," *Ibidem*, p. 123-124.
  31. Lara Dodds, "Form, Formalism, and Literary Studies: The Case of Margaret Cavendish," in Pamela S. Hammons and Brandie R. Siegfried (eds.), *World-Making Renaissance Women Rethinking Early Modern Women's Place in Literature and Culture*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2021, p. 137, 143.
  32. "To relate all their optic observations through the several sorts of their glasses, would be a tedious work, and tire even the most patient reader, wherefore I'll pass them by," *Ibidem*, p. 145.
  33. Cavendish, *The Description*, p. 152-153.
  34. Virginia Woolf's lamentation surrounding the lack of proper tutelage for Cavendish's prodigious, torrential, untamed imagination strangely ventriloquises the scathing manner in which the Duchess's contemporaries addressed her eccentric determination to fritter "her time away scribbling nonsense and plunging ever deeper into obscurity and folly," see *A Room of One's Own*, London, Grafton, 1977, p. 68. In her inquiry into Cavendish's poetics of unsubdued style, Sylvia Bowerbank takes issue with undiscerning detractors, for whom the writer's cultivation of "natural wit" has somehow passed undetected. See "The Spider's Delight: Margaret Cavendish and the 'Female' Imagination," in *English Literary Renaissance*, 14(3), 2008, p. 393, 407.
  35. Sylvia Bowerbank, *Speaking for Nature. Women and Ecologies of Early Modern England*, Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004, p. 73.
  36. Bowerbank, "The Spider's Delight," p. 397.
  37. This is a partially contested thesis in today's scholarship. It is associated with Ian Watt's well-known prioritization of Defoe's seminal, because more coherent, use of formal realism as an aesthetic that paid tribute to the rise of middle-class individualism, *The Rise of the Novel. Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1957, p. 32.
  38. See Paul Salzman, *English Prose Fiction 1558-1700. A Critical History*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1985, p. 307-337.
  39. See the second motto to this article.
  40. As Seager suggests, "The realism thus defined by Watt is a nineteenth-century critical standard applied retroactively to the eighteenth century. [...] Watt purports to be tracing in England the

- emergence of the standard eventually to be achieved by the nineteenth-century French realists and naturalists, such as Honoré de Balzac and Emile Zola,” in *The Rise of the Novel. A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism*, London, MacMillan, 2012, p. 37.
41. Seidel, *op. cit.*, p. 193-194.
  42. J. Paul Hunter, *Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth-Century English Fiction*, New York, Norton, 1990, p. 11-26.
  43. Mendelson, “Introduction,” p. 23.
  44. On *The Blazing World* as “Europe’s ‘first’ novel,” see Mary Baine Campbell, “*The Blazing World*: Literary History, Genre, and the Inner World,” in Lisa Walters and Brandie R. Siegfried (eds.), *Margaret Cavendish. An Interdisciplinary Perspective*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2022. Kindle.
  45. Jason H. Pearl, *Utopian Geographies and the Early English Novel*, University of Virginia Press, 2014, p. 45.
  46. On Cavendish’s self-fashioned identity as a “singular woman,” see Lilley, *op. cit.*, p. xii. “Her writings,” Lilley states, “collectively and individually, demonstrate an abiding fascination with kinds as such, and particularly with impure and unexpected hybrids,” *Ibidem*, p. xi.
  47. Like the autobiographical avatars of Lady/Empress/Duchess/Authoress in *The Blazing World*, the heroine of “Assaulted and Pursued Chastity” progresses through a volley of sequential identities, Miseria/ Travellia/ Affectionata, which are formally staged by recourse to the frames of romance, allegory, natural philosophy, moral philosophy, utopia, cornucopia, history, and play-book. See Cavendish, *The Description*, p. 45-118.
  48. Roger Pooley, *English Prose of the Seventeenth Century, 1590-1700*, London and New York, Longman, 1992, p. 87-88. On Cavendish’s troping of the boundary between self-advancement and self-concealment, see Sharon Cadman Seelig, *Autobiography and Gender in Early Modern Literature. Reading Women's Lives, 1600-1680*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 131-139. See also Bowerbank’s discussion of Cavendish’s tendency to hover between “self-deprecation and self-dramatisation,” in “The Spider’s Delight: Margaret Cavendish and the ‘Female’ Imagination,” in *English Literary Renaissance*, 14(3), 2008, p. 406.
  49. Peter Boxall, *The Prosthetic Imagination. A History of the Novel as Artificial Life*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018, p. 30.
  50. Michael Seidel validates Watt’s reliance on realism as an aesthetic that was alert to phenomena already detectible in the seventeenth century: “the psychology of individual apprehension, cognition, and conscience; the material urgency of contemporary experiences; the believability of represented events within the general laws of circumstantial probability; the sceptically driven curiosity surrounding the laws and phenomena of nature,” in “The Man Who Came to Dinner: Ian Watt and the Theory of Formal Realism,” in *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, 12 (2000), p. 195.
  51. Boxall, *op. cit.*, p. 40, 51.
  52. *Ibidem*, p. 52. A somewhat similar perspective innervates Mary Baine Campbell’s notion that speculative/ science fiction predates the novel as “its host, its matrix,” in *op. cit.*
  53. Salzman, *op. cit.*, p. 295, 292.
  54. Michael McKeon, *Historicizing the Enlightenment. Volume 2: Literature, the Arts, and the Aesthetic in Britain*, Lewisburg, Bucknell University Press, 2023, p. 16.
  55. *Ibidem*, p. 16.
  56. Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1981, p. 5.