

THE BLAZING WORLD
OR
A WOMAN'S ATTEMPT TO ESCAPE FROM HER
HUMAN CONDITION

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ABSTRACT: In Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* (1958), the author states that science is an expression of the human being's desire to escape from their human condition. Since 'science fiction' has 'science' itself in its formation, throughout Arendt's approach we may be able to think of this discipline through the lenses of her reflections on science. Throughout this conception, we will analyze Margaret Cavendish's *The Description of a New World, Called The Blazing-World* (1666). Margaret Cavendish (1623–1673) was a British noblewoman who had the opportunity to receive a better education. She had written several texts, such as poems, philosophical essays, and short stories. *The Description of a New World, Called The Blazing-World* is precisely mixed of those genres. We aim to discuss the content of Cavendish's text as one of the first attempts to create a science fiction book that might reflect the desire of a woman to escape her human condition.

KEYWORDS: Human condition; Science; Fiction; Women

INTRODUCTION

In *The Human Condition* (1958), by referring to the reception of the launch of *Sputnik 1* in the news, Arendt states that this was a moment in history when dreams that were, until then, only mirrored in literature and in science fiction, were realized. Referring to science fiction, Arendt states the following: "science fiction (to which, unfortunately, nobody yet has paid the attention it deserves as a vehicle of mass sentiments and mass desires)" (Arendt [1958], 1998, 2). With this statement, Arendt highlighted a source that can provide us with information about the reception of scientific ideas in the community: literature. Regarding science itself, Arendt does not have a positive approach. The author criticizes

science by saying that it is turning life artificial, and creating a society that cannot express truth using words, morals, and reasoning, but only through forms and numbers which cannot be expressed verbally. Without verbal expression, we are unable to discuss the contents of science (Arendt [1958], 1998, 2-3). Arendt also states that the science of her time was an expression of human beings' desire to escape from their human condition (Arendt [1958], 1998, 4-5).

Since the term 'science fiction' includes the term 'science', we may think of this discipline through the lens of Arendt's reflections on science. According to her point of view, science fiction may reflect human beings' desire to escape from this world. And if they do want to escape, this may also reflect not only a desire but also a dissatisfaction with what is available in their perceived reality.

Science fiction is, indeed, a currently very popular genre today, especially in the form of movies. If we look at the IMDb top ranking of movies, plenty of them belong to the science fiction genre, such as *Inception* (2010); *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back* (1980); *The Matrix* (1999); or *Interstellar* (2014). And, if we look at the top lifetime highest-grossing movies, the list is topped by science fiction movies, such as *Avatar* (2009) and *Avengers: Endgame* (2019). This means that science fiction is, in fact, meaningful in today's society, and when we ask *why*, Arendt's statement that science fiction reflects the feelings and desires of the masses may give us a clue.

In addition to 'science', we also have the term 'fiction'. The fictional object is immaterial, while the scientific object is a material one. The first one is a product of our imagination, whereas the second one is a product of our work. Traditionally, we might think that through science we aim to find solutions to specific problems. Through imagination, we access our dreams, fears, and desires. But if we think of science through Arendt's conception, there is a point where science meets imagination. If science reflects our desire to escape from our human condition, this means that science is a material response to our dreams, fears, and desires. We will analyze Cavendish's *The Description of a New World, Called The Blazing-World* (1666), which is one of the first attempts to create a science fiction book focusing on the aspects that reflect a woman's to escape from her human condition.

MARGARET CAVENDISH'S BLAZING WORLD OR A WOMAN'S DESIRE TO ESCAPE FROM HER HUMAN CONDITION

Margaret Cavendish (1623–1673), as you may know, is well known for being the first woman to attend a *Royal Society* meeting. She was a British noblewoman who had the opportunity to receive a proper education. Married to William Cavendish (1748 – 1811) she developed her philosophical knowledge through the influence of her husband's brother, Sir. Charles (Olgivie and Harvey, 2000, 488). The exile of Margaret Cavendish in France during the English Civil War allowed her to establish contact with some of the major modern philosophers, such as Thomas Hobbes (1588 –1679) and René Descartes (1596 –1650). She wrote several poems, philosophical essays, and short stories (Wills et al. 2023, 81-82). *The Description of a New World, Called The Blazing-World* is a mix of those genres.

Cavendish's work opens with a precise inscription: "To all Noble and Worthy Ladies". This book was written as an appendix to her *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* (1666). This text mixes romance, philosophy, science, religion, and fantasy and she wrote this text with the aim of presenting some of the ideas of her time to other women. In the note to the reader, Cavendish also states that "for I am not covetous, but 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 *Caesar* 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" (Cavendish [1666] 2004, 124). This sentence presents her as a woman dissatisfied with her own condition who, in order to escape from this world, had to create a world of her own.

The story begins with "A Merchant travelling into a foreign country, fell extremely in Love with a young Lady" (Cavendish [1666] 2004, 125). This merchant will "steal her away" and they will go on a tempestuous journey across the sea. At the beginning of the book, we can recognize the representation of a woman's desire live an experience different from the one she has known: firstly, because the man is a stranger, with different habits and culture, and secondly, because they are going to travel far away from her homeland, allowing her to live an adventure.

Due to the storm, and because they had traveled beyond the poles, the men

in the boat “freeze to death”. They all die, leaving the Lady as the sole survivor. She is relieved to see that the oppressors who had kidnaped her are dead due to this event: “she seeing all the men dead, found small comfort in life” (Cavendish [1666] 2004, 126). Indeed, Cavendish writes, in “The Epilogue to the Reader”, that in the world she created, not as many atrocities were committed as in the empires of Alexander or Cesar, but only a few men were destroyed in a boat as punishment for kidnapping a lady: “for I have destroyed but some few men in a little boat, which died through the extremity of cold, and that by the hand of Justice, which was necessitated to punish their crime of stealing away a young and beauteous Lady” (Cavendish [1666] 2004, 224).

Throughout her stormy journey, the lady will see different worlds, each one having their own sun:

“you must know, that each of these worlds having its own sun to enlighten it, they move each one in their peculiar circles; which motion is so just and exact, that neither can hinder or obstruct the other; for they do not exceed their tropics, and although they should meet, yet we in this world cannot so well perceive them, by reason of the brightness of our sun, which being nearer to us, obstructs the splendour of the suns of the other worlds, they being too far off to be discerned by our optic perception, except we use very good telescopes, by which skilful astronomers have often observed two or three suns at once” (Cavendish [1666] 2004, 126)

But then she will enter the Blazing World. In order to replace the men that ended up frozen to death, the author introduces another kind of being: “from which came walking upon the Ice, strange creatures, in shape like bears, only they went upright as men” (Cavendish [1666] 2004, 127). These creatures are described as civilized and friendly: “but those bear-like creatures, how terrible soever they appeared to her sight, yet were they so far from exercising any cruelty upon her, that rather they showed her all civility and kindness imaginable” (Cavendish [1666] 2004, 127). Although the bear men are described in a positive light, the bear women to whom she is given are the ones who treat her with respect for the first time: “they left her to the custody of the females, who entertained her with all kindness and respect, and gave her such victuals as they used to eat” (Cavendish [1666] 2004, 127). However, the bear-men community will decide that the lady does not fit into their community, and they will take her to another island.

This new island is populated with fox-lie creatures, who, admiring her beauty, decide “to make her a present to the Emperor of their world” (Cavendish [1666] 2004, 127). So far in this book, we have found three ways for a beautiful woman can be treated: her abduction, her imprisonment, or her sale as merchandise. It is also worth noting that the women in the story have not yet made any decisions, and the fate of the main character has always been decided by men. But this is about to change.

The lady will be travelling through other islands, where she will meet the great navigators and ships of the Blazing World. The ships are described as better than our own, and they have the particularity of not having weapons as they are not needed in this world:

“their ships were so ingeniously contrived, that they could fasten them together as close as a honey-comb, without waste of place; and being thus united, no wind nor waves were able to separate them. The Emperor's ships were all of gold; but the merchants and skippers of leather; the golden ships were not much heavier than ours of wood, by reason they were neatly made, and required not such thickness, neither were they troubled with pitch, tar, pumps, guns, and the like, which make our wooden ships very heavy; for though they were not all of a piece, yet they were so well soddered that there was no fear of leaks, chinks, or clefts; and as for guns, there was no use of them, because they had no other enemies but the winds”. (Cavendish [1666] 2004, 129)

When the lady comes to see the Emperor, he is dazzled by her beauty and believes she is a goddess. So the Emperor decides to make her his wife and give her the power to rule this world as she wishes. Note, however, that this reaction of the Emperor is only motivated by the outer appearance and by the idea that she is a goddess:

“No sooner was the Lady brought before the Emperor, but he conceived her to be some goddess, and offered to worship her; which she refused, telling him, (for by that time she had pretty well learned their language) that although 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. But her subjects, who could hardly be persuaded to believe her mortal, tendered her all the veneration and worship due to a deity”. (Cavendish [1666] 2004, 132)

From now on, the book will consist of a description of a kingdom ruled by a woman. What will be the peculiarities of this kingdom?

Firstly, it is worth noting that the beings who inhabit this *Blazing-World*, despite being created in the likeness of non-human animals, are all described as possessing civility, reason, and sympathy, which somehow dignifies them. Therefore, in this world, we only find oppressed beings, such as women and non-human animals:

“some were bear-men, some worm-men, some fish- or mear-men, otherwise called syrens; some bird-men, some fly-men, some ant-men, some geese-men, some spider-men, some lice-men, some fox-men, some ape-men, some jack daw-men, some magpie-men, some parrot-men, some satyrs, some gyants, and many more, which I cannot all remember.” (Cavendish [1666] 2004, 133-134)

When the Empress begins to rule this world, she encourages her people to pursue the study of the sciences and arts, which she values, therefore creating new schools and societies that she divides into specialized groups:

“The bear-men were to be her experimental philosophers, the bird-men her astronomers, the fly- worm- and fish-men her natural philosophers, the ape-men her chemists, the satyrs her Galenic physicians, the fox-men her politicians, the spider- and lice-men her , mathematicians, the jackdaw- magpie- and parrot-men her orators and logicians, the giants her architects, etc.” (Cavendish [1666] 2004, 134)

This world is characterized as having only one religion and only one God. However, the lady notices that there are no women in the congregations, and the men respond by saying that it is not good for men and women to be together in congregations because the company of women disturbs the prayers to God, leading men to pray to their mistresses rather than to the one God. They also argued women and children cause disturbances in the church and state, and so that their priests and governors were made Eunuchs:

“I never perceived any women in your congregations; but what is the reason, you bar them from your religious assemblies? It is not fit, said they, that men and women should be promiscuously together in time of religious worship; for their company hinders devotion, and makes many, instead of praying to God, direct their devotion to their mistresses. But, asked the Empress, have they no congregation of their own, to perform the duties of divine worship, as well as men? No, answered they: but they stay at home, and say their prayers by themselves in their closets. Then the Empress desired to know the reason why the Priests and Governors of their World were made eunuchs? They answered, to keep them from marriage: for women and children most commonly make disturbance both in church and state.” (Cavendish [1666] 2004, 135)

So she decided to create new churches and congregations for women, which she would lead according to her own philosophical and religious ideas:

“After the Empress had thus finished the discourses and conferences with the mentioned societies of her vertuosos, she considered by herself the manner of their religion, and finding it very defective, was troubled, that so wise and knowing a people should have no more knowledge of the divine truth; wherefore she consulted with her own thoughts, whether it was possible to convert them all to her own religion, and to that end she resolved to build churches, and make also up a congregation of women, whereof she intended to be the head herself, and to instruct them in the several points of her religion. This she had no sooner begun, but the women, which generally had quick wits, subtle conceptions, clear understandings, and solid judgments, became, in a short time, very devout and zealous sisters; for the Empress had an excellent gift of preaching, and instructing them in the articles of faith; and by that means, she converted them not only soon, but gained an extraordinary love of all her subjects throughout that world.”
(Cavendish [1666] 2004, 163)

Note that Cavendish characterizes these women as being quick learners and capable of rational judgment.

Afterward, the Empress asks her advisers a series of questions that reflect the debates of the time about light and colors, the development of the microscope, and the telescope. The Empress takes a negative view of the latter, as the appearance of this instrument had led to dissension in society, and she is skeptical about the truth of what could be seen through it. She also argues that we should only believe in what our sense and reason tell us, which is quite an important aspect of Cavendish’s philosophical perspective: “if their glasses were true Informers, they would rectify their irregular sense and reason; but, said she, nature has made your sense and reason more regular than art has your glasses, for they are mere deluders, and will never lead you to the knowledge of truth; wherefore I command you again to break them” (Cavendish [1666] 2004, 141-142). It is also noteworthy that in the following pages, the Empress approves of the microscope. The discoveries – or the corruption – of the heavens were unacceptable to Cavendish, while new observations inside the Earth posed not theoretical problem. This might suggest that Cavendish was a sympathizer with the Aristotelian tradition.

The following discourses focus on several different topics of philosophy and science, such as the nature of heat and air, the constitution of different animals

inside the earth, medicine, logic, and religion.

There is a moment when the Empress, wanting to know more, makes contact with the spirits. Feeling quite lonely with her ideas, she asks these spirits for the possibility of having as her scribe the spirit of one of the great figures of history, such as “Galileo, Gassendus, Descartes, Helmont, Hobbes, H. More” (Cavendish [1666] 2004, 181). The spirits reply that “they were fine ingenious writers, but yet so self-conceited, that they would scorn to be scribes to a woman” (Cavendish [1666] 2004, 181). They, therefore, recommend to the Empress the spirit of the author of *The Blazing World* herself: Margaret Cavendish, who is characterized as “not one of the most learned, eloquent, witty and ingenious, yet she is a plain and rational writer; for the principle of her writings, is sense and reason, and she will without question, be ready to do you all the service she can”. (Cavendish [1666] 2004, 181).

The intellectual relationship between the Empress and the Duchess becomes strong, and it is even mentioned that “truly their meeting did produce such an intimate friendship between them, that they became platonic lovers, although they were both females” (Cavendish [1666] 2004, 183). This sentence is also a criticism: in the history of philosophy, platonic relationships are often found between men, but not between women.

At a certain moment the Duchess expresses her wish about wanting to occupy a place like that of the Empress, to which the Empress replies that the Duchess would not want such a world of responsibilities, suggests that she should create her own inner world:

“why should you desire to be Empress of a material world, and be troubled with the cares that attend government? whenas by creating a world within yourself, you may enjoy all both in whole and in parts, without control or opposition, and may make what world you please, and alter it when you please, and enjoy as much pleasure and delight as a world can afford you?” (Cavendish [1666] 2004, 186)

Following the Empress’s advice, the Duchess is left to create a world within herself because, as the author writes “The Duchess of Newcastle was most earnest and industrious to make her world because she had none at present” (Cavendish [1666] 2004, 186-187). Running through the philosophical models proposed by ancient and modern men, the Duchess realizes that, in fact, none of them fit the world that she wanted to create. So, she creates it in her own way:

“At last, when the Duchess saw that no patterns would do her any good in the

framing of her world; she was resolved to make a world of her own invention, and this world was composed of sensitive and rational self-moving matter; indeed, it was composed only of the rational, which is the subtlest and purest degree of matter; for as the sensitive did move and act both to the perceptions and consistency of the body, so this degree of matter at the same point of time (for though the degrees are mixt, yet the several parts may move several ways at one time) did move to the creation of the imaginary world; which world after it was made, appeared so curious and full of variety, so well ordered and wisely governed, that it cannot possibly be expressed by words, nor the delight and pleasure which the Duchess took in making this world of her own." (Cavendish [1666] 2004, 188)

Thus, the Empress wonders about the Dutchess's world. She wants to visit it, and she will do that in the form of a spirit. In contrast to *The Blazing World*, she finds our world full of diversity of opinion, ambition, and war:

"the Empress's soul take much notice of the several actions of humane creatures in all the several nations and parts of that world, and wondered that for all there were so many several nations, governments, laws, religions, opinions, etc. they should all yet so generally agree in being ambitious, proud, self-conceited, vain, prodigal, deceitful, envious, malicious, unjust, revengeful, irreligious, factious, etc. She did also admire, that not any particular state, kingdom or commonwealth, was contented with their own shares, but endeavoured to encroach upon their neighbours, and that their greatest glory was in plunder and slaughter, and yet their victory's less then their expenses, and their losses more than their gains; but their being overcome, in a manner their utter ruin: But that she wondered most at, was, that they should prize or value dirt more than men's lives, and vanity more than tranquility: for the Emperor of a world, said she, enjoys but a part, not the whole; so that his pleasure consists in the opinions of others". (Cavendish [1666] 2004, 190)

After visiting her old world, which was in disarray and war, the empress realizes that *The Blazing World* was no longer balanced as it had been:

"ask her advice concerning the Government of the Blazing-World; for, said she, although this world was very well and wisely ordered and governed at first, when I came to be Empress thereof; yet the nature of women being much delighted with change and variety, after I had received an absolute power from the Emperor, did somewhat alter the form of government from what I found it; but now perceiving that the world is not so quiet as it was at first, I am much troubled at it; especially there are such continual contentions and divisions between the worm-, bear- and fly-men, the ape-men, the satyrs, the spider-men, and all others of such sorts, that I fear they'll break out into an open rebellion, and cause a great disorder; and the ruin of the government; and therefore I desire your advice and assistance, how I may order it to the best advantage, that this world may be rendered peaceable,

quiet and happy, as it was before. Whereupon the Duchess answered, that since she heard by her Imperial Majesty, how well and happily the world had been governed when she first came to be Empress thereof, she would advise her Majesty to introduce the same form of government again, which had been before; that is, to have but one sovereign, one religion, one law, and one language, so that all the world might be but as one united family, without divisions; nay, like God, and his blessed saints and angels: otherwise, said she, it may in time prove as unhappy, nay, as miserable a world as that is from which I came, wherein are more sovereigns than worlds, and more pretended governors than government, more religions than Gods, and more opinions in those religions than truths” (Cavendish [1666] 2004, 200-201)

Since the changes that the Empress had made had brought disorder to the kingdom, she decided to return everything to the way it was before she arrived.

This action of the Empress introduces a contradiction regarding Cavendish’s stance on the role of women: although she is critical of the position women should occupy in society, she tells us that women cannot change their condition because it would cause disorder in the kingdom. It seems to us that the author is resigned to her place: not even in an imaginary place can the world be effectively different.

Having restored order to her kingdom, the Empress intends to do the same to the Duchess’ world: establishing one religion, one language, and one government. The empress will thus intervene in the duchess’s world war and strategically and slowly subjugating everyone to one kingdom: even if this means destroying houses and forcing people to pay tribute to the king that they cannot afford (Cavendish [1666] 2004, 205- 216).

The world imagined by Cavendish could be compared to Thomas Hobbes’s philosophical ideas on the perfect form of government. Hobbes’s political ideas are based on the defense of absolute monarchy, where the state is brought together by having one sovereign, one language, one religion. These ideas are also expressed in the Cavendish’s description of *The Blazing World* where it appears a defense of the monarchy and the defense of only one opinion and religion:

“it was natural for one body to have but one governor; and that a commonwealth, which had many governors was like a monster with many heads: besides, said they, a monarchy is a divine form of government, and agrees most with our religion; for as there is but one God, whom we all unanimously worship and adore with one faith, so we are resolved to have but one Emperor, to whom we all submit with one obedience.” (Cavendish [1666] 2004, 134).

As we can see in Hobbes's *Leviathan*, the author does state the need to have only one sovereign:

“The only way to erect such a Common Power, as may be able to defend them from the invasion of Forraigners, and the injuries of one another, and thereby to secure them in such sort, as that by their owne industrie, and by the fruites of the Earth, they may nourish themselves and live contentedly; is, to conferre all their power and strength upon one Man, or upon one Assembly of men, that may reduce all their Wills, by plurality of voices, unto one Will”. (Hobbes [1651], 1985, 227)

Hobbes also defends monarchy as the best form of government:

“in Monarchy, the private interest is the same with the publique.”

“a Monarch receiveth counsel of whom, when, and where he pleaseth; and consequently may heare the opinion of men versed in the matter about which he deliberates.”

“the Resolutions of a Monarch, are subject to no other Inconstancy, than that of Human Nature; but in Assemblies, besides that of Nature, there ariseth an Inconstancy from the Number.”

“a Monarch cannot disagree with himself, out of envy, or interest, but an Assembly may; and that such a height, as may produce Civill Warre.” (Hobbes [1651], 1985, 241-243)

Hobbes was close to Cavendish's circle, as they had both gone into exile in France (Blake, 2023, 81). Thus, it seems quite plausible that they exchanged philosophical ideas as Hutton (1997) also argues in the article: “In dialogue with Thomas Hobbes: Margaret Cavendish's natural philosophy.” Actually, in *The Blazing World*, the author mentions precisely that the Duchess's world (Cavendish's world) was in civil war, and the way to end it was to establish an absolute monarchy. The fact that both lived through the English Civil War (1642-1652) may also justify the need for Cavendish and Hobbes to imagine a possible way to have a stable world in peace.

CONCLUSIONS

Margaret Cavendish's book is rich from a philosophical, historical, and literary point of view, which means that it can be approached in different ways. In this paper, the aim was to focus on the role of women in Cavendish's work. This also allows us to reflect on her model for the perfect form of government, which we may compare with Hobbes's political ideas.

We have, however, passed over the study of Cavendish's philosophy of nature, as well as of her criticism of the experimental philosophy. The author repeatedly appeals to reason, to common sense, to what she sometimes calls "natural" in contrast with innovation, new instruments, or the idea of studying nature through experimentation. Each one of these individual discussions on several topics of science or philosophy could be the subject of an isolated analysis. Her discussions about the nature of spirits and the Cabala are also aspects that might deserve a separate presentation. A longer analysis of Cavendish's political ideas might be also an enriching approach.

According to our perspective on Cavendish's text as the work of a woman who is trying to create her own world in order to escape from this one, we get the impression that the author fails to effectively create a world in which the role of women is changed. Even though several issues are raised that, in today's eyes, we might consider feminist, those ideas were castrated by the pre-established idea that, in a perfect government, women should not be able to take an active role in society. It looks as if the author is finally resigning herself to the position she is familiar with and that, not even in fiction, the world could be as she would like it to be. We consider that Cavendish's political ideas, which are similar to those of Hobbes, may be the cause of her inability to imagine this *Blazing World* as effectively affording a different position for women in society.

This text may also lead us to wonder about whether the ideas embedded in us by society and education can be strong enough that we become incapable of changing them even in an imaginary world. It is as if the author was convinced that, although she had no place in this world, it could not be otherwise: the fact that a woman is ruling in *The Blazing World* does not mean that the other women in that world are in a different condition: it is not enough. In this book, we thus see a woman who is dissatisfied with her human condition, but who does not truly believe that it may change. The best advice that Cavendish may give to the women of her time is to suggest that they create a world inside themselves, as this cannot happen outside. Thus, Cavendish's place is contradictory from a feminist point of view: although she is a woman writing for women in the seventeenth-century who sets herself up as a main character and creates a world led by a woman, this world is nevertheless a male-led world: she failed in giving equal rights to the women of *The Blazing World*.

However, this text was written specifically for women, and, in some moments, women are placed in an emancipatory position, of course. It is also important to note that this text was written specifically for women with the aim of communicating some scientific and philosophical ideas.

This paper is concluded with the conviction that Margaret Cavendish's work is worthy of study today in order to understand the position of women in seventeenth-century England. Her criticism of the "new science" of the seventeenth century is also worth studying, as it helps us to understand that scientific revolutions are a slow process and how they can affect society in its habits and beliefs. It also illustrates the path that mankind has taken to understand the world scientifically, a path that often begins with philosophical enquiry.

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