The Blazing World

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MARGARET CAVENDISH

Margaret Cavendish was born to a prominent English aristocratic family. Because she was a girl, she did not receive the same intensive, wide-ranging education as her brothers. However, from a young age, she constantly read from her family's extensive library and talked about academic topics with her older brother John. She joined Queen Henrietta Maria's court as a maid of honor in 1643, and in 1644, she followed the queen into exile in France. Just one year later, she married the extremely wealthy and influential Duke of Newcastle, William Cavendish, who was also exiled in France. While they were more than 30 years apart in age and never had children, the Duke and Duchess had a deep, loving, and mutually supportive relationship. In fact, the Duke introduced the Duchess to numerous prominent philosophers, including Thomas Hobbes and René Descartes, and the Duke and Duchess frequently collaborated on and edited one another's writing. The Duke dedicated most of his time to breeding horses, fighting for the English monarchy, and financially supporting artists and philosophers—including his wife. For 15 years, the Cavendishes lived in Paris, Rotterdam, and Antwerp. Cavendish dedicated much of her time to writing on a wide variety of topics, in a wide variety of genres. She published her first book, *Poems and Fancies*, in 1653. When King Charles II was restored to the throne in 1660, the Cavendishes could return to England, but the Duke found his fortune substantially diminished—by the equivalent of up to a hundred million pounds in today's money. Still, as Cavendish explains in *The Blazing World*, she and her husband managed to live a relatively comfortable life. She published most of her work between 1662 and 1668, and she always insisted on publishing her books in her own name, which was extremely unusual in the 17th century. Many readers even thought that Cavendish's husband had written her books because they didn't believe that a woman could produce work so sophisticated. Similarly, although Cavendish was famously the first woman ever invited to the Royal Society of London, a prominent scientific society, the male scientists generally shunned and ignored her. In fact, throughout her life, she was often called "Mad Madge" because of her rambling writings and marked, eccentric sense of style. However, since the 1920s, readers and critics have started to take her work more seriously and even treat her as an important early feminist icon. She died in 1673 and is buried in Westminster Abbey.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the mid-1600s, the British Isles experienced a series of significant political transformations that deeply marked Margaret Cavendish's life and work. During the first half of the century, King James I and his son King Charles I constantly feuded with Parliament, the body of landowners, noblemen, bishops, and local representatives that occasionally met to control the monarchy's power by setting tax policies. When Charles eventually ran out of money, he started refusing to let Parliament meet and imposing illegal taxes on the population. Moreover, he married a Catholic woman, Queen Henrietta Maria, and changed numerous religious norms, which made the Church of England more hierarchical and ritualistic. This alienated many of Britain's people, and a rebellion against Charles broke out in Scotland. The Scottish army invaded England and Charles desperately convened Parliament, which promptly took a series of actions to limit his power. War finally broke out in 1642, and Queen Henrietta Maria fled to France in 1644. In fact, so did many other Royalists, including Margaret Cavendish, who had joined the queen's court, and her eventual husband, the Duke of Newcastle. After two wars, the Parliamentarians won and Charles was executed in 1649, and after a third war, Charles's son Charles II was forced into exile. But after Parliamentarian leader Oliver Cromwell ruled Britain as a dictator for several years, Parliament restored Charles II to power in 1660, creating a more balanced system in which the monarch and Parliament shared power. This led to further conflict and, in the Glorious Revolution of 1688, England built the Parliament-dominated system that it still maintains today. While many historians view these events as key steps in the birth of modern capitalism and democracy, Cavendish instead saw them as a terrible injustice because they destroyed the English monarchy's power and left her husband's vast state in ruins. Thus, Cavendish's experience as a wealthy Royalist during the English Civil War is an important motivating factor behind her impassioned defense of absolute monarchy and deep fear of political factions in *The Blazing World*.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Cavendish wrote in a wide variety of genres, ranging from philosophy and biography to poetry and short stories. In fact, she may have been the 17th century's most prolific woman writer. Cavendish published *The Blazing World* alongside her *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* (1666), which has recently been appreciated as a significant work of early modern philosophy that challenges the ideas of major thinkers like Hobbes, Descartes, and Robert Hooke. Cavendish also published several collections of poetry and letters, including *Poems and Fancies* (1653), and numerous plays, the most significant of which is *The Convent of Pleasure* (1668), a comic piece about a group of women who decide to reject marriage

and live independently in a convent. Cavendish also wrote the autobiography *A True Relation of my Birth, Breeding, and Life* (1656) and a biography of her husband, *The Life of the Thrice Noble, High, and Puissant Prince William Cavendishe, Duke Marquess and Earl of Newcastle* (1667). An accessible anthology of Cavendish's work is *Paper Bodies: A Margaret Cavendish Reader* (2000, edited by Sylvia Bowerbank and Sara Mendelson), and as of the early 2020s, Punctum Books is also compiling a 20-volume edition of *The Complete Works of Margaret Cavendish* (edited by Liza Blake, Shawn Moore, and Jacob Tootalian). Significant books about Cavendish include Douglas Grant's 1957 biography of her and Danielle Dutton's 2016 novel about her life, both of which are entitled *Margaret the First*. Academic studies of Cavendish's work include Deborah Boyle's *The Well-Ordered Universe: The Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish* (2018) and Emma Rees's *Margaret Cavendish: Gender, Genre, Exile* (2004). Cavendish has also inspired generations of later writers. Virginia Woolf helped popularize Cavendish's work in the 20th century by writing about Cavendish in *The Common Reader* (1925) and *A Room of One's Own* (1929). *The Blazing World* was heavily inspired by earlier utopian writing, most notably Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), and it set the stage for much later feminist science fiction, including works like Charlotte Perkins Gilman's utopian novel *Herland* (1915) and Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). In 2014, American novelist Siri Hustvedt published a novel entitled *The Blazing World*, which is loosely inspired by Cavendish's life and work.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Description of a New World, Called The Blazing-World. Written By the Thrice Noble, Illustrious, and Excellent Princesse, The Duchess of Newcastle.
- **Where Written:** Welbeck Abbey, Nottingham, England
- **When Published:** January 1666
- **Literary Period:** Early Modern
- **Genre:** Early Modern Prose Fiction, Proto-Novel, Science Fiction, Utopian Literature, Feminist Literature, Philosophical Dialogue, Metafiction
- **Setting:** The Empress's home world, the Blazing World, and the Duchess's home world
- **Climax:** The Empress appears as a goddess when she and the Duchess invade the Empress's home world.
- **Antagonist:** Social divisions, gender roles
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Editions and Audiences. Cavendish published *The Blazing World* on two separate occasions, in 1666 and 1668, and each time, she published both a combined edition (with *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*) and a standalone edition for "ladies [who] take no delight in Philosophical Arguments." In these editions, she addressed the book's prefatory note not "To the Reader," but rather "To all Noble and Worthy Ladies."

Feminist Trailblazing. Cavendish was largely ignored during her lifetime and forgotten until major feminist writers rediscovered her writings in the 20th century. Today, she is receiving more and more scholarly attention, as organizations like the Margaret Cavendish Society and Digital Cavendish Project work to catalogue, analyze, and promote her work. In fact, the actress Carlson Young has written, directed, and starred in two films entitled *The Blazing World* and based on Cavendish's work.

PLOT SUMMARY

Margaret Cavendish's 17th-century tale *The Blazing World* follows a young Lady who becomes the all-powerful Empress of a fantastical parallel world, where everything from popular religion to the laws of nature is radically different—and better—than in our own. While frequently called utopian feminist literature, an early novel, and a work of science fiction, *The Blazing World* was actually published long before any of these genres formed—and it helped shape them in the first place. As Cavendish explains in her author's note, she published the fanciful *Blazing World* alongside her more rigorous *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* in order to show how fiction can help writers and readers alike explore philosophical ideas and enjoy themselves.

At the beginning of *The Blazing World*, a lustful merchant kidnaps the young Lady, hoping to make her marry him. As punishment, the gods blow the merchant's ship toward the North Pole, where the Lady's world meets "another Pole of another world." The merchant and his crew freeze to death, but the Lady survives. She finds herself in this other world—**the Blazing World**—which is full of curious hybrid creatures who have the bodies of animals but walk, talk, and act like human beings. The bear-men, who live near the Blazing World's icy North Pole, find the merchant's ship and rescue the Lady. She is as unusual to the Blazing World's inhabitants as they are to her, so they bring her to their Emperor, who lives in a palace in the gold-and-jewel-studded city of Paradise. The Emperor believes the Lady to be a goddess, and he graciously marries her and gives her "absolute power to rule and govern all that World as she please[s]."

The Lady, now the Empress, uses her power to learn everything that she can about the Blazing World. She learns that the world's inhabitants all speak the same language, follow the same religion, and obey the same all-powerful Emperor. Each species group lives independently and follows a unique

profession, but they coexist peacefully, without fighting over power. The gooselike bird-men, the kingdom's astronomers, tell the Empress about the Blazing World's sun, moon, and stars. The bear-men, who are experimental philosophers, use telescopes to test the bird-men's hypotheses and microscopes to show the Empress tiny objects, like a fly's eyes and a piece of charcoal. The fish-men and worm-men (natural philosophers) teach her about the Blazing World's animals, and the ape-men (chemists) explain how basic elements make up everything in nature. But other groups (like the lice- and parrot-men) humiliate themselves when they present their shoddy work, and the Empress banishes them from her palace. She blames the Blazing World's religion for their failures, so she decides to convert its people to her own. She builds two chapels, one out of the Blazing World's shining star-stone and the other of its burning fire-stone.

Next, the Empress meets the immaterial spirits, who are the Blazing World's most advanced theoretical philosophers. Since they have no physical bodies, the spirits can travel anywhere in an instant and learn anything they wish. The Empress asks the spirits to explain creation and the universe to her because she wishes to write a Cabbala, or a philosophical treatise about the nature of God, the soul, and the physical world. The spirits explain that the world is made up of self-moving matter, and the soul is really just the rational part of beings' material bodies. But when the Empress asks about original sin, the spirits suddenly disappear—they get banished to the other side of the planet.

The Empress reconnects with the spirits and asks if one of them can come serve as a scribe to help with her Cabbala. They agree to send a "plain and rational" woman writer, the Duchess of Newcastle—or Margaret Cavendish, who advises the Empress to write her Cabbala as a fictional allegory. The two women become dear Platonic friends, and their souls frequently visit one another's worlds. On a visit to the Blazing World, the Duchess admits that she wishes she could conquer a world for herself—but the spirits convince her that it's better to rule a fictional "celestial world" than try to conquer a real one. Later, the Empress visits the Duchess's world, where they visit a London theater, observe the English monarchy up close, and meet the Duchess Cavendish's incredibly "wise, honest, witty, complaisant and noble" husband, the Duke of Newcastle, who has lost most of his vast estate in the English Civil War. The Duchess asks for the Empress's help convincing Fortune to stop disfavoring her husband. Honesty and Prudence speak on the Duke's behalf, but neither of them manages to convince Fortune, so the Duchess resolves to learn to accept Fortune's folly. After the trial, the Empress notes that she has created divisions in the Blazing World by introducing a new religion and turning the different groups against one another. She resolves to return to the old system: "one sovereign, one religion, one law, and one language."

In the second section of *The Blazing World*, the Empress learns that a war has broken out back in her native world, and her country is being devastated. The fish-men discover the icy passage between the two worlds, and the Empress decides to send an army to defend her native land. The giants, who are architects, develop a class of special golden ships that can travel underwater, and the Empress leads a fleet of them to the shores of her country, ESFI (England, Scotland, France, and Ireland). Wearing shining star-stone clothes and standing on the fish-men's backs, so that she appears to be walking on water, the Empress gives an impassioned speech in defense of her country. Her people worship her as a goddess. Her army destroys the enemy ships besieging her country's shores, then invades and burns down her enemies' cities until they all pledge loyalty to the King of ESFI. The Empress returns to the Blazing World, where she discusses riches and theater with the Duchess. Finally, the Duchess Cavendish returns to her own world, where she tells everyone she can about the splendors of the Blazing World. In her brief Epilogue, Cavendish encourages her readers to imagine glorious fantasy worlds of their own.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

The Empress – The book's protagonist is a young noblewoman who gets abducted by a traveling merchant and accidentally finds herself stranded in the **Blazing World**. She then meets the Emperor, who believes that she is a goddess and falls in love with her. He decides to marry her, make her Empress, and give her absolute power over everything in this new world. Besides slightly changing the kingdom's religion and system of government, the Empress primarily uses this new power to learn everything that she possibly can from the Blazing World's wisest creatures. She tries to make her own contribution to the Blazing World's advanced philosophy by developing her own Cabbala, and instead she ends up forming a deep Platonic friendship with her scribe, the Duchess of Newcastle (Cavendish herself). At the end of the book, the Empress assembles an army and invades the world she originally came from in order to defend her native country and create a system of absolute monarchy under the King of ESFI. Notably, when she returns to her world, like when she first reached the Blazing World, others treat her as a goddess. Cavendish uses the Empress's eccentric life and decisions to make crucial points about knowledge, society, and power. Most importantly, the Empress reflects Cavendish's personal fantasy of ruling the world, as well as two different political fantasies: restoring the English monarchy to absolute power and creating a world in which women truly could rule over men (just as men ruled over women in Cavendish's real world). Next, the Empress's interest in science and philosophy reflects Cavendish's belief that these disciplines are the secret to understanding—and therefore

controlling—the universe. Similarly, Cavendish uses the Empress's interest in Cabbala and imagination to highlight the way that she has imagined the Blazing World into existence, and to show how fantasizing about alternate worlds and lives can actually be an intellectually and personally transformative process. Thus, the Empress serves as a role model and character foil for the Duchess Cavendish—both the Duchess who wrote the book and the Duchess who appears in it.

The Emperor – The beloved Emperor of the **Blazing World** lives in the infinitely rich city of Paradise and rules firmly but generously, maintaining peace and unity throughout the entire land. When he first meets the Lady, the Emperor immediately falls in love with her, recognizes her as a goddess, and hands her complete power to rule the Blazing World as she wishes. Later, he insists on helping the Empress invade her native world, and he takes after the Duke and Duchess by learning to train horses and direct plays, respectively. Like the Duke, he embodies benevolent, wise leadership: he learns from other people's knowledge, and he refuses to let conventions about gender prevent him from fostering women's wisdom and talent.

The Duchess – The Duchess, a fictionalized version of the author Margaret Cavendish, becomes the Empress's trusted advisor, confidant, and Platonic friend in the second half of *The Blazing World*. The immaterial spirits identify the Duchess as the ideal scribe for the Empress's Cabbala because she is honest, rational, and unprejudiced. In addition to helping the Empress with her philosophy and war effort, the Duchess also gives the Empress a tour of her own native world and pleads that the goddess Fortune treat her husband, the Duke, more favorably. In addition to advancing the Empress's interests and providing her with companionship, the character of the Duchess also allows Cavendish to comment on her own worldly ambitions, including her desire to exercise the kind of power that her society ordinarily reserves for men and her hope to be taken seriously as an artist and philosopher.

Margaret Cavendish – The author of *The Blazing World* is the Duchess's real-life counterpart and the wife of the real-life Duke William Newcastle. In the book's prefatory note and epilogue, Cavendish directly addresses the reader to explain why she wrote the book and how it relates to her *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*. She also comments extensively on the relationship between fact and fiction by writing herself into the novel—for instance, by writing about how the Duchess invents a "celestial world" of her own and tells her friends all about her friendship with the Empress.

The Duke of Newcastle – The Duchess's husband, a lightly-fictionalized version of Margaret Cavendish's real husband, is a wealthy English landowner and Royalist who has lost most of his estate in the English Civil War. He is extremely virtuous, respectable, and well-mannered—in fact, he isn't even particularly affected by losing his estate. He spends most of his time training horses to dance and supporting prominent scientists and artists. Cavendish's favorable portrayal of him not only demonstrates her love for her real-life husband and commitment to the English monarchy, but also highlights the Duchess's virtue and respectability in the book.

The King of ESFI – The king of the Empress's native country, "ESFI" (England, Scotland, France, and Ireland), is suffering a terrible defeat in a global war at the beginning of the second half of the book. However, the loyal Empress sends in her army to fight on his side; it handily defeats ESFI's enemies and eventually forces all of them to pay tribute to ESFI's king. As a result, the political system in the Empress's native world closely resembles the **Blazing World**'s absolute monarchy by the end of the book.

The Bear-Men – The bear-men are the first creatures that the Empress meets in the **Blazing World**. They live in their planet's snowy polar region, and while they look like massive bears, they walk upright and act like humans. They care for the Empress when she first washes on their shores: they nurse her back to health and bring her to the Emperor with help from the fox-men, bird-men, satyrs, and green people. They are experimental philosophers by trade, which explains their advanced navigation and engine technology. They proudly tell the Empress about their (often conflicting) experimental results and show her their microscopes and telescopes. Later, they use these telescopes for reconnaissance during the Empress's military campaign in her native world.

The Bird-Men – The bird-men, who look like large geese but walk and talk like humans, are the third species that the Empress meets in the **Blazing World**. Because they spend so much time navigating the skies, they are astronomers by profession, and they teach the Empress all about their world's sun, moon, stars, and atmosphere. They also tell her about fire-stone and help her drop it on her foes during her military campaign in the second half of the book.

The Fish-Men – The fish-men are another of the **Blazing World**'s many hybrid races, and like the worm-men, they are natural philosophers by trade. The fish-men specialize in studying the ocean's makeup, currents, and animal life. Because they are at home both on land and in the sea, they are key to the Empress's military campaign in the second part of the book. For instance, they find the hidden passageway back to her native world and allow her to stand on their backs (so that she looks like a goddess who can walk on water).

The Worm-Men – The worm-men are one of the many hybrid species in the **Blazing World**. They are natural philosophers, like the fish-men, and they specialize in studying animals, plants, and minerals on land. They teach the Empress all about life underneath the planet's surface, help her find the immaterial spirits to settle her questions about God and the soul, and play a pivotal role in the military campaign she wages on behalf of the King of ESFI.

The Satyrs – The satyrs, one of the many hybrid species-groups who live in the **Blazing World**, are based on the part-man, part-horse (or part-goat) spirits of the same name from ancient Greek and Roman mythology. The satyrs are specialist physicians who follow the teachings of the extremely influential ancient Greek doctor, anatomist, and philosopher Galen.

The Immaterial Spirits – The spirits are a group of disembodied souls who visit the Empress to explain the nature of mind, body, God, and the universe to her. They also help with her Cabbala and introduce her to the Duchess. In general, their ideas reflect Cavendish's personal philosophical beliefs, including her theory that matter is made of living, self-moving particles. Because they are immaterial, or entirely non-physical, the spirits have no bodies of their own—they can occupy different bodies, rapidly teleport themselves across the planet, and even cross into other worlds, which gives them special knowledge and insight into the universe. They teach the Empress's spirit to use these same strategies to travel away from her body and expand her knowledge.

Fortune – The spirit of the virtue Fortune appears in the **Blazing World** to explain why she has long disfavored the Duchess's husband, the Duke of Newcastle. Fortune accuses the Duke of scorning and mistreating her first, but after Honesty blames Fortune for being vain and fickle, Fortune disappears in a rage. The book implies that she will never reconcile with the Duke, who will simply have to accept further misfortune for the rest of his life.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Fox-Men – The fox-men are the second of the groups that the Empress meets upon arriving in the **Blazing World**. Like all the other hybrid races, the fox-men have animal-like bodies but walk and talk like humans. Fittingly, they are politicians in the Blazing World.

The Ape-Men – The ape-men are the **Blazing World**'s chemists. They present the Empress with shaky hypotheses about the origins of metals and the way a few basic elements make up all matter. They also tell her about a naturally-occurring substance that people can use to reverse aging.

The Green People – The green people are one of several peculiar hybrid groups who live in the **Blazing World**. They are ordinary humans, except that their skin is green.

The Giants – The giants are a race of enormous men who work as sophisticated architects (and occasional bodyguards) in the **Blazing World**. When the Empress decides to invade her native world, the giants design advanced golden ships that can sail underwater.

Honesty – The spirit of the virtue Honesty appears in the **Blazing World** alongside Prudence to plead the Duke's case against Fortune. Honesty lists Fortune's crimes against the Duke, but she speaks too boldly—upon hearing the naked truth, Fortune grows furious and disappears.

Prudence – The spirit of the virtue Prudence appears in the **Blazing World** with Honesty to plead the Duke's case against Fortune. Prudence calmly tries to convince Fortune to abandon her feud with the Duke.

TERMS

Cabbala – Cabbala (or Kabbalah) is a school of mystical thought that attempts to explain the nature of the universe, including the relationship between God and the physical world (as well as the meaning of concepts like scripture, truth, the soul, and heaven). While Cabbala is traditionally associated with Judaism, during Cavendish's life, there were also significant Christian and philosophical Cabbalistic traditions. In *The Blazing World*, **the Empress** tries to develop her own Cabbala (or interpretive theory of the universe) in collaboration with **the immaterial spirits**, but she ends up inventing a "celestial world" of fantasy instead.

Platonic Love/Friendship – Platonic love (or Platonic friendship) is a deep but non-romantic kind of love that is based on admiration for the beauty, virtue, and divinity in another person's soul. In *The Blazing World*, **the Empress** and **the Duchess** become close Platonic friends. Philosophers influenced by Plato's *Symposium* first popularized this idea in Queen Henrietta Maria's court, where Cavendish spent much of her youth. Today, the term is often used to refer to any non-romantic friendship, but Plato's followers (and Cavendish) meant it in this more specific sense.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

FICTION, FANCY, AND UTOPIA

In *The Blazing World*, which is often considered an early utopian novel and pioneering work of science fiction, Margaret Cavendish writes of a young noblewoman who gets kidnapped and brought to another, parallel world, where the inhabitants care for her and make her their Empress. But these inhabitants are not ordinary human beings: they're monstrous, fantastical, yet benevolent animal-human hybrids, like bear-men, fish-men, giants, and satyrs. Once she becomes Empress, the book's protagonist dedicates her life to learning about her new world, which allows Cavendish to describe every detail in it with scientific precision,

from the way ice forms and the nature of the stars to the division between soul and body. Yet, while Cavendish deeply values rationality and scientific thinking, *The Blazing World* is fundamentally about the power of fancy. Specifically, Cavendish uses the Empress's Blazing World to show how fantasy—and utopian thinking and science fiction, by extension—can help people achieve insight and fulfillment by giving them total freedom to explore their identity, ambitions, and interests in an imaginary world of their own making. This is true for both writers and readers. Cavendish uses the Blazing World to indulge her fantasies of abolishing the patriarchy, ruling the world, and achieving total knowledge of everything in it. Meanwhile, the book calls her readers to imagine how the gender, class, and species hierarchies that govern their own world could be different and, in so doing, to view science fiction as a serious intellectual exercise.

Halfway through *The Blazing World*, when the Empress decides to write her own Cabbala (a mystical interpretation of God and the Hebrew Bible), she chooses to revive a historical figure as her scribe. After she tries and fails to work with a series of ancient philosophers, she instead chooses the Duchess of Newcastle—Margaret Cavendish herself. Throughout the rest of the book, the Empress and the Duchess become deep Platonic friends, visit each of their native worlds, and invent their own fantasy worlds together. By writing herself into the Empress's life, Cavendish shows how fiction allows readers, writers, and characters to share in life-changing adventures. Just as the Duchess's and Empress's souls can travel through different worlds, Cavendish argues, everyone can do the same by imagining and reading about fictional universes.

GENDER HIERARCHY AND WOMEN'S FREEDOM

When she published *The Blazing World* in the 17th century, Margaret Cavendish was already remarkable in several ways: while most women writers modeled themselves after men, even to the point of using male pseudonyms, Cavendish insisted on writing under her own name and imagining an alternative universe where women rule with the same power and gusto as men. In fact, this is why critics often consider *The Blazing World* as an important precursor to modern feminist literature. The book starts as a parody of medieval romance: a traveling merchant falls in love with a young woman, and rather than wooing her, he abducts her. Then, rather than learning to submit to male authority, like she might in a contemporary romance novel, the woman instead finds her abductor frozen to death and then travels to a new world—a remarkable fantasy world without clear species distinctions or gender hierarchies. She eventually becomes the Empress of this world, which she rules in consort with her most trusted advisor—the soul of Cavendish herself. Cavendish presents the Blazing World as an alternative to the patriarchal gender roles that deeply oppressed women in the early modern period. Through this imaginary world, she shows how gender hierarchy harms everyone by preventing women from fully exercising their abilities and contributing to society as a whole.

MONARCHY AND GOVERNMENT

Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World* is most often praised for its dazzling depiction of an alternate world and forward-thinking ideas about gender, but Cavendish also wrote the book to explore various different approaches to politics and government. She depicts the Blazing World's Emperor as an absolutely powerful ruler, who maintains peace across his entire world and is beloved by all. Later, the Emperor hands his absolute power to the Empress, whom he and his subjects consider a goddess. But when the Empress changes laws and starts to favor some groups over others, conflict starts to emerge, and she eventually realizes that she has made a terrible mistake. She returns to the old system of "one sovereign, one religion, one law, and one language," which solves the kingdom's troubles. In other words, she learns that the best way to foster peace and unity is by concentrating all power in as few hands as possible. In fact, at the end of the book, the Empress dresses up as a radiant goddess, invades the world where she originally lived, and conquers every single country in it—then hands power to her native country's king. Thus, she recreates the Blazing World's system of government in her own world. This is particularly significant because Cavendish was writing in the aftermath of the English Civil War, which briefly overthrew the English monarchy and forced royalists into exile—including Cavendish and her husband, the Duke of Newcastle. Clearly, the Empress's revolution, regret, and restoration of the old system are a metaphor for the English monarchy's fall and restoration in the 1650s–60s.

Cavendish presents benevolent but absolute monarchy as the best system of government because she believes that the best way to foster unity and equality in a nation is by concentrating power in as few hands as possible. This might seem counterintuitive to modern readers, particularly those who view Cavendish as an early feminist icon. Modern feminists generally fight against women's oppression by appealing to broader democratic values, like the idea that all people are equal and should share power. But these ideas simply didn't exist in Cavendish's time—and if they did, she no doubt would have opposed them, as her life and marriage made her a lifelong defender of the British monarchy. In fact, *The Blazing World* can be seen as an aggressive anti-democratic response to the Parliamentarians, who fought the Civil War to hand power to Parliament (an assembly of wealthy landowners). Specifically, Cavendish suggests that dividing power into many hands inevitably causes factionalism, tension, and violence because, when *nobody* has absolute power, elites will fight to take it.

PHILOSOPHY, SCIENCE, AND RELIGION

The most eye-catching portions of *The Blazing World* are no doubt the Empress's fantastical journey from one world to another, descriptions of the Blazing World's remarkable nature and creatures, and magnificent military campaign to conquer the world that she originally came from. But almost half of the book also consists of her in-depth philosophical, scientific, and religious dialogues with the creatures and immaterial spirits in her new world. Each group has a specific occupation fitting its nature—for instance, the giants are architects, the bird-men are astronomers, and the immaterial spirits are philosophers who know the truth about the nature of mind, matter, and God. Through her conversations with these intellectuals, the Empress learns all sorts of fascinating truths about phenomena that are well-understood today, but totally baffled scientists in the 17th century. In fact, like in much science fiction, Cavendish contrasts her imagined world's advanced science, philosophy, religion, and technology with the real world's in order to highlight how profoundly a society's collective knowledge in these fields shapes its success. After all, the Empress has absolute power to do anything she wants in the Blazing World, yet chooses to dedicate her time to thinking about science, philosophy, and religion. This is because Cavendish thinks that understanding the nature of the universe is one of the most valuable ways that people can spend their lives, and science, philosophy, and religion are three dimensions of this project. More specifically, she shows how rigorous scientific inquiry can give people powerful technology by uncovering useful truths about the natural world, while religion gives them purpose and direction by revealing the meaning of the universe to them. Finally, philosophy brings science and religion into a greater unity by explaining the relationship between the physical and spiritual worlds. Tellingly, while Cavendish emphasizes that some religious questions are unanswerable, she also argues that the world is just made of "rational self-moving matter," so science is far more important than religion when it comes to understanding it. In fact, Cavendish published *The Blazing World* alongside another work, her *Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy*, and in her introductory note to the book she explains that she views philosophy and fiction as two complementary halves of the same intellectual project.

LOVE AND FRIENDSHIP

The plot of *The Blazing World* centers on the Empress's scientific, political, and military ambitions. But while the Empress structures her life and government around these interests, they aren't her greatest source of pleasure or satisfaction. Instead, even after she conquers the world and learns everything she can possibly know about it, her deepest desire is to spend time with her beloved Platonic friend, the Duchess (a fictionalized version of Margaret Cavendish herself). Ultimately, she values this relationship more than her wealth, fame, and power. So does the Duchess, whose loyalty to the Empress compares only to her treasured relationship with her husband, the Duke. By putting these deep relationships front and center in her book, Cavendish suggests that love and friendship are foundational to human flourishing. Specifically, she believes that the most powerful relationships depend on Platonic love, or loving another person for their inherent goodness and virtue. Through her depiction of the Empress and Duchess's friendship, Cavendish shows that building ethical, loving, mutual relationships like theirs is crucial to living a good life (and specifically to developing wisdom and virtue).

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

FIRE, BLAZES, AND LIGHT

The Blazing World is full of unlikely sources of fire and light, which represent its status as a utopia—and also the personal and philosophical benefits that Cavendish associates with utopian thinking. From its blazing stars and endless sparkling jewels to its legendary fire-stone, the Blazing World's bright, spectacular things clearly mark it as morally, technologically, and naturally superior to the Empress's native world (as well as our own). After all, light and fire are the visual characteristics that first impress the Empress when she arrives in the Emperor's city of Paradise. And they're also the same traits that stun the people of her native world when she invades: because of the way the Empress's star-stone dress, fire-stone-wielding army, and gold ships let off light, these people view her as an all-powerful goddess, even though she is really one of their own. Thus, the Blazing World is recognizable as a superior utopia because of the way it blazes, and the Empress gains such great power in it precisely because she learns to harness the Blazing World's abundance of light and fire. In other words, technologies associated with light and fire make possible both female empowerment and absolute, centralized power—the same utopian social phenomena that Cavendish hoped to explore by writing this book.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *The Blazing World* published in 1992.

To the Reader Quotes

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: for which no body, I hope, will blame me, since it is in every one's power to do the like.

Related Characters: Margaret Cavendish (speaker), Fortune, The Empress

Related Themes:

Page Number: 124

Explanation and Analysis

In her introductory note to *The Blazing World*, Margaret Cavendish explains what motivated her to write the book. She has great social, political, and intellectual ambitions, but as a woman without royal lineage living in the 17th century, she has no practical way to achieve them. Even though her husband is a powerful Duke, Cavendish will never wield true political power, nor will her contemporaries take her seriously as a philosopher or scientist. Thus, lacking options in the real world, she turns to fantasy instead. As Cavendish explains here, fiction allows her to create an imaginary parallel world, a utopia in which everything works exactly the way she wants. She can control her Blazing World's nature, government, history, society, and more—and she can explore it far more than real-life kings and queens can explore the realms they rule over. Thus, Cavendish combines a critique of England's patriarchal government and scientific establishment with a defense of fiction, fantasy, and utopian thinking as strategies for women to find freedom in an unfree world. She may not be able to rule in the real world, but she decides that ruling over the Blazing World is no poor substitute.

Part 1 Quotes

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 a voyage, were all frozen to death, the young Lady only, by the light of her beauty, the heat of her youth, and protection of the gods, remaining alive: neither was it a wonder that the men did freeze to death; for they were not only driven to the very end or point of the Pole of that world, but even to another Pole of another world, which joined close to it; so that the cold having a double strength at the conjunction of those two Poles, was insupportable: at last, the boat still passing on, was forced into another world.

Related Characters: Margaret Cavendish (speaker), The Empress

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 125-6

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of *The Blazing World*, a vile merchant abducts a young noblewoman in hopes of making her his wife. The gods angrily blow the merchant's ship towards the icy North Pole, where he and his crew freeze to death. But the Lady survives the cold because her beauty and youth keep her warm, and she sails on into the parallel universe—the Blazing World—where she will soon become the Empress.

In addition to setting the stage for the rest of the book's eccentric plot, this passage helps contextualize Cavendish's writing in relation to the literary norms and genres of her time. *The Blazing World* begins as an unusual inversion of a romance story: rather than a chivalrous gentleman wooing a beautiful maiden, it begins with a lecherous villain attacking one. While the Lady is passive and helpless in this opening scene, like in a conventional romance, she soon becomes anything but—as the Empress, she is wise and all-powerful. She still falls in love—not with the merchant, but rather the wise, complacent Emperor. And she remains beautiful, but her beauty isn't merely something for men to appreciate and desire. Instead, her beauty is a source of *power*. Here, this power manifests in the heat that keeps her alive, but later, it allows her to invade and conquer entire worlds. Thus, by transporting the traditional romance story into the Blazing World and turning the Lady into its protagonist, Cavendish presents a better alternative to fiction and

society's restrictive, patriarchal norms.

> They made their ships and tacklings ready to sail over into the island, where the Emperor of their Blazing World (for so it was called) kept his residence; very good navigators they were; […] above the rest, they had an extraordinary art, much to be taken notice of by experimental philosophers, and that was a certain engine, which would draw in a great quantity of air, and shoot forth wind with a great force; this engine in a calm, they placed behind their ships, and in a storm, before; for it served against the raging waves, like canons against an hostile army, or besieged town.

Related Characters: Margaret Cavendish (speaker), The Empress, The Emperor

Related Themes:

Page Number: 128-9

Explanation and Analysis

After the Lady arrives in the Blazing World, the world's inhabitants take her to meet the Emperor in his city, Paradise. While the Blazing World's extraordinary hybrid creatures already signal that this world is very different from the Lady's—and the reader's—native one, its superiority isn't clear until the Lady sees its navigation technology. The Blazing World's inhabitants have extraordinary engines that let them speed across the oceans. Of course, scientists in Cavendish's time knew that such technology was possible—after all, she is describing engines similar to modern steam engines. This shows how Cavendish saw great potential in the kind of literature now called science fiction: it can help readers and writers understand the implications of technologies, events, and social arrangements that don't yet exist. Thus, these incredible engines are the first indication that the Blazing World will hold a futuristic mirror up to Cavendish's own world and challenge her readers' assumptions about what is possible in science and nature.

> 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.

Related Characters: Margaret Cavendish (speaker), The Empress, The Emperor

Related Themes:

Page Number: 132

Explanation and Analysis

When the Lady arrives in the Blazing World, its inhabitants immediately take her to their Emperor, who lives in the glorious, jewel-studded city of Paradise. The Emperor and his subjects see the beautiful, otherworldly Lady as a goddess and start to worship her. Unlike the evil merchant who kidnaps the Lady at the beginning of the book, the Emperor is noble and wise. When he decides to marry the Lady, she welcomes his offer and becomes the all-powerful Empress. This scene sets up the rest of the book, in which the Lady rules and learns all about the Blazing World, but it also clearly shows why Cavendish's writing was so innovative in the 17th century.

First, Cavendish uses the Lady and the Emperor's meeting to comment on the relationship between novelty, knowledge, and religion. While readers are being dazzled by the exotic, utopian Blazing World, they can easily forget that the human Lady is just as new and unfathomable to the Blazing World's creatures as they are to her. Cavendish also sketches a critique of religion in this scene: people worship things they don't understand, fooling themselves into viewing such things as divine. Second, the Empress becomes a powerful female monarch, able to rule the Blazing World however she wishes—something that Cavendish thinks would certainly never happen on Earth (not even with England's queens). Of course, as Cavendish hints in her prefatory note, she creates the Empress in order to live out her own fantasies of world domination—which she can fulfill only in fiction, and never in fact. Third and finally, Cavendish reclaims the basic story of medieval romance that she inverted at the beginning of the book—the chivalrous man wooing the beautiful woman. However, in Cavendish's version of this story, the woman is

not forced to submit to the man—on the contrary, he recognizes her worthiness and offers her the power she desires. In other words, Cavendish suggests that love, romance, and even chivalry are fully compatible with freedom and equality for women.

> The bear-men being exceedingly troubled at her Majesty's displeasure concerning their telescopes, kneeled down, and in the humblest manner petitioned that they might not be broken; for, said they, we take more delight in artificial delusions, than in natural truths. Besides, we shall want employments for our senses, and subjects for arguments; for were there nothing but truth, and no falsehood, there would be no occasion for to dispute, and by this means we should want the aim and pleasure of our endeavours in confuting and contradicting each other; neither would one man be thought wiser than another, but all would either be alike knowing and wise, or all would be fools; wherefore we most humbly beseech your Imperial Majesty to spare our glasses, which are our only delight, and as dear to us as our lives.

Related Characters: Margaret Cavendish (speaker), The Empress, The Bear-Men

Related Themes:

Page Number: 142

Explanation and Analysis

After becoming the Empress of the Blazing World, Cavendish's protagonist sets out trying to understand her new kingdom. She learns about its government and religion, then dedicates ample time to its science, which is far more specialized than science in her native world. In fact, each of the Blazing World's numerous hybrid animal-races specializes in one field of knowledge, and collectively, they know far more about their world than Cavendish's contemporaries in England did about theirs. Of course, when Cavendish was writing, modern scientific disciplines did not yet exist—in this passage, she is meeting with the bear-men, who are experimental philosophers (the equivalent of natural scientists today). She asks the bear-men to use their telescopes to test the bird-men's astronomical theories, and after they do, they return to report a number of contradictory conclusions. Their experiments don't clarify anything: they only confuse the Empress further. So the Empress angrily orders them to destroy their telescopes, and this passage describes what transpires next.

While instruments like telescopes are conventionally used in science today, they were not in Cavendish's time. In fact, they were new and controversial, and Cavendish had strong opinions about them. For instance, she publicly feuded with the scientist Robert Hooke, who promoted the use of microscopes, and this scene is a direct reference to their disagreement. When the bear-men's telescopes fail, Cavendish is really mocking scientists like Hooke, whom she thought were overconfident about the potential of their new technologies. Yet this is by no means her only point in this scene—or even her primary one. After all, in this passage, the bear-men convince the Empress to spare their telescopes by explaining how trial, error, and disagreement are essential to healthy scientific progress. New experimental methods do not work instantly—rather, scientists must improve them until they do. Similarly, scientists seldom instantly recognize and agree on the truth—instead, they have to collect lots of evidence and debate one another in order to gradually form a consensus over time. Cavendish clearly recognizes and supports this model of science: even though the Empress criticizes the bear-men's faulty telescopes, she still supports their efforts to improve them. Thus, at the same time as Cavendish criticizes her contemporaries for their blind faith in new methods like microscopes, she still agrees with their underlying belief that the scientific community can gradually uncover important truths about the world by developing and refining new technologies. She takes issue with arrogant scientists, but not with science itself.

> How is it possible, that a natural nothing can have a being in nature? If it be no substance, it cannot have a being, and if no being, it is nothing; [...] all parts of nature are composed in one body, and though they may be infinitely divided, commixed and changed in their particulars, yet in general, parts cannot be separated from parts as long as nature lasts; nay, we might as probably affirm, that infinite nature would be as soon destroyed, as that one atom could perish; and therefore your Majesty may firmly believe, that there is no body without colour, nor no colour without body; for colour, figure, place, magnitude, and body, are all but one thing, without any separation or abstraction from each other.

Related Characters: The Worm-Men (speaker), The Empress

Related Themes:

Page Number: 151

Explanation and Analysis

The Empress and the wise worm-men hold a wide-ranging scientific discussion on topics as varied as reproduction, hydrology, and the formation of minerals. Then, the conversation takes a philosophical turn that foreshadows the Empress's coming debates with the immaterial spirits and introduces Cavendish's unconventional views about the nature of mind and matter. The Empress asks the worm-men if there are colorless minerals, and the worm-men reply that there can't be, since color is an inherent property of all physical matter. According to the worm-men, nothing can be totally colorless for the same reason that nothing can be sizeless or shapeless: everything that exists must have color (and a shape, size, place, and so on), just because that's part of what existing requires. This is why the worm-men say that there can be no "natural nothing" in nature—nothing can exist without color, size, shape, and so on, because all of these properties are definitionally part of what it means to exist in the world. For instance, it's impossible to imagine a colorless, sizeless rock—it either has color or size, or it doesn't exist.

The worm-men connect this claim about the way matter's properties are inherent inside it with another claim about the structure of the universe as a whole. Namely, the universe is one huge, composite whole, and everything in it gets preserved—as modern scientists put it, matter can never be created or destroyed, only transformed. Even if the universe is constantly moving and changing, on the whole, its overall composition will always remain the same. For the worm-men, this explains why it's impossible to take the color, size, position, or shape out of an object: these properties must also be conserved, even if they can change. (For instance, an object can move, but it will always have *some* position.) Of course, this argument might sound counterintuitive and incomplete to modern readers. But it does clearly show Cavendish's creativity and takes a scientific approach to traditionally philosophical problems (like the relationship between matter and its qualities), as well as her unusual theory that the mind and the body are *both* physical objects. For Cavendish, there is nothing beyond or outside nature—even our thoughts are just the mind's "rational motions."

> Both by my own contemplation, and the observations which I have made by my rational and sensitive perception upon nature, and her works, I find, that nature is but one infinite self-moving body, which by the virtue of its self-motion, is divided into infinite parts, which parts being restless, undergo perpetual changes and transmutations by their infinite compositions and divisions. Now, if this be so, as surely, according to regular sense and reason, it appears no otherwise; it is in vain to look for primary ingredients, or constitutive principles of natural bodies, since there is no more but one universal principle of nature, to wit, self-moving matter, which is the only cause of all natural effects.

Related Characters: The Empress (speaker), The Ape-Men

Related Themes:

Page Number: 154

Explanation and Analysis

After listening to the ape-men explain their research showing that certain fundamental elements make up all matter, the Empress presents her own theory of everything: nature is an "infinite self-moving body" made up of nothing but constantly-changing, "self-moving matter." This might sound jumbled or meaningless, but it's actually crucial to understanding why Cavendish's work was so innovative. In her time, like throughout history, philosophers assumed that the world is made up of two different kinds of things: physical matter and immaterial energy. For instance, they view human beings as the unity of the (immaterial) mind or soul and the (material) body. One reason this view is useful is that it explains why some beings are alive and others are not. (Living beings have spirits, the logic goes, and nonliving things do not.)

But Cavendish rejects this worldview entirely. She thinks that, rather than two kinds of substances in the universe, there's only one: "self-moving matter." This means that the soul isn't immaterial at all—rather, it's just a very light kind of matter (similar to air, Cavendish clarifies). For Cavendish, everything in the world is just made of matter, and it all interacts according to the laws of nature. This is significant because it implies that the natural sciences have a much more important role to play in explaining the ways of the world. For instance, if the soul is immaterial, then it can only be studied through religion or philosophy, but if it is made of matter (as many neuroscientists think today), then it can be studied through scientific experiments. Thus, Cavendish's philosophy wasn't just unconventional: it also predicted new philosophical trends and the growing role of science over the several centuries after her death.

Thus they argued, and intended to go on, but the Empress interrupted them: I have enough, said she, of your chopped logic, and will hear no more of your syllogisms; for it disorders my reason, and puts my brain on the rack; your formal argumentations are able to spoil all natural wit; and I'll have you to consider, that art does not make reason, but reason makes art; and therefore as much as reason is above art, so much is a natural rational discourse to be preferred before an artificial: for art is, for the most part, irregular, and disorders men's understandings more than it rectifies them, and leads them into a labyrinth whence they'll never get out, and makes them dull and unfit for useful employments; especially your art of logic, which consists only in contradicting each other, in making sophisms, and obscuring truth, instead of clearing it.

Related Characters: The Empress (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 161-2

Explanation and Analysis

The Empress meets with all of the Blazing World's thinkers and scientists, group by group. One of her shorter, more contentious meetings is with the orators and logicians, who are all bird-human hybrids (parrot-, magpie-, and jackdaw-men). They show off their art, giving beautiful speeches and laying out elegant syllogisms—until they trip over their words, confuse themselves, and shamefully give up. The Empress stops the logicians and gives this speech criticizing their work.

The crux of the Empress's argument is that art and science are only valuable when used for their proper purposes. But the orators and logicians (and other groups like the geometricians) study their discipline in the abstract, totally removed from any real-world content. As the Empress puts it here, the logicians are interested in how to make valid arguments in the abstract, but they don't actually learn any truths about the world. When they come up with syllogisms like "Every philosopher is wise: / Every beast is wise, / Therefore every beast is a philosopher," they confuse people around them and make truth indistinguishable from falsehood.

By scorning the logicians, Cavendish makes it clear that she values applied science, not theoretical science. Of course, this is fundamentally rooted in her belief that everything in nature is material. Scholars in disciplines like math and logic often view their job as pursuing the abstract beauty of pure reason, but Cavendish thinks that this simply doesn't exist—which makes their jobs a waste of time. Thus, she again uses the Empress's dialogues as an allegory for her own thoughts about the different scientific disciplines and their proponents.

And thus the Empress, by art, and her own ingenuity, did not only convert the Blazing World to her own religion, but kept them in a constant belief, without enforcement or blood-shed; for she knew well, that belief was a thing not to be forced or pressed upon the people, but to be instilled into their minds by gentle persuasions; and after this manner she encouraged them also in all other duties and employments, for fear, though it makes people obey, yet does it not last so long, nor is it so sure a means to keep them to their duties, as love.

Related Characters: Margaret Cavendish (speaker), The Empress

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 164

Explanation and Analysis

After she finishes meeting all of the Blazing World's different species groups, the Empress decides to convert the whole kingdom to her own religion. She builds two chapels—one of the shining star-stone, to represent Heaven, and one of the flaming fire-stone, to represent Hell. Next, she trains a corps of women preachers to spread the gospel throughout the Blazing World. Soon, everyone follows the Empress's religion, and the Blazing World becomes even more peaceful and harmonious than before.

This scene shows how Cavendish envisions the role of religion in society. Specifically, she views it as an important tool that leaders can use to create and maintain their absolute power over their subjects. And since Cavendish believes that absolute monarchy is crucial to building a stable, flourishing society, this is a clear plus. She believes that people have to be controlled, one way or another, but organized religion controls them through love (while most rulers use violent and coercive tactics to control them through fear). Effectively, the Empress is setting up an idealized version of the English monarchy, in which she controls both the government and the church, and uses them to impose her wise, benevolent laws on everyone she rules. While this kind of autocracy may seem like a horrific form of government to modern readers, grasping its appeal to Cavendish is a helpful step towards understanding why it has been the norm in so many societies throughout history,

particularly before the modern age.

She asked further, which of these two Cabbalas was most approved, the natural, or theological? The theological, answered they, is mystical, and belongs only to faith; but the natural belongs to reason. Then she asked them, whether divine faith was made out of reason? No, answered they, for faith proceeds only from a divine saving grace, which is a peculiar gift of God. How comes it then, replied she, that men, even those that are of several opinions, have faith more or less? A natural belief, answered they, is not a divine faith. But, proceeded the Empress, how are you sure that God cannot be known? The several opinions you mortals have of God, answered they, are sufficient witnesses thereof.

Related Characters: The Empress, The Immaterial Spirits (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 168

Explanation and Analysis

The Empress meets the immaterial spirits who live in the Blazing World, and they start to discuss the nature of God, matter, and the world itself. The conversation turns to Cabbala—meaning the theory of the relationship between God and the world. Modern readers might find this discussion of Cabbalas confusing, but the Empress is really asking the spirits a simple question: should we understand God through reason or faith? The spirits choose *faith*: since God is far greater than anything people can observe in the world, it's impossible to understand Him through science or reason. Instead, people can only understand God through faith—and they can only obtain this faith through "divine saving grace." In other words, people will have faith in God if God has granted them the ability to do so. But, beyond finding or developing this faith, there is nothing that humans can do to understand God better. In this section of the dialogue, Cavendish makes it clear that science and religion are compatible because they are designed to help people understand two different realms—the physical world and the spiritual world, respectively.

She asked again, whether they were none of those spirits that frighted Adam out of the Paradise, at least caused him not to return thither again? They answered they were not. Then she desired to be informed, whither Adam fled when he was driven out of the Paradise? Out of this world, said they, you are now Empress of, into the world you came from.

Related Characters: The Empress, The Immaterial Spirits (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 170

Explanation and Analysis

During her conversation with the immaterial spirits, the Empress asks about the origins of the world. Specifically, she wants to know whether the story of Adam and Eve was literally true—and if the spirits she's talking with have anything to do with it. Paradise, the spirits reveal, is not an immaterial realm full of souls, but rather a real, physical place. In fact, it happens to be exactly where the Empress is now: in the Blazing World's sparkling imperial city.

This discussion of God, Adam, and Paradise raises fascinating questions about the true meaning of *The Blazing World*. If the Empress is in the Christian Paradise, then the entire book can be read as a religious allegory. The Empress may have died and gone to heaven at the beginning of the book, or she may represent Eve herself, as her incessant curiosity threatens her place in the Blazing World. The Emperor could represent God, who rules over the universe with absolute power—the same system that Cavendish hopes people can replicate on Earth. Each of these interpretations ultimately relies on the reader to speculate—but fortunately, throughout the book, Cavendish consistently defends speculation and imagination as tools for building wisdom and understanding.

By reason every material part has a material natural soul; for nature is but one infinite self-moving, living and self-knowing body, consisting of the three degrees of inanimate, sensitive and rational matter, so intermixed together, that no part of nature, were it an atom, can be without any of these three degrees; the sensitive is the life, the rational the soul, and the inanimate part, the body of infinite nature.

Related Characters: The Immaterial Spirits (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 176

Explanation and Analysis

During the Empress's conversation with the immaterial spirits, Cavendish concisely presents her metaphysics—or her view of how a few fundamental elements combine to form the world as a whole. According to Cavendish, life, the soul, and the body are really just different kinds of matter, and when they all come together, they create individuals (whether human, animal, or otherwise alive). Because of these views, Cavendish differs from earlier philosophers, who thought that the immaterial soul infuses the material body with life.

Yet this theory raises an important question, one that threatens to undermine Cavendish's entire worldview. If spirits and souls are made of a material substance, then why are the Empress's most important conversation partners called "the immaterial spirits?" Cavendish never answers this question directly, but readers can imagine a few possible solutions to it. One possibility is that Cavendish simply contradicts herself, and another is that the spirits simply aren't immaterial at all—and that their name is misleading. But a third is that she sees some fundamental difference between the souls of humans and animals, on the one hand, and what she calls "divine souls" on the other. While humans and animals need a *material* soul to have life, perhaps there is an entire class of spirits and souls who *never* become living beings, but rather exist beyond the bounds of the physical universe. If this is true, then the Empress's dialogue with the immaterial souls would be as close to a conversation with God Himself as possible.

Then I will have, answered she, the soul of some ancient famous writer, either of Aristotle, Pythagoras, Plato, Epicurus, or the like. The spirit said, that those famous men were very learned, subtle, and ingenious writers, but they were so wedded to their own opinions, that they would never have the patience to be scribes. Then, said she, I'll have the soul of one of the most famous modern writers, as either of Galileo, Gassendus, Descartes, Helmont, Hobbes, H. More, etc. The spirit answered, that they were fine ingenious writers, but yet so self-conceited, that they would scorn to be scribes to a woman. But, said he, there's a lady, the Duchess of Newcastle, which although she is not one of the most learned, eloquent, witty and ingenious, yet is she a plain and rational writer, for the principle of her writings, is sense and reason.

Related Characters: Margaret Cavendish (speaker), The Empress, The Duchess, The Emperor, The Immaterial Spirits

Related Themes:

Page Number: 181

Explanation and Analysis

The spirits offer to help the Empress write down her philosophy by providing her with a scribe. She enthusiastically accepts their offer and asks for a famous philosopher as a scribe—but the spirits explain that these men's souls won't want to write down someone else's ideas (especially a woman's). Instead, the spirits propose a "plain and rational" woman, the Duchess of Newcastle—or Margaret Cavendish herself.

Cavendish introduces herself into the book for several reasons. It allows her to create a surprising plot twist, give the Empress a female companion, and emphasize how writers can start to experience the fictions they create as though they were real places. But, perhaps most importantly, it also allows her to explain many of the barriers she faced as a woman writer and philosopher in the 17th century. She accuses male philosophers of two things, both of which were absolutely true of her contemporaries: they didn't like considering opposing views, and they didn't take women seriously as thinkers. Surely enough, even though Cavendish published extensively during her lifetime, other scientists and philosophers ignored her (at best) and ridiculed her (at worst). In fact, until the last few decades, Cavendish's literary and philosophical works were not particularly influential—but only because others decided not to read her. But they *were* extremely innovative, and many scholars believe that they are finally receiving the attention they deserve in the 21st century.

If your Majesty were resolved to make a Cabbala, I would advise you, rather to make a poetical or romancical Cabbala, wherein you can use metaphors, allegories, similitudes, etc. and interpret them as you please.

Related Characters: Margaret Cavendish, The Empress, The Duchess (speaker), The Duke of Newcastle

Related Themes:

Page Number: 183

Explanation and Analysis

When the Duchess Margaret Cavendish visits the Empress to help with her Cabbala, the two women quickly become close Platonic friends. (Of course, this friendship also represents the way that people can learn and grow by bonding with fictional characters.) The Empress asks for the Duchess's advice about her Cabbala, the book of philosophy she wishes to write, and the Duchess recommends writing a "poetical or romancical Cabbala." In other words, rather than a logical explanation or a scriptural interpretation of the meaning of God and the universe, the Duchess proposes that the Empress present her philosophical beliefs in the form of a *story*.

This recommendation is significant because it describes exactly what Cavendish has done by writing *The Blazing World*. Cavendish uses the Empress's journey to the Blazing World, rise to power, dialogues with others, and friendship with the Duchess as an allegory for her worldview. And this allegory is at once personal, political, and philosophical: it describes Cavendish's opinions about the way people can learn by venturing into their imagination and then returning to the real world, the way the world should be structured and governed, and the real nature of everything (which is supposedly made of "rational self-moving matter"). Thus, this scene announces that the book is just a long metaphor for Cavendish's philosophy. Needless to say, this gives readers important context for understanding what Cavendish seeks to do in the book as a whole.

❝ We wonder, proceeded the spirits, that you desire to be Empress of a terrestrial world, when as you can create your self a celestial world if you please. What, said the Empress, can any mortal be a creator? Yes, answered the spirits; for every human creature can create an immaterial world fully inhabited by immaterial creatures, and populous of immaterial subjects, such as we are, and all this within the compass of the head or scull. [...] And since it is in your power to create such a world, what need you to venture life, reputation and tranquility, to conquer a gross material world? For you can enjoy no more of a material world than a particular creature is able to enjoy, which is but a small part.

Related Characters: Margaret Cavendish, The Immaterial Spirits, The Empress (speaker), The Duchess, Fortune

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 185-6

Explanation and Analysis

The Duchess is very disappointed to be an ordinary mortal, and not an all-powerful ruler like the Empress. When she learns this, the Empress promises to help the Duchess find a world to rule, and she calls the spirits for help. But the spirits advise the Duchess to stop trying to rule a real physical world, and start building her own "celestial world" instead. Of course, a "celestial world" is a spiritual or imaginary world—so creating a "celestial world" simply means imagining an alternate fantasy world. Put differently, the spirits are advising the Duchess to write fiction. *Imagining* world domination is far less bloody and difficult than actually *achieving* it in the real world, but in many ways, it's just as rewarding. If the Duchess wants to feel powerful, prove her wisdom, and create a legacy for herself, she can do so just as well through the imagination as through actual politics. Thus, Cavendish uses the Duchess's struggle with ambition in order to explain why she chose to write this book. She argues that fiction—and particularly science fiction—can help people achieve freedom, pleasure, and even social progress by giving them the space to explore alternate ways of living and organizing society.

❝ [The Duchess] 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; [... this] 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.

Related Characters: Margaret Cavendish (speaker), The Empress, The Duchess

Related Themes:

Page Number: 188

Explanation and Analysis

The spirits convince the Duchess to create an imaginary "celestial world" so that she can become all-powerful, like the Empress. Then, she starts to imagine her perfect world. It's full of "rational self-moving matter"—which is Cavendish's term for souls—and in its beauty and perfection, it closely resembles the Blazing World. Of course, in the book, the Duchess is already inside this world,

and the Empress already rules it.

But this raises the complex, unanswerable question of what kind of world the Blazing World is. Is it someone's "celestial world?" (Yes: it's a fiction written by Cavendish.) Is it a physical world? (Yes, to the characters in the book.) And, most importantly, who has created it? On the one hand, the Duchess, who is imagining this new world, literally represents the author. On the other hand, the Empress is already Cavendish's alter ego, a fictional persona who allows her to imagine the absolute power she dreams of.

Thus, perhaps the Duchess is really visiting the Empress and imagining a better world, or perhaps the Empress is already living within the Duchess's imagination. It's impossible to say—but, by making reality indistinguishable from fantasy and the Duchess indistinguishable from the Empress, Cavendish suggests that fiction is far more powerful than people tend to think, and identity far less certain.

❝ Lest the Emperor, or any of his subjects should know of her travel, and obstruct her design, she sent for some of the spirits she had formerly conversed withal, and enquired whether none of them could supply the place of her soul in her body at such a time, when she was gone to travel into another world? They answered, yes, they could; for not only one, said they, but many spirits may enter into your body, if you please.

Related Characters: Margaret Cavendish (speaker), The Empress, The Emperor, The Duchess, The Immaterial Spirits

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 189

Explanation and Analysis

When she decides to go visit the Duchess's native world, the Empress debates how she can temporarily leave her job ruling the Blazing World without causing trouble. Of course, the only part of her that needs to leave is the thinking part, her rational soul. In Cavendish's philosophy, this soul is merely a very light object that resides inside the body and can travel freely outside it. As a result, the Empress decides that her soul will fly away with the Duchess, while other people's souls will temporarily occupy her body, so that it looks like she's still present in her royal court.

Cavendish's quirky view of the human soul isn't a particularly important part of her philosophical legacy, but it's still significant because it shows how she committed to unconventional ideas and used fiction to test out their consequences. Readers may or may not think that Cavendish literally believes that people's souls can fly away from their bodies in the real world—although philosophers certainly believed more improbable things in the 17th century. But Cavendish wants to explore how the world *would* look if souls *were* just light, flying objects, which is the conclusion she reaches in her philosophy. Thus, even though most people never feel their souls escape their bodies or enter other people's, Cavendish still thinks it's valuable to imagine a world in which they do.

❝ Thus those two female souls travelled together as lightly as two thoughts into the Duchess her native world; and which is remarkable, in a moment viewed all the parts of it, and all the actions of all the creatures therein, especially did the Empress's soul take much notice of the several actions of human 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.

Related Characters: Margaret Cavendish (speaker), The Empress, The Emperor, The Duchess

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 190

Explanation and Analysis

After they become dear friends, the Empress and Duchess travel to the Duchess's world—the real Earth, where Cavendish actually lives. (This makes three different worlds in the book: the Empress's native world, the Blazing World, and Cavendish's real world.) The Duchess and Empress observe Earth's social and political order in a sudden flash of insight, then conclude that the Blazing World truly is superior: while Earth is full of division and conflict, the Blazing World is peaceful and united. Diverse people and cultures might populate the Earth, but they bicker and compete for power instead of cooperating. So Cavendish thinks that Earth would be better off if its system were more like the Blazing World's.

Cavendish uses this scene to hammer home her theory of politics: the stronger the ruler, the more unified their people, and the more peaceful their land. In other words, Cavendish argues that *division* is the primary cause of

conflict, and governments should try to concentrate all power, crush all opposition, and create as politically unified a population as possible—even if it's by force. These ideas may seem unsettling to modern readers living in advanced democracies, but Cavendish believed in them wholeheartedly. Most of all, she believed in the English monarchy, which she hoped would take power back from Parliament and never give it up again.

❝ When the soul of the Empress viewed the King and Queen, she seemed to be in amaze, which the Duchess's soul perceiving, asked the Empress how she liked the King, the Queen, and all the royal race? She answered, that in all the monarchs she had seen in that world, she had not found so much majesty and affability mixed so exactly together, that none did overshadow or eclipse the other; and as for the Queen, she said, that virtue sat triumphant in her face, and piety was dwelling in her heart, and that all the royal family seemed to be endued with a divine splendour: but when she had heard the King discourse, she believed, that Mercury and Apollo had been his celestial instructors; and my dear lord and husband, added the Duchess, has been his earthly governor.

Related Characters: Margaret Cavendish, The Duchess, The Empress (speaker), The Duke of Newcastle

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 192

Explanation and Analysis

When the Duchess and the Empress's souls visit the English royal court, they agree that the King and Queen are the finest monarchs on Earth. This will probably be no surprise to the reader—throughout the whole book, Cavendish takes pains to flatter the English royal family and praise her husband. She deeply believes in the monarchy, primarily because of how much wealth she and her husband stand to gain from it. In fact, Cavendish is so close to the monarchy that readers ought to question whether she truly believes that absolute monarchy is the best form of government, or is merely saying so in order to please the Crown. Regardless, modern readers may find this scene profoundly ironic: Cavendish sets out on an imaginary quest to discover the best form of government, and it just so happens to be the one in which she grew up and holds a prominent title. In other words, even though she argues that fantasy is a useful way to explore possibilities and test out new ideas, she may seem remarkably firm in her own political conclusions.

❝ But one thing I forgot all this while, which is, that although thoughts are the natural language of souls, yet by reason souls cannot travel without vehicles, they use such language as the nature and propriety of their vehicles require, and the vehicles of those two souls being made of the purest and finest sort of air, and of a human shape; this purity and fineness was the cause that they could neither be seen nor heard by any human creature; when as, had they been of some grosser sort of air, the sound of that air's language would have been as perceptible as the blowing of Zephyrus.

Related Characters: Margaret Cavendish (speaker), The Empress, The Duchess

Related Themes:

Page Number: 193

Explanation and Analysis

When the Empress and Duchess decide to go visit the Duke together, Cavendish's narrator briefly pauses the action to clarify that the Empress and Duchess are souls traveling around in light, imperceptible "vehicles" (or bodies) made of air. It's easy to dismiss this digression as an unimportant product of Cavendish's eccentricity, poor editing, or both. And yet it is also crucial for understanding the relationship between Cavendish's philosophy of nature and her faith in the imagination. Namely, for Cavendish, imagination is really a physical process, a reordering of the rational matter in the brain, which helps explain its practical effects on people. Thus, there is a clear parallel between the kind of speculative fantasy that Cavendish defends as a tool for learning and improvement, on the one hand, and her characters' remarkable journeys across worlds, on the other.

The most important feature of Cavendish's philosophy is that she describes what other thinkers call the immaterial soul as a very light kind of matter instead. This approach was innovative because it suggested that thinking is a form of acting, and therefore speculation is really a form of experimentation. Still, it also leaves several unanswered questions in her story—for instance, if souls are material, then how can they pass from one world to another?

> The Duke's soul being wise, honest, witty, complaisant and noble, afforded such delight and pleasure to the Empress's soul by her conversation, that these two souls became enamoured of each other; which the Duchess's soul perceiving, grew jealous at first, but then considering that no adultery could be committed amongst Platonic lovers, and that Platonism was divine, as being derived from divine Plato, cast forth of her mind that Idea of jealousy. Then the conversation of these three souls was so pleasant, that it cannot be expressed; for the Duke's soul entertained the Empress's soul with scenes, songs, music, witty discourses, pleasant recreations, and all kinds of harmless sports; so that the time passed away faster than they expected.

Related Characters: Margaret Cavendish (speaker), Fortune, The Empress, The Duchess, The Duke of Newcastle

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 194-5

Explanation and Analysis

When the Duchess decides to introduce the Empress to her husband, the Duke of Newcastle, the Duchess and Empress's souls enter the Duke's body, and then all three souls mingle inside. Just like the Empress and the Duchess, the Empress and the Duke became Platonic friends (or Platonic lovers) because of their great appreciation for one another's virtues. Understandably, the Duchess is initially surprised to see her husband fall in love with her best friend—until she remembers the crucial difference between Platonic and romantic love.

In fact, Cavendish wrote this scene to help clarify and popularize the concept of Platonic love, which was a fashionable new idea during her lifetime. Platonic love essentially means loving the inherent virtue in someone's soul—for instance, the Empress is drawn to the Duke because of his good inner character, not because of the way he looks or even the way he treats her. (While Cavendish doesn't explicitly say so here, she strongly implies that the Duke also loves the Empress for the same reasons.) In Platonic love, two people don't necessarily want to unite or possess one another—instead, they aspire to exhibit the other's virtues. Thus, the Empress and Duke's Platonic love comes from mutual admiration: they both see the other as a model for how to act well, and they both push one another to be better people. While Platonic love is not the same as romantic love, they're also not mutually exclusive—for instance, Cavendish and her husband clearly admired one another's virtues, above and beyond their marital relationship.

> *First, I desire, your Imperial Majesty may know, that this Duke who complains or exclaims so much against me, hath been always my enemy; for he has preferred Honesty and Prudence before me, and slighted all my favours; nay, not only thus, but he did fight against me, and preferred his innocence before my power. His friends Honesty and Prudence, said he most scornfully, are more to be regarded, than inconstant Fortune, who is only a friend to fools and knaves; for which neglect and scorn, whether I have not just reason to be his enemy, your Majesty may judge yourself.*

Related Characters: Fortune (speaker), The Duke of Newcastle, The Duchess, The Empress, The Immaterial Spirits, Honesty, Prudence

Related Themes:

Page Number: 196-7

Explanation and Analysis

After the Duchess introduces the Empress to her husband, the Duke, she requests the Empress's assistance in defending the Duke against his arch-enemy, the goddess Fortune. They stage a trial in the Blazing World, and this is Fortune's opening speech. Fortune declares that the Duke has always spurned her. She doesn't mention justice or fairness: instead, she admits that she lashes out at the Duke simply because she wants to be his favorite, but isn't. In other words, the Duke's misfortune is largely because of his goodness—he values true virtues, like Honesty and Prudence, while refusing to compromise his values just to please Fortune.

Of course, Cavendish stages this trial in order to draw real-life attention to her and her husband's plight. During the English Civil War, they lost much of their property, so they went from fabulously wealthy to just moderately wealthy. Cavendish finds this humiliating and hopes to rebuild her husband's estate. Whereas in real life she had nowhere to turn, in her fantasy Blazing World, she can face Fortune directly and make her case to the world.

> Fortune hearing thus Honesty's plain speech, thought it very rude, and would not hearken to Truth's judgement, but went away in a passion: at which, both the Empress and Duchess were extremely troubled, that their endeavours should have no better effect: but Honesty chid the Duchess, and said, she was to be punished for desiring so much Fortune's favours; for it appears, said she, that you mistrust the gods' blessings: at which the Duchess wept, answering Honesty, that she did neither mistrust the gods' blessings, nor rely upon Fortune's favours; but desired only that her lord might have no potent enemies.

Related Characters: Margaret Cavendish (speaker), The Empress, The Duchess, The Duke of Newcastle, Fortune, Honesty, Prudence

Related Themes:

Page Number: 200

Explanation and Analysis

After Fortune, Folly, and Rashness speak out against the Duke of Newcastle, Prudence and Honesty speak in his defense. They criticize Fortune for abandoning the Duke and ask for him to receive justice—but all to no avail. Furious about Honesty's matter-of-fact criticisms, Fortune disappears and does not return. Clearly, the Duke will not be winning her favor.

In the context of the book as a whole, this is an unusual turn of events because it shows that the Empress and Duchess's power is profoundly limited. In every other part of life, they use their awesome power to crush their enemies and get their way—but they can't do so with Fortune. In fact, it's just the opposite: in this scene, the Duchess realizes that she must accept that Fortune has power over her and will never act justly. In other words, she has to accept fate, not try to control it, even if this means watching her husband fall into disgrace. This principle connects meaningfully with Cavendish's arguments about the imagination: she consistently praises fantasy because it gives people total control over things that they *don't* usually control in everyday life. On the one hand, people with vibrant fantasy lives might develop unrealistic expectations about how much of their lives they should be able to control. But, on the other, fantasizing about power and control can also help people deal with misfortune they *don't* control.

> 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.

Related Characters: The Empress, The Duchess (speaker), The Emperor, The Ape-Men, The Bear-Men, The Worm-Men, The Fish-Men, The Satyrs

Related Themes:

Page Number: 201

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of the first part of *The Blazing World*, the Empress realizes that most of her attempts to improve life in her kingdom have failed. She always recognized that the Emperor's absolute power kept the kingdom peaceful, but when the Emperor handed this power to her, she still tried to improve upon his system of government (for instance, by banning useless disciplines like rhetoric and establishing a new state religion). Over time, this policy has backfired: the Blazing World's people have started to fight, both with one another and with the government. Thus, the Empress seeks the Duchess's advice about how to restore order.

The Duchess's advice is unlikely to surprise Cavendish's readers: she proposes creating as united a society as possible, in order to erase the divisions that are leading the different groups to rebel. Of course, the Empress can only do this because she rules the Blazing World with absolute power: she can change the government however she wants, without having to consult with anybody else. Thus, this conversation reinforces Cavendish's argument for a benevolent monarchy: well-meaning leaders can easily and efficiently change the rules to improve the system of government. This is especially true when they have the chance to consult with wise and trusted advisors, like the Duchess. Of course, readers will note that Cavendish says little about monarchs who *don't* have good intentions—and this raises serious doubts about how her vision of an ideal government would actually work in the real world.

Part 2 Quotes

The Empress before she came in sight of the enemy, sent some of her fish- and bird-men to bring her intelligence of their fleet; and hearing of their number, their station and posture, she gave order that when it was night, her bird-men should carry in their beaks some of the mentioned fire-stones, with the tops thereof wetted; and the fish-men should carry them likewise, and hold them out of the water; for they were cut in the form of torches or candles, and being many thousands, made a terrible show; for it appeared as if all the air and sea had been of a flaming fire; and all that were upon the sea, or near it, did verily believe, the time of judgement, or the last day was come, which made them all fall down, and pray.

Related Characters: Margaret Cavendish (speaker), The Empress, The Giants, The Bear-Men, The Bird-Men, The Fish-Men

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 208

Explanation and Analysis

The Empress raises an army to save her native country from its enemies. After she leads her forces back through the passage that originally took her from her native world to the Blazing World, she orders them to approach the enemy and make a spectacular show of force. Thousands of troops wield the Blazing World's magical fire-stone, which the Empress has managed to turn into a weapon because of her scientists' long, dogged effort to understand the Blazing World's special natural phenomena.

The entire world appears to burn, and the enemy thinks that Judgment Day has come. Cavendish uses this religious symbolism as a metaphor for the Empress's incredible power and the enemy's inability to fathom how superior the Blazing World's technology is to their own world. Indeed, since they are unable to imagine a world so much more advanced than their own, they assume that the Empress must be the Messiah. Clearly, nothing in her native world can match the Blazing World's superior technology, and this means that she can easily conquer everything in her native world and set up the absolute monarchy of her dreams for her native country. Of course, since the Empress is attacking from the Blazing World of Cavendish's fantasy, her dazzling invasion may also represent the immense power of imagination—which gives people infinitely more options than they have in reality.

If I had long speeched councillors, replied the Empress, I would hang them, by reason they give more words, than advice. The Duchess answered, that Her Majesty should not be angry, but consider the differences of that and her Blazing World; for, said she, they are not both alike; but there are grosser and duller understandings in this, than in the Blazing World.

Related Characters: The Empress, The Duchess (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 209

Explanation and Analysis

When the Empress raises a mighty army and invades her native world, her native country's leaders can't reach a consensus about whether or not to accept her help. This frustrates her: she is used to living in the Blazing World, where everyone worships her and instantly recognizes her absolute power. But in her native world, this is no longer the case, even though she has gone to great lengths to save her people. She complains about her native country's "long speeched councillors" (politicians who talk too much), whose bickering endlessly delays her attack. In fact, this delay again suggests that divided, decentralized governments are less effective than highly centralized, absolutist ones. However, the Empress's impatience ought to make readers wonder whether absolute rulers can remain wise and levelheaded over time. Where democratic decision-making might be seen as a virtue today, Cavendish cites it as evidence that the Empress's native world is inferior and corrupted.

The Empress appeared upon the face of the water in her imperial robes; in some part of her hair she had placed some of the star-stone, near her face, which added such a lustre and glory to it, that it caused a great admiration in all that were present, who believed her to be some celestial creature, or rather an uncreated goddess, and they all had a desire to worship her; for surely, said they, no mortal creature can have such a splendid and transcendent beauty, nor can any have so great a power as she has, to walk upon the waters, and to destroy whatever she pleases, not only whole nations, but a whole world.

Related Characters: Margaret Cavendish (speaker), The Empress, The Fish-Men, The Bird-Men, The King of ESFI

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 214-5

Explanation and Analysis

After the Empress finishes her military campaign and establishes an absolute monarchy over her native world for the King of ESFI, she decides to make one final appearance. She dresses in star-stone and reveals herself to her native world's princes, who are so impressed by her beauty and power that they assume that she must be a goddess.

Beyond the daring gender reversal involved in male princes submitting to a woman warrior in the 17th century, this scene is significant because it repeats a similar event from the beginning of the book. Namely, the Emperor *also* mistook the Empress for a goddess when she first arrived in the Blazing World. In both cases, people worship her not only because she's extraordinarily beautiful, but also because she has clearly come from another realm. In this case, she *is* essentially the Messiah: she descends from Paradise to her original world in order to save its people.

Still, in this scene, Cavendish shows that it's easy to confuse power with divinity. On the positive side—at least from Cavendish's perspective—this helps explain why absolute monarchies can often force society into a consensus by using religious imagery and displays of power. But at the same time, this misunderstanding also shows that people continue to assume that the greatest power in the universe is immaterial and divine, while Cavendish insists that it is really material and grounded in the world.

❝ Great, heroic, and famous monarchs: *I came hither to assist the King of ESFI against his enemies, he being unjustly assaulted by many several nations, which would fain take away his hereditary rights and prerogatives of the narrow seas; at which unjustice Heaven was much displeased; and for the injuries he received from his enemies, rewarded him with an absolute power, so that now he is become the head-monarch of all this world; which power, though you may envy, yet you can no ways hinder him; for all those that endeavour to resist his power, shall only get loss for their labour, and no victory for their profit. Wherefore my advice to you all is, to pay him tribute justly and truly, that you may live peaceably and happily, and be rewarded with the blessings of Heaven, which I wish you from my soul.*

Related Characters: The Empress (speaker), The King of ESFI

Related Themes:

Page Number: 216

Explanation and Analysis

Just before she returns to the Blazing World, the Empress gives this speech to the leaders of her native world. She explains that she has conquered this world in order to create an absolute monarchy for the King of ESFI (England, Scotland, France, and Ireland), whom she considers the world's rightful ruler. She assumes that this absolute monarchy will inevitably create peace in the world. In fact, she has effectively recreated the Blazing World's political system in her native world, with the King taking her place.

Curiously, the Empress never explains *why* she thinks that justice is on her King's side—she appears to simply believe that might makes right. In this way, the Empress begins to act like the goddess Fortune: she uses her extraordinary power to carry out personal vendettas, and she does not even *pretend* to follow any definite principles. She fought for ESFI only because of her personal loyalty to her country and its ruler, and not because she thinks that he will rule his world better than any other monarch. Of course, the Empress's desire to avenge the King of ESFI clearly represents Cavendish's desire to avenge the English monarchy's losses in and after the English Civil War. In this way, Cavendish uses the book's conclusion to fulfill her greatest political fantasy: restoring order to England.

❝ In time of the voyage, both the Empress's and Duchess's soul were very gay and merry, and sometimes they would converse very seriously with each other.

Related Characters: Margaret Cavendish (speaker), The Empress, The Duchess

Related Themes:

Page Number: 216

Explanation and Analysis

After conquering her native world and handing control to the King of ESFI, the Empress celebrates with the Duchess on their voyage back to the Blazing World. This may seem like an irrelevant, minor detail, but it actually represents the core of Cavendish's message about politics and society.

Cavendish believes in using terror and brainwashing to establish an absolute monarchy over the whole world, but

only because she genuinely believes that this is the best way to maintain peace. Thus, by the end of the book, the Empress's work is done: she has conquered and created stability in both of her worlds. This means she can dedicate her time to relaxation and enjoyment. And her decision to spend her time chatting with the Duchess shows how highly they value their Platonic friendship. In fact, Cavendish strongly suggests that such relationships are the most valuable thing in life—whenever she isn't busy fighting a war, the Empress believes that the best use of her time is talking about philosophy and nature with the Duchess. Thus, while the immediate goal of politics is to create peace and harmony in society, the true purpose of peace and harmony is to enable genuine, loving human relationships to form as widely as possible.

> The Empress asked, are those good plays that are made so methodically and artificially? The Duchess answered, they were good according to the judgement of the age, or mode of the nation, but not according to her judgement; for truly, said she, in my opinion, their plays will prove a nursery of whining lovers, and not an academy or school for wise, witty, noble, and well-behaved men. But I, replied the Emperor, desire such a theatre as may make wise men; and will have such descriptions as are natural, not artificial. If Your Majesty be of that opinion, said the Duchess's soul, then my plays may be acted in your Blazing World, when they cannot be acted in the Blinking World of Wit; and the next time I come to visit Your Majesty, I shall endeavour to order Your Majesty's theatre, to present such plays as my wit is capable to make.

Related Characters: The Empress, The Duchess, The Emperor (speaker), Margaret Cavendish, The Duke of Newcastle

Related Themes:

Page Number: 220

Explanation and Analysis

When the Empress and Duchess return to the Blazing World, they learn that the Emperor is making some changes around the palace. Specifically, he's adopting two new habits: horse-training (the Duke of Newcastle's passion) and theater (the Duchess's passion). Of course, this is a perfect illustration of Platonic love: the Emperor bonds with the Duke and Duchess over their excellence in horse-training and theater, and this inspires him to pursue the same goals. In turn, he wants to put on plays that inspire *others* to become more wise and virtuous.

Meanwhile, Cavendish uses this conversation about theater to express her own conflicted feelings about her career as a playwright. She clearly distinguishes between the popular but artificial plays that audiences tend to favor, on the one hand, and plays with real merit, on the other. Needless to say, this is Cavendish's way of criticizing her contemporaries for producing simplistic plays, while overlooking more profound, innovative ones like hers. And yet, as a woman writing in her own name, Cavendish had almost no chance of ever getting her plays produced. She addresses this in her conversation with the Empress and Emperor, too. If real-world theaters in the "Blinking World of Wit" won't produce her plays, Cavendish insists, then she will stubbornly produce them in the Blazing World of her imagination. Most importantly, she will never let society's prejudices override her own judgments about morality and art.

> Were there but a passage out of the Blazing World into this, said she, you should not only have some of those horses, but such materials, as the Emperor has, to build your stables and riding-houses withal; and so much gold, that I should never repine at your noble and generous gifts. The Duke smilingly answered her, that he was sorry there was no passage between those two worlds; but said he, I have always found an obstruction to my good fortunes.

Related Characters: The Duchess, The Duke of Newcastle (speaker), The Empress, Fortune

Related Themes:

Page Number: 221

Explanation and Analysis

After she returns to her own world, the Duchess tells the Duke about her experiences in the Blazing World. Above all, she laments the fact that the only way she can reach the Blazing World is by traveling as a disembodied soul. There is no physical passageway between her world and the Blazing World, which means that she will never be able to bring riches back to replenish her husband's estate.

Of course, the Duchess is just Cavendish, so she is really complaining that she cannot bring back the Blazing World's riches because it is an imaginary place with no physical connection to the real world. Alas, while Cavendish has found endless adventures and wisdom through her imagination, she will never be able to bring back anything

physical. The Duke chalks this poor luck up to his longstanding feud with Fortune, but he also makes it clear that he and the Duchess ultimately do not care much about their material possessions. It's difficult to know whether Cavendish really *did* learn to stop waiting around for Fortune and worrying about the money—or whether she just wanted her readers to *think* that she did. Regardless, she clearly recognizes that her adventures in the Blazing World were far more rewarding than any amount of wealth she could have found there.

❝ 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.

Related Characters: Margaret Cavendish (speaker), The Empress, The Duchess

Related Themes:

Page Number: 221-2

Explanation and Analysis

In the closing paragraph of *The Blazing World*, Cavendish writes about the Duchess telling other people in her own world about her experiences with the Empress in the Blazing World. She goes into great detail about the Empress's life, leisure, and governance; she describes the Blazing World's unusual hybrid people, strange weather, exotic fruits, and ethereal music. In other words, the Duchess starts to tell stories, spreading the news about her journey and the otherworldly splendors of the Blazing World.

This conclusion's significance can be easy to miss: it brings the book back to where it began. In other words, it is a circular ending. Cavendish is the Duchess, who has returned from an intrepid journey to the imaginary Blazing World and wants to tell everybody about it (through this book). In this sense, the book's conclusion definitively blurs the line between fact and fiction, author and character, and the inside and outside of the story. Just as the Duchess and Empress imagined a fantasy "celestial world" from within the fantasy Blazing World, Cavendish now tells the story from within the story itself.

Epilogue Quotes

❝ By this poetical description, you may perceive, that my ambition is not only to be Empress, but Authoress of a whole world; and that the worlds I have made, both the Blazing and the other Philosophical World, mentioned in the first part of this description, are framed and composed of the most pure, that is, the rational parts of matter, which are the parts of my mind; which creation was more easily and suddenly effected, than the conquests of the two famous monarchs of the world, Alexander and Caesar: neither have I made such disturbances, and caused so many dissolutions of particulars, otherwise named deaths, as they did; 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.

Related Characters: Margaret Cavendish (speaker), The Empress

Related Themes:

Page Number: 224

Explanation and Analysis

The Epilogue returns to Cavendish's authorial voice, as she describes the process of writing *The Blazing World* and its companion work, *Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy*. Readers may find this shift jarring, as Cavendish's voice is, by design, often indistinguishable from her characters' voices. For instance, she praises fantasy using the same language as the Empress and the Duchess—two characters she invented to represent different versions of *herself*. By imagining the Blazing World into existence, just like her characters, Cavendish enjoyed herself, satisfied her hunger for power, and tested out many of her philosophical ideas (like the notion that everything is physical, including thoughts and fantasies). In this way, being an "Authoress" and creating a world is more fulfilling than being an "Empress" and merely ruling over it. Women's limited opportunities in the 17th century clearly influenced Cavendish's taste for fantasy, but this can't explain it entirely. In fact, Cavendish views fiction as far more than just a consolation prize for powerlessness—she presents it not merely as an alternative to living out one's dreams, but rather as a place to develop and test out those dreams.

> If any should like the world I have made, and be willing to be my subjects, they may imagine themselves such, and they are such, I mean, in their minds, fancies or imaginations; but if they cannot endure to be subjects, they may create worlds of their own, and govern themselves as they please: but yet let them have a care, not to prove unjust usurpers, and to rob me of mine; for concerning the Philosophical World, I am Empress of it myself; and as for the Blazing World, it having an Empress already, who rules it with great wisdom and conduct, which Empress is my dear Platonic friend; I shall never prove so unjust, treacherous and unworthy to her, as to disturb her government, much less to depose her from her imperial throne, for the sake of any other; but rather choose to create another world for another friend.

Related Characters: Margaret Cavendish (speaker), The Empress, The Duchess

Related Themes:

Page Number: 224-5

Explanation and Analysis

At the very end of her Epilogue to *The Blazing World*, Cavendish explicitly clarifies a point that she has repeatedly alluded to throughout the entire book: she believes that readers should use her fantasy world as a model for building and exploring their own. She doesn't want to just show readers how *she* imagined a marvelous Blazing World—she also wants to help *them* do the same thing, because she thinks that everyone can benefit from cultivating their imaginations.

Yet, in this passage, Cavendish also makes another peculiar request to her readers: she asks them not to interfere with the Blazing World. Needless to say, this is ironic because her Empress ended the book by invading another world. Still, Cavendish doesn't seem to think that other people's ideas will actually change the Blazing World that she imagines—rather, she appears to be defending a particular kind of intellectual property. Her philosophy and Blazing World are *her* creations, and she thinks that people need to imagine their own worlds for themselves if they truly want to grow from the exercise.

Finally, when Cavendish calls the Empress her "dear Platonic friend," she is clearly merging her authorial voice with the Duchess's perspective. In this way, Cavendish challenges ordinary conceptions of authorship one last time: she is both the book's writer and one of its main characters, and she constantly emphasizes that the protagonist is a mere figment of her imagination. In fact, she leaves one of this book's greatest mysteries unsolved: are the Duchess, the Empress, and Cavendish really three different people? Or are they just three different dimensions of a single person? What is the true relationship between our fantasy selves and our real selves?

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

TO THE READER

The book opens with a poem by Margaret Cavendish's husband, William Newcastle. He compares Cavendish creating the Blazing World to Columbus discovering America, and he declares that the book will enlighten its readers.

Newcastle's poem reflects the financial, personal, and creative support he gave to his wife's writing career—which played a significant role in her success during a time when women were excluded from mainstream intellectual life. By comparing Cavendish to Columbus, Newcastle suggests that fiction can offer adventure, discovery, and insight just as much as actual exploration in the real world.

Then, in her author's note, Cavendish explains why she published *The Blazing World* alongside the more serious *Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy*. She isn't trying to deride philosophy by combining it with fiction—instead, she thinks that philosophy and fiction complement one another. In philosophy, people use reason to try and understand the world, while in fiction, they imagine entirely new worlds. Cavendish wrote *The Blazing World* for both her own and her readers' enjoyment. It has three parts, which are "*romancical*," "philosophical," and "*fantastical*."

Cavendish insists that her fiction has a serious intellectual purpose. If philosophy is about narrowing down possible truths about the world through rationality, then fiction helps people explore those possibilities and understand their implications in the first place. This is why The Blazing World *is a pioneering work in the genre of science fiction: Cavendish deliberately creates a world ruled by a different natural order, way of knowing, and kind of technology in order to show her readers some other ways that the world could be.*

Cavendish will be "a happy *creatoress*" if the reader enjoys her *Blazing World*, but if not, she will go on living in her own noble world, which is full of gold and diamonds. While she "cannot be *Henry* the Fifth, or *Charles* the Second," she concludes, she can still be "*Margaret* the *First*." And while she can't conquer the world like Julius Caesar or Alexander the Great, she has created a world of her own instead. She concludes that anyone can do the same.

In addition to showing readers new possibilities for the world, fiction also gives them an escape. In other words, Cavendish is saying that there's little more pleasurable than getting lost in fiction—especially fiction of one's own. She clearly links the value of fiction to gender: since women lived under a severe patriarchal system in 17th-century England, fantasy was one of the only ways they could experience freedom and power. Eventually, imagining and writing about alternative worlds could even become a way to change the real *world.*

THE DESCRIPTION OF A NEW WORLD, CALLED THE BLAZING WORLD

A traveling merchant sailor falls in love with a wealthy young noblewoman in a foreign land. The Lady will never marry him because of his low status, so he abducts her. This angers the gods, who send a giant storm to sweep his ship towards the icy North Pole. The merchant and his crew freeze to death, but the gods save the young Lady. At the North Pole, this world meets with "another Pole of another world." This other world orbits its own sun, but always remains perfectly parallel to our world. It also isn't visible from our world because the sun blocks it out.

The Blazing World *begins with a parody of medieval romance: instead of showing a hero court a noblewoman or save a damsel in distress, it shows the merchant brutally kidnap the Lady, who will become the story's true hero. Cavendish uses this twist to hint that the tropes of romance fiction—like the strapping, virtuous man courting the passive, powerless woman—often actually function to justify patriarchy in the real world. In turn, this speaks to her deep interest in the purpose of fiction: if ordinary romances reinforce society's gender inequality, then can women's literature and science fiction help challenge it?*

The boat crosses over into this other world, and it sails down a stream between two ice-covered landmasses. The young Lady sees a group of bear-like creatures that walk on two legs, like humans, and speak an unfamiliar language. The creatures approach the boat, carry the young Lady off it, and then sink it, with the sailors' bodies onboard. The Lady is frightened, but the creatures actually treat her kindly. They carry her to their city, which is really a complex of underground caves. All the creatures in the city assemble to meet her, and the females take her to a special cave and care for her.

Cavendish's protagonist enters a world that is parallel to her own, yet nevertheless belongs to the same universe. This Blazing World operates according to its own laws of nature, but still resembles our own in many fundamental ways. For instance, the bear-human hybrid creatures show that biology and reproduction function differently in the Blazing World, but they still live in the cold polar region, which shows that weather, ecology, and the basic physics of heat are likely the same in the Blazing World as in our own. Cavendish's choices about what to change and what to leave the same in the Blazing World are significant, because they point to the elements of her own world that she hopes could be different.

The "bear-men" realize that the Lady isn't used to the cold climate, so they take her to a warmer island, where the "fox-men" live. The bear-men and fox-men agree to bring the Lady to their Emperor. They take her across a river to the gooselike bird-men, across another to the satyrs, and then across a third to a kingdom of green-colored people. All of the groups get along and speak the same language.

The Blazing World is full of several *human-animal hybrid species, none of which could possibly exist in the Lady's world. In a sense, they are just like the different groups of people that populate Earth—only they collaborate and communicate effortlessly, instead of fighting over wealth, power, and status.*

The bear-men, fox-men, bird-men, satyrs, and green people sail the Lady across the sea to the Emperor's island. Their navigation techniques and knowledge of the sea are excellent, even though they don't have the technology that seafarers use on Earth. Instead, they have giant engines that shoot out wind to flatten waves and propel their ships forward, and they make special formations to weather storms. Their ships are made of gold and leather, but light and seaworthy. Recognizing her hosts' generosity, the Lady starts to calm down and learn their language.

While the Lady initially finds the Blazing World strange and threatening, its extraordinary technology shows her that it's actually radically better than her own world. In turn, this otherworldly technology reflects Cavendish's hope that human life and society can radically improve in the future. Of course, contemporary readers will note that modern ships are similar to the fantastical ones that Cavendish describes here (even if they aren't made of leather or gold).

The fleet reaches the Emperor's land, which is ringed by steep cliffs. Another fleet of boats sets out from the shore to meet the Lady. The narrator explains that the Blazing World is harmonious and peaceful because everyone submits to the same Emperor. The fleet brings the Lady down a series of narrow, winding rivers to the fertile, beautiful area where the Emperor lives. On the way, they pass a number of cities made of precious stones.

The Blazing World is an absolute monarchy—or a kingdom in which the king has total power over everything. But, contrary to the modern assumption that dictatorship creates cruelty and unrest, the Blazing World is actually peaceful and unified. In fact, Cavendish clearly thinks that absolute monarchy is the best form of government. This makes sense in the context of her life as a noblewoman and staunch supporter of the English monarchy during the English Civil War.

Paradise, the Emperor's city, is built on canals and full of golden buildings in monumental classical architecture. The Emperor's palace is at the top of a hill, ringed by a four-mile-long arch and guarded by guards at regularly-spaced gates. Inside the palace, the Emperor's apartment is made of precious stones, including many different kinds of diamonds that don't exist in our world.

The name "Paradise" and the Emperor's extravagant, gated palace strongly suggest that the Blazing World is an allegory for Heaven (with the Emperor representing God). Yet this is only one of many ways to read the novel—for instance, the Blazing World could also represent the human mind, the future of society, the conquest of the Americas, or England if the monarchy had won the English Civil War. Rather than asking which interpretation is correct, readers ought to explore the significance and implications of each one.

When the Emperor meets the Lady, he thinks that she is a goddess—but she explains that she isn't. He marries her instead and gives her "absolute power to rule and govern all [the blazing] world." Her royal subjects continue to worship her like a goddess. Once declared Empress, she wears clothing made of pearls and diamonds, which clearly identify her as royalty.

The Emperor mistakes the Lady for a goddess because she is just as striking and exotic to him as the Blazing World is to her. By turning the Lady into the Empress, Cavendish inverts more medieval social norms and literary tropes (in which men hold power and almost never willingly give it up to women). The book becomes a fantasy of female political empowerment, designed to explore the possibilities of a government run by and for women. In addition to shining a light on Cavendish's own ambition, the book shows how fiction can function as a tool for planning and imagining different futures (such as more just social arrangements).

The Emperor and Empress have infinite gold and jewels, and they oversee an extensive barter economy. Their kingdom's common people aren't of any familiar complexion—instead, they're various shades of green, purple, red, and orange. The blazing world is also full of numerous inhabitants of other "sorts, shapes, figures, dispositions, and humors." This includes the bear-men and fox-men, but also many other groups, including the worm-men, lice-men, magpie-men, giants, and many others. Each group works in a profession fit for its species, and they all have highly advanced art, science, and institutions. For example, the bear-men are experimental philosophers, the bird-men are astronomers, the fox-men are politicians, and the giants are architects.

After becoming Empress, the Lady takes in the Blazing World as a whole. She learns that, not only do plenty of unusual hybrid creatures live there, but it also lacks all of the familiar creatures that she is accustomed to seeing on Earth. The Blazing World's fantastical creatures challenge the categories that readers intuitively use to understand the world (most importantly, the division between humans and animals). But, despite being hybrids who don't clearly fall into familiar categories, they also all have clearly defined places in their own world's social, political, and intellectual order. In fact, the Blazing World's society seems to be organized around knowledge, which reflects Cavendish's intense interest in the early modern science of her time (and its potential to improve human society).

The Empress asks the statesmen and priests to tell her about the kingdom's government and religion. The statesmen explain that the kingdom has few laws because laws cause conflict, and that it's an absolute monarchy because bodies (including kingdoms) naturally have one head. Just as the people worship just one God, they obey just one Emperor. While the subjects attend many different churches, the priests explain, they all worship the same God and say the same prayers. Men worship together in public, while women worship alone in private, and the priests and statesmen are eunuchs because marriage would distract them from their duties.

The statesmen's explanation again reflects Cavendish's belief that absolute monarchy is the best form of government: she thinks that people naturally respect and obey a benevolent king or queen, which creates social order. Similarly, the Blazing World's religion is also unified, even if its practitioners are diverse. Thus, the Blazing World is a utopia specifically because it's all united under a particular set of institutions and values—in other words, because it's ruled by a single global empire with total power. This is a significant comment on real-world politics, given that England was building an overseas colonial empire during Cavendish's time, and that Cavendish was deeply committed to the English monarchy.

Next, the architects tell the Empress that the kingdom's houses are built low to protect them from the elements, with thick walls to help them regulate temperature, and with arches and pillars to make them sturdy and beautiful.

The Blazing World's architecture makes sense according to the laws of physics and resembles that of some real-world societies, but it is very different from that of the places where Cavendish lived her life (England, France, and the Spanish Netherlands). In other words, it is a rational but utopian solution to real-world problems—which again shows how Cavendish's fictional world can help her readers improve the real world.

The bird-men (who are astronomers) tell the Empress about their world's splendid sun and sparkling moon, which are both made of stone. They don't yet know if the sun generates heat because it's burning, or because its motion creates light. They debate whether air densities explain the sun and moon's changing appearances and positions. They agree that motes (floating particles lit up by the sun) are tiny living creatures. They also know about many other "blazing stars" besides the sun and moon, which is why they call their world the Blazing World.

Having learned about her new society, the Empress now decides to learn everything she can about nature in the Blazing World. She will spend much of the rest of the book immersed in this quest for knowledge, which reflects Cavendish's own lifelong involvement in English scientific circles. In fact, these scientists were just starting to develop modern scientific principles and experimental methods at the time. The bird-men's theories about the stars echo major scientific debates that Cavendish participated in.

The bird-men offer various theories about how heat and air density create wind, and they declare that snow is a frothy mixture of water and fire from the moon. Meanwhile, the fish-men have discovered that ice is made of water mixed with vapor from the seas. The bird-men debate how hot, cold, and clouds mix to create thunder and lightning.

To modern readers, the bird-men and fish-men's explanations may seem to range from accurate to outlandish. But Cavendish still depicts them as serious scientists doing their best to explain complex phenomena through the best available hypotheses. Nature may function very differently in the Blazing World than it does in our own world, but the scientific method remains basically the same.

The Empress asks the bear-men (natural philosophers) to test the bird-men's theories with their telescopes, but the bear-men all disagree about the motions of the sun and earth, the number and size of the stars, and more. She sends the bear-men to the pole that connected to her original world, and they report seeing three blazing stars there—two bright and one dim. But they can't agree whether they have seen three different stars, or just the same star in different positions. The Empress orders the bear-men to break their telescopes, which have only deceived them. But the bear-men humbly plead with her to let them keep the telescopes, which delight them, and she agrees.

The bear-men's experiments reveal Cavendish's scientific empiricism—or her belief that the surest route to knowledge is through observing the external world. At the same time, the bear-men's experiments turn out to be absurd and unsuccessful. To understand why, it's helpful to know that Cavendish frequently clashed with scientists whose experiments she considered useless and misguided (such as Robert Hooke and Robert Boyle). Thus, while Cavendish clearly believes in science and experimentation, she also makes a point to mock science that goes wrong and confuses instead of clarifying.

The bear-men thank the Empress by taking out a microscope and showing her several extraordinary small objects, like a fly's composite eyes, the pores in a piece of charcoal, a poisonous nettle, a flea, and a louse. She asks if they can also magnify large objects—they look at a whale through the microscope, but it's too large. Instead, at the Empress's command, they create a reverse microscope that makes the whale look tiny. They also try to make a looking glass that will let them see vacuums, but they fail.

The Empress's conflict with the bear-men over microscopes also represents a real episode from Cavendish's life. When prominent scientists showed her tiny objects under a microscope, she became very interested in microscopy and bought a microscope of her own. Later, she feuded with the Royal Society of London over whether microscope results were reliable. Early microscopes often didn't work well, and Cavendish didn't think that seeing the outside of a small object could tell scientists anything meaningful about the object's true nature inside. *Thus, while she clearly admires microscopes' potential as scientific tools, she is also skeptical of scientists who rely too heavily on them.*

Next, the fish-men and worm-men tell the Empress about animals in the sea and on land. The fish-men discuss the salt in the sea, which they claim causes waves, and the circulatory systems of different sea-creatures. The worm-men tell her that, like sea-creatures, some insects have blood and others don't. They conclude that animals' blood doesn't actually carry their spirits. They explain that some animals can live both on land and in the water because they're part fish and part flesh. This is possible because nature has adapted their respiratory systems to their unique habitats.

The fish-men and worm-men, who are natural philosophers (biologists and earth scientists), combine the bodies of animals with the minds of humans capable of analyzing the environments where they live. Regardless of whether their hypotheses accurately explain the Blazing World's natural environment, they still demonstrate how science as a method can expand people's knowledge and power in any world. Meanwhile, their discussion of animals and their spirits foreshadows the Empress's conversations about mind and body with the immaterial spirits in the next section of the book.


The Empress asks about reproduction, and the worm- and fish-men also explain that, in some animals, the offspring look just like the parent, but in others, the offspring takes a different form—like the way cheese gives birth to maggots. They also explain that different animals perceive the world differently—although it's difficult to understand how. Finally, they agree with the fish- and bird-men's theory that salt mixes with water to create ice and snow—but the Empress wonders what happens to the salt when ice melts back into water.

This conversation about reproduction and perception shows that the Empress is interested in the origins of life and the kinds of minds that different life forms have. This points to the more philosophical concerns to which her scientific questioning eventually leads her—including the origins of the world and what kinds of perception and reason are reliable.

The worm- and fish-men debate whether springs shrink and grow over time because of underground water flows, or because of particles in the water. They argue that spring water is fresh because of heat deep in the earth, and that different amounts of heat produce different minerals, which accounts for their unequal distribution around the planet. For instance, gold appears in moderately (but not extremely) hot zones inside the planet.

The worm- and fish-men's knowledge of the Blazing World's geology and hydrology suggests that it is very similar to the Earth in many fundamental ways. This again shows that Cavendish's speculation about the Blazing World is a way to test out her own scientific hypotheses about Earth. The worm- and fish-men's science is imperfect, but the Blazing World's superabundance of gold and jewels shows that it's clearly more successful than science on Earth.

The Empress asks the ape-men (who are chemists) to test the hypothesis that moderate heat creates gold, and they speculate whether it's possible to make different metals artificially. The ape-men also report that, unlike with animals, they can't predict the movements of vegetables and minerals. The Empress suggests using the bear-men's microscopes to look closer. The bear-men say they can't see inside the Earth, where there's no light, but the worm-men note that they *can* perceive other creatures inside the Earth—although microscopes won't help them.

The ape-men's claims about the motion of animals show that they are investigating the fundamental question of what differentiates living from nonliving matter. Again, this foreshadows the conversations about the nature of life and the universe that the Empress will soon have with the spirits who visit her. And the bear-men and worm-men's debate over how to learn about minerals inside the Earth again points to Cavendish's focus on epistemology—or the different methods that scientists and other thinkers can use to learn about the nature of the world.

The Empress asks the worm-men whether minerals are colorless, but the worm-men say that *everything* has to have a color, because otherwise it would be nothing at all. In fact, by nature every physical thing must have a color, shape, place, weight, and so on. Their wise discourse impresses the Empress, who asks whether there is anything without qualities inside the Earth. They explain that seeds, while small and imperceptible, multiply and grow into larger organisms by mixing with other substances. But if the Empress wants to know about non-beings, the worm-men say, she has to ask the immaterial spirits. The Empress asks where forms come from, and they respond that "nature is eternal and infinite," so forms have always existed. The worm-men also tell the Empress about how different species work together to create mixed species, like weeds—which kill worms.

These topics of discussion turn the conversation towards the philosophical question of what determines something's identity. On the one hand, the idea that nothing can exist without qualities like color is significant because it means that many of things' important, essential traits depend on their physical bodies, and not on some deeper inner nature or soul. On the other hand, the existence of seeds and immaterial spirits suggests that the essence of life could *be a nonphysical soul, which directs the motion and development of matter.* Forms, *or the basic ideas and structures that repeatedly appear in nature, are also an important dimension of this problem: they may be eternal blueprints that have always existed in nature (as philosophers like Plato suggest), or they may simply be the result of different physical things repeatedly behaving in similar ways.*

The Empress next meets with the ape-men, who explain how they have found that all natural bodies are made of a few basic elements. Some think these basic elements are air, water, earth, and fire, but others disagree. The Empress replies that, in her view, nature is all "one infinite self-moving body" which is "divided into infinite [constantly-changing] parts." Rather than trying to figure out the basic elements of nature, the Empress says, the ape-men should do experiments that actually benefit other people.

The Empress's conversation with the ape-men, like all of her other dialogues in this section of the book, is really about the meaning of science. The ape-men want to find the fundamental building blocks of all matter, just like modern scientists who have organized them into the periodic table. But the Empress believes that focusing on the interconnections between *things in nature is an easier and more useful way to explain the world than breaking nature down into separate, disconnected component parts. In other words, the Empress defines nature through its totality, whereas the ape-men define it through its parts.*

The ape-men tell the Empress how the imperial people live for hundreds of years, without seeming to age. They use a special natural gum from the desert that makes them vomit out toxins and shed their skin. If wrapped in a cloth for nine months afterward, they are reborn with the body and strength of a 20-year-old. They also only drink water from limestone and eat fowl. The Empress is amazed—she has heard legends of the philosopher's stone, which cures diseases, but never a way to reverse aging.

The ape-men have *done practical experiments to benefit other people. These experiments are Cavendish's interpretation of scientists' and alchemists' longtime search for rejuvenation technologies. And they again show how Cavendish uses her fantasy world to explore the meaning of Western culture's aspirations to scientific and cultural power. The ruling imperial people's alchemy not only makes them young—it also allows them to continue living and ruling forever, which creates a more stable system of government over time. Thus, Cavendish's fantasies about superior technology are really just a means to fulfill her political fantasies about creating an invincible absolute monarchy.*

The Empress next assembles the anatomists, herbalists, and satyrs (who are followers of the ancient Greek physician Galen). The herbalists describe how their herbs cure people, which means that these herbs must have reason and wisdom. The Empress asks the anatomists to dissect monsters for her, but they refuse, as doing so won't prevent nature from making more monsters. Next, the Galenic physicians explain how a highly infectious kind of internal gangrene causes the plague. They still haven't reached consensus about whether the plague spreads because small particles jump from person to person, or because one person's particles start imitating the motion of an infected person's.

Like the ape-men, the anatomists, herbalists, and Galenic physicians offer practical *scientific insights, not theoretical ones. They do not know for a fact what makes up herbs, monsters, or the plague, but they* do *know what role each can and should play in human society. Modern readers will know that understanding the inner nature of medicines, animals, and diseases can help sciences use and fight them. But, in the 17th century, Cavendish did not seem to think that this was as important a goal as merely identifying problems and solutions.*

The Empress talks with several other groups. The spider-men (mathematicians) show her their designs of lines and shapes, but the Empress doesn't understand them. The lice-men (geometricians) try to weigh air, but the Empress finds this ridiculous and forces them to stop practicing.

Cavendish's Empress continues to sort the meaningful sciences from the meaningless ones. In addition to reflecting her interest in the practical technological applications of science, preference for natural science over pure mathematics also shows what kind of scientific method the Empress values. Specifically, she believes that empirically observing the world is a surer way to understand it than analyzing it theoretically.

The magpie-, parrot-, and jackdaw-men (orators and logicians) are next, but one of the parrot-men gets confused during a complicated speech and publicly humiliates himself. The Empress tells the orators to focus less on eloquence and more on ideas. Next, the logicians present her with several syllogisms about the wisdom of politicians and knaves, beasts and philosophers. The Empress stops them and tells the logicians that, while reason is noble and valuable, they are misusing it and wasting their time. The logicians reply that their art is necessary for understanding the perfection in nature, but the Empress says that most of nature is imperfect—besides God—and she never wants to see the logicians again.

The Empress sees the value in the orators and logicians' arts, but only when they are applied to meaningful real-world challenges. Like the mathematicians and geometricians, the orators and logicians err in believing that their skills are in the abstract. For instance, the parrot-man tries to show off his ability to persuade, without believing in any cause, and the logicians care more about the abstract beauty of logic than the actual world where they live. Instead, the Empress argues that these arts and sciences are not valuable in themselves, but only as tools in service of the natural sciences. Thus, Cavendish suggests that biology, chemistry, physics, and astronomy hold the real truth about the universe, not math, logic, and philosophy.

The Empress concludes that all the people in this world have a defective religion, as they have no knowledge of God. She decides to build churches and convert everyone to her own religion. She teaches a large cohort of women the basics of her faith, and they gradually convert everyone in the kingdom, which makes the Empress a beloved leader. Still, she starts to worry that her people will forget the nature of God, so she looks for ways to reinforce their faith.

The Empress decides to transform the Blazing World's religion after talking with the logicians, who seem to think that human rationality is perfect enough to worship instead of God. The Empress's conversion mission strongly resembles Europe's colonial missions around the world, which wedded the quest for power and wealth with a religious imperative to convert non-Europeans to Christianity.

The bird-men tell the Empress about a mountain that burns because a rock inside it **bursts into flame** when it's wet. She has the worm-men bring her the rock. She also asks the bird-men to bring her part of the sun—and while they can't, they offer to bring her a piece of a different star instead. The Empress builds two chapels, one of wet fire-stone and one of star-stone. In the dark night, both chapels emit a brilliant light and rotate slowly in opposite directions. The Empress preaches about sin and terror in the hellish fire-stone chapel, and repentance and salvation in the heavenly star-stone chapel. Using her chapels, the Empress get the Blazing World's inhabitants to continue believing in her religion, without coercion or violence.

The Empress uses the Blazing World's miraculous natural phenomena to convince its people to worship her God instead of their own. Controlling the Blazing World's religion also helps the Empress maintain political control over its people. Notably, however, this is only possible because of the world's advanced technology for mining the mountain and the stars. Thus, Cavendish suggests that science and technology give people power, and this power is the cornerstone of religion and good governance. The fire- and star-stone make such an impression on the kingdom's people simply because of their extraordinary, blinding light. Thus, in addition to again suggesting that people's senses control their thinking and decisions more than their intellect, the persuasive power of the Empress's chapels also suggests that religion may only serve to unite people by manipulating them.

Next, the Empress starts to wonder about the state of her own original world. She decides that the only way to learn about it is by sending immaterial spirits to find out. The worm-men tell her that there are no such spirits underground, but the fly-men affirm that there are in the air, and they set up a meeting between the spirits and the Empress. The spirits tell the Empress about her homeland, friends, and acquaintances. She asks them about Cabbalist philosophy, and they tell her about how the writer Ben Jonson mocked the Cabbalists in his play *The Alchemist*. The Empress remembers seeing the play, and she asks the spirits whom the different characters represent. But the spirits have forgotten.

The immaterial spirits' arrival is a significant development because, thus far, Cavendish has primarily focused on the physical world and sought to understand it through science. In fact, it's not entirely clear whether her worldview is consistent with the existence of immaterial spirits at all. Yet these spirits also offer her the only way to bridge the gap between her original world and her new one. Her interest in Cabbala, or the mystical interpretation of the relationship between God, the physical universe, and human beings, shows that she has moved beyond science and into the realm of philosophy. Specifically, she is starting to ask questions that natural science cannot answer.

The Empress is surprised to learn that spirits have memories and can forget, but the spirits explain that they wouldn't be able to know anything about the present without memory. The Empress points out that the spirits can predict the future without knowing it, so they should be able to describe the past without memory. But they explain that, in reality, they only predict the future based on their detailed knowledge of the present and past.

This conversation is really about psychology—and specifically the way the mind stores and processes information. Clearly, the spirits are not all-knowing deities. Instead, their minds are different from human ones, and their wisdom is greater, only because they are not constrained by physical bodies (so they can go anywhere they want and learn anything they wish). In this sense, they embody the ideal conditions for knowing about the world, but this knowledge is still based on their senses, and not on any supernatural insight into hidden truths.

The Empress continues asking the spirits about the Cabbala. She asks how many parts it has—usually two, respond the spirits. She asks what kind it is—and the spirits say it's a mix of traditional and scriptural, as well as of literal, philosophical, and moral. She asks whether it comes from human reason or divine inspiration, and the spirits respond that many Cabbalists claim to be divinely inspired, but it's impossible to know whether or not this is true. The spirits also note that Cabbalas are based on faith, not reason—and many human philosophers tend to confuse the two. Only philosophers who study mysticism and divinity, rather than sense and reason, are true Cabbalists.

The Empress's questions about the Cabbala might seem confusing or irrelevant to modern readers. However, she's really asking a simple and important question: how can people answer the greater questions that science can't answer, like what created the world and what God is like? She offers some possible solutions, including looking to scripture, seeking out mystical or divine inspiration, and philosophical deduction. But the spirits clearly reject this last option, which makes the same mistakes as the logicians: it wrongly assumes that human reason is perfect and infallible.

The Empress next asks whether God is made of Ideas or Cabbala. The spirits respond that God can't be made of anything, because he's God, and he's perfect beyond the understanding of any living being. They go on to tell her that the Cabbala isn't made of numbers, and it isn't sinful to be ignorant of the Cabbala, because God is merciful. They explain that the theological Cabbala is superior to the natural one because it's based on faith instead of reason, and that this faith comes from God's "divine saving grace." Although faith and reason are different, the spirits clarify, people can still have both reasoned opinions about the world *and* faith in God. But they cannot directly know God through reason—after all, people have all sorts of contradictory beliefs about God.

Readers can think of the next long section of the Empress's conversation with the spirits as Cavendish's attempt to test out her philosophical ideas about the nature of the universe. She asks what the world would actually look like if her ideas are true, and then she asks whether this world could actually function coherently. The spirits' lecture clarifies that reason is the right tool for understanding the world, while faith is the right tool for understanding God. In other words, they use philosophy to define where scientific inquiry must end and religious faith must begin. This means that there's no contradiction in the Empress dedicating her life to scientific inquiry, yet also setting up a new religion for the Blazing World, which is based on faith.


Next, the Empress asks the spirits whether they are what make physical beings move, and they say no—in fact, spirits can only move because the physical bodies they inhabit do. Yet the spirits can move fast over long distances when they inhabit bodies made of a special, pure, extremely light kind of matter. Since they have no bodies, the spirits have no direct knowledge of nature—instead, their knowledge is supernatural. But it's not perfect and universal, since only God can have such knowledge. Because the spirits don't have any physical parts, the Empress agrees that they were right to say that bodies move them, and not vice-versa.

This obscure conversation about whether spirits move bodies or bodies move spirits is really Cavendish's way of addressing a major philosophical debate about where the true essence of a person (or other being) really lies. Many philosophers traditionally think of people's true identities as their souls, and their bodies as mere vessels for the souls. The spirits partially support this view by noting that they can enter different bodies. But they also partially reject it when they emphasize that bodies move them. *Similarly, they note than they can only understand the physical world by attaching themselves to a body and then experiencing the world through that body's senses. Thus, while Cavendish accepts the division between body and spirit, she thinks that bodies are much more important—and spirits much less so—than her philosophical contemporaries do.*

The bodies the spirits inhabit are formed of many different kinds of matter, but the spirits themselves don't have any inherent body. They can't be compared to water or fire, which are material. They never leave physical vehicles, although these vehicles can change in form.

Cavendish describes the spirit (or soul, or mind) as an immaterial force that enters a physical body and takes up residence in it. This view is similar to that of philosophers who believe that all individuals are the unity of an immaterial soul and a material body. But these philosophers generally think that the individual's essence is really their soul, and the body is merely a vessel. Cavendish rejects this conclusion. Instead, she thinks that, if the soul is really immaterial, it really can't do anything *without the body. This means that the body is far more than a mere empty vessel—instead, it's the vehicle that drives around the helpless, motionless soul.*

The Empress asks the spirits if people are "little world[s]," and they say yes—so are flies, worms, and other animals. She asks if humans' ancestors were just as wise, and the spirits say yes. She asks whether Paradise is a place in the world, or a world in itself, and the spirits respond that Paradise is right here, at the place where her palace is located in the imperial city. The Empress asks if all the animals could speak at the beginning of the world, and the spirits say that only the hybrid creatures like the worm-men and bear-men could.

The Empress's conversations with the spirits turn from the nature of mind and body to the origins of the world and the relationship between the different worlds that she has experienced. Cavendish uses this portion of the conversation to establish that the Blazing World absolutely could exist. *It's logically consistent with all of her own philosophical beliefs about the nature of the world, and once those fundamental principles are set in stone, the Blazing World is just as viable as our own world. Thus, Cavendish encourages her readers to see that many seemingly essential features of their world could actually be totally different, and the fundamental nature of reality would not have to change at all.*


The Empress asks the spirits whether they were the ones who drove Adam out of Paradise, and they say no. She asks where Adam went, and they explain that he left the world where she is now for the world where she originally came from. The Empress concludes that the Cabbalists are wrong to think of Paradise as a purely immaterial world, when it's clearly "a world of living, material creatures." The Empress asks if the Devil was in the serpent who tempted Eve, and they say yes. Next, she asks if light is the same thing as Heaven, and the spirits explain that the real Heaven is far beyond the mere region that contains the stars.

Cavendish again connects her work to the Christian creation story by showing the spirits declare that Paradise is really the Blazing World. Of course, this also lends validity to the interpretation that the Lady actually died on the merchant's ship at the beginning of the book and has gone to Paradise. Cavendish suggests that this Paradise is not a mystical spirit-world populated only by people's souls—instead, it's a real, physical place where they get new bodies and live out eternity.

The spirits also tell the Empress that matter was not all liquid at the beginning of the universe, and it's impossible to know if the universe was truly made in six days. The spirits reject the Cabbalists' fanciful speculations about the deeper meanings of numbers, like the idea that six represents marriage and seven represents God. In fact, it's impossible to represent God, who is perfect and unknowable, because numbers are imperfect. The Empress and the spirits agree that it's therefore useless to describe the creation of the world through numbers, although numbers can grow to infinity, just like the universe, which has grown out from God's infinite power.

The spirits encourage the Empress to start thinking of religious doctrines about the creation of the world as metaphors, rather than literal truths. Since human reason and language are imperfect, they suggest, Scripture can never perfectly express the truth of God and creation. Indeed, just like people cannot fully grasp infinity, they cannot fully grasp God—but they can try, despite knowing they will always fall short. Thus, Scripture is just an imperfect attempt to describe God's indescribable perfection—it's like looking at God's reflection off of a rippling pool of water. Scripture makes it possible to get an imperfect glimpse of God, Cavendish concludes, but it will never represent God fully or accurately.

The spirits clarify many more of the Empress's doubts. The Empress asks whether the stars and planets come from the heavens, or from the ether. The spirits respond that, instead, the Empress should be asking where the heavens and ether come from in the first place. This would be the true origin of the stars and planets.

Understanding the true origin of the universe requires learning where the very first physical thing came from—and not just the planet where we happen to live and the stars that we happen to see. By pointing this out, the spirits show the Empress that the answer to this question is more far-flung than she thought—which implies that she must find it through faith and divine inspiration, not science and reason.

The Empress asks the spirits about what Plato's followers call "three principles of man"—the intellect, the soul, and the soul's effects on the body. The spirits respond that these principles are meaningless, because human reason cannot understand them. The spirits say that there are no true atheists, and they again explain that they are immaterial, but inhabit material forms, including air itself. They explain that there is no world of spirits, since a world must be material and spirits are not. When the Empress asks when spirits were created, the spirits admit that they don't know, and they argue that the answer simply doesn't matter because it wouldn't help mortals at all.

Cavendish uses this conversation to clearly distinguish her philosophy, which views the world as primarily material, from the more conventional ideas popularized by philosophers like Plato, who believed that there is a material world of things and *an immaterial world of ideas. The spirits also admit that they can't answer certain questions—and in doing so, they emphasize how many things are impossible to understand, which means that philosophical knowledge has certain inherent limits. Thus, the Empress must grapple with the fact that, despite being all-powerful in the Blazing World, there are many things that she will simply never know, because nobody ever can.*

The spirits tell the Empress that the mortal soul isn't the same thing as an immaterial spirit, and that it doesn't matter where Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory are—just that they exist. The Empress asks whether the soul can have a shape (no) and whether spirits can be naked (no, because they don't have bodies). The spirits also don't know when human souls were created, but they do believe that souls immediately join new bodies after their original bodies die. They also don't know if "all matter [is] soulified." But they do know that, while two immaterial souls cannot share the same body, multiple material souls *can*—after all, nature is just one enormous material body made of numerous smaller ones.

The difference between the soul and the spirit might seem like a meaningless technicality, but actually it's the key to understanding Cavendish's view of the world. Philosophers have long suggested that humans and animals are conscious because, unlike other things in the world, they have special, immaterial souls (or minds). Cavendish agrees, but she thinks that the soul is made of matter. Thus, like earlier philosophers, she still views people as the union of a soul and a body—she just thinks that the soul happens to be physical. Despite her belief that fantasizing can be a useful alternative to acting in the real world, then, Cavendish actually thinks that fantasy is a real, physical object. Modern readers might find this easier to understand by thinking of the Blazing World as a physical thing in the sense that it's made of a series of electrical signals in Cavendish's brain.

The spirits explain that everything physical in the world has three parts: the inanimate part (or body), the sensitive part (or life), and the rational part (or soul). While divine souls and spirits have life without bodies, souls need bodies. The Empress compares the soul to the sun and the body to the moon, but the spirits say it's the other way around: the body is like the sun and the spirit the moon, because the body gives the spirit its motion (like the sun gives the moon its light).

Cavendish's metaphor about the sun and moon may help readers understand her unusual view of the nature of life. But it shouldn't be misinterpreted as meaning that the body contains the essence of a person's identity and personality, any more than the soul does. Whereas most philosophers thought that the soul controls the body's movements, Cavendish thinks that the body controls the soul's because it moves on its own, while the soul just sits around inside.

When the Empress asks whether the serpent tempted Eve because of an evil spirit, the spirits reply that spirits cannot commit evil, so instead, the Empress asks whether supernatural evil exists. The spirits say that it might exist, but it can never be as evil as God is good. The Empress asks whether animals have evil spirits, and the spirits say that animals sometimes do evil things to get food, but are generally less cruel to each other than people are. In fact, beings with good and evil spirits tend to mix together.

The Empress returns to a subject she has already asked about: the nature of humankind's original sin. In fact, it's reasonable to view her as a stand-in for Eve in the Bible—after all, she is in Paradise, seeking absolute knowledge about the nature of the universe and God. In this way, Cavendish could be seen as criticizing and reinterpreting the traditional version of the story, which holds that Eve caused the fall of man by defying God and eating from the tree of knowledge. Instead, the Empress seems to save the world and her people through knowledge.

The spirits explain that Heaven is made of light, but not fire, and that the bodies that souls occupy don't affect whether the souls are happy or not. They don't know if animals' souls leave the material world, and they conclude that "natural lives, forms and matter" always stay together in the material world.

The spirits' speculation about the soul's journey after death again suggests that the Blazing World may really be the afterlife. Their comment about "lives, forms and matter" again reinforces Cavendish's theory that living beings are entirely material—including the soul, spirit, or life-force, which is usually imagined as immaterial instead.

The Empress asks whether the first humans ate better food than the beasts who lived around them, but the spirits respond that the humans and beasts would have all sought out the best natural food that they could find. She asks whether the first man named all the species of fish, and the spirits say no, because he lived on land. Of course, he did name birds (who are "partly airy, and partly earthy creatures") and all the other animals. The Empress asks about whether the animals that exist now are different from those that existed in the past, and the spirits say yes—but the overall number is the same. They explain that not all the original animals went on Noah's Ark, but "the principal kinds" did.

The Empress's curiosity about the natural evolution of humans and animals may seem irrelevant to the rest of her conversation with the spirits. But it's really just another way of asking about the Blazing World's origins. Specifically, her questions about the first man are ways of investigating the history and origins of science. Similarly, her questions about the Blazing World's animals in the past and present are an attempt to understand where its peculiar human-animal hybrids came from.

The spirits affirm that humans became miserable because they disobeyed God, but they declare that they don't know why, and they ask the Empress not to keep inquiring about the topic. The Empress apologizes for her curiosity, but the spirits declare that it's natural to seek knowledge. The Empress declares that she wants to make her own Jews' Cabbala, and then the spirits suddenly disappear. This frightens the Empress, who briefly falls into a trance. When she emerges, she starts to wonder why the spirits disappeared. She thinks that perhaps she tired them out with her questions, but she concludes that, actually, they made a mistake in their answers and were being punished for it.

There are numerous ways to interpret the spirits' sudden disappearance, as Cavendish never gives any definitive explanation of it. In one sense, the Empress ironically repeats the story of Adam and Eve through her unhealthy curiosity about original sin and the meaning of everything. The only difference is that she gets the spirits banished from Paradise, instead of herself. Under this interpretation, the spirits' disappearance would mean that humans shouldn't try to understand God and the meaning of the universe, since they simply can't. Alternatively, if readers agree with the Empress that the spirits' answers *were the problem, they can reasonably question any of the claims the spirits have made so far—and replace them with ideas of their own. In this way, Cavendish preserves her readers' power to creatively interpret her philosophy however they wish.*


The Empress tells the worm-men and fly-men that she feels deeply guilty about accidentally getting the spirits banished to the abyss deep within the Earth. The worm-men tell her that the depths of the earth are not so bad a place to live, and she feels slightly better. But she asks the worm-men and fly-men to find the spirits, and they go off looking. The worm- and fly-men soon return and report that the spirits are at the opposite point on the planet from the Empress, and are happy to help with her Cabbala.

Regardless of what the spirits' banishment means, Cavendish uses it as a plot device to transition from the Empress's philosophical dialogues to the book's next phase, in which she meets and befriends the Duchess. While the spirits do not actually end up banished to the abyss, the Empress's fear suggests that this abyss represents Hell (the counterpart to the Emperor and Empress's city of Paradise). Finally, the spirits' banishment shows that, even though the Emperor has given the Empress absolute power over the Blazing World, there are still unfathomable forces beyond her control.



The spirits offer to send the Empress one of their own as a scribe, and she agrees. They ask whose body she wants the scribe to inhabit. She requests a famous ancient writer, like Plato or Aristotle, but the spirits tell her that such men wouldn't be willing to write down ideas they don't agree with. She asks for a more recent well-known writer instead, like Descartes or Galileo, but the spirits insist that these men would refuse to be scribes for a woman. Instead, the spirits propose a lady scribe, the "plain and rational" Duchess of Newcastle, and the Empress agrees.

When the Empress calls for famous philosophers as scribes, the spirits' responses—that they would be too proud or misogynistic to work with her—point to the serious obstacles that Cavendish faced in her life. Philosophers, scientists, and men in general didn't take her work seriously because of her gender and lack of formal education. This context is crucial for understanding this book's fantasy form and unconventional approach to philosophy. Of course, the Duchess of Newcastle is Cavendish herself. By pointing out male philosophers' biases and having the spirits choose her as the Empress's scribe, Cavendish insists that her readers should judge all thinkers by their personal and intellectual qualities alone.

The Duchess of Newcastle appears to the Empress and apologizes for her poor handwriting, but the Empress declares that one of her secretaries will learn to transcribe it. The Duchess proposes that the Empress consult "some famous Jew," like Moses, to help with her "Jews' Cabbala," but the Empress says that she trusts the spirits. However, the Duchess insists that the "spirits are as ignorant as mortals" about many things, and she advises the Empress to leave the work of scriptural interpretation to experts.

When Cavendish appears as a character in her own book, The Blazing World *becomes a work of metafiction—or literature that emphasizes the fact that it is a work of fiction created by an author. Of course, this scene raises the question of whether* The Blazing World *is supposed to be the Duchess Cavendish's work or the Empress's Cabbala—meaning that it contains the Empress's philosophical interpretation of the meaning of the universe. However, in reality, it seems to be* both*: while Cavendish has imagined the Empress into existence in the first place, the last several dozen pages of the book have contained the Empress's philosophy, transcribed by Cavendish.*

The Empress agrees with the Duchess and decides to write a "philosophical Cabbala," but the Duchess tells her that the Cabbala must go beyond what can be known with reason. So the Empress proposes a "moral Cabbala" instead, but the Duchess says that morality is nothing more than "to fear God, and to love [one's] neighbor." The Empress suggests a "political Cabbala," but the Duchess says that government is merely based on reward and punishment, so it doesn't need a Cabbala.

Each different kind of Cabbala represents a particular kind of methodology, or approach to developing knowledge. Thus, when the Empress decides which kind of Cabbala to write, she is really making a definitive decision about which way of understanding the world she believes to be best. She rejects philosophy because, as the spirits have shown her, reason alone cannot answer the most fundamental questions (like what created the world and what God is like). Meanwhile, the Empress also rejects morality and politics because they don't need detailed interpretation. Living morally and governing well depend entirely on reason*, which means that asking about them won't help the Empress understand the true secrets of the universe.*

Instead, the Duchess proposes that the Empress "make a poetical or romancical Cabbala, wherein you can use metaphors, allegories, similitudes, etc. and interpret them as you please." The Empress agrees and thanks the Duchess, whom she declares her favorite person in the world. She spends some time with the Duchess, then sends her back to her world, but asks her to visit from time to time. They become so close that they turn into Platonic lovers.

The Empress's "poetical or romancical Cabbala" is likely this very book, which uses the Empress's journey to the Blazing World as a metaphor for Cavendish's worldview. Cavendish uses the Empress's rise to power to communicate her faith in absolute monarchy, and the Empress's endless conversations with the animal-men and spirits in order to present her unique philosophy that the world is made of rational, self-moving matter. Finally, the concept of Platonic love is based on Plato's vision of love and virtue in the dialogue Symposium, *but it only became a popular idea during Cavendish's life, in the very royal court where she spent her youth. It refers specifically to loving someone because of their virtue and goodness.*

On one of her visits to the Empress, the Duchess is visibly upset. She admits that this is because of her "extreme ambition"—she wants to be a princess. But the Empress tells the Duchess that she already outranks princesses, since Dukes and Duchesses are the highest rank that common subjects can achieve. But the Duchess complains that Dukes and Duchesses can never become Emperors and Empresses. The Empress offers to ask the immaterial spirits to help the Duchess become the Empress of her own world. The spirits appear to her.

The Duchess's speech allows Cavendish to express her frustrations with the gender roles of her time. Because she could not meaningfully wield political power, her best chance to articulate and spread her ideas was by turning herself into a fictional character. Of course, her desire to rule her own world explains why she has created the Empress as the Blazing World's all-powerful ruler. Even though modern readers may think that England's tyrannous monarchy was responsible *for oppressing women, Cavendish doesn't agree. Instead, she views absolute monarchy as the* solution *to women's oppression.*

The spirits explain that there are an endless number of different worlds, and the Empress asks if the Duchess can become an Empress in one of them. The spirits respond that all the worlds already have their own people and governments. The Empress insists that it must be possible to conquer one of them, but the spirits recommend against conquest, which inevitably makes rulers "more feared than loved" and gets them deposed. The Duchess insists that she wants to give up her boring life for a life of fame and adventure.

By learning about all of the other worlds, the Empress and Duchess realize that the Empress is actually much less powerful than she feels. She only rules over one world, and there are infinite people who rule infinite other worlds and thus are just as powerful as her. As a result, she starts to see absolute power differently: a truly powerful monarch must rule many *worlds, not just their own. Put differently, they have to build an inter-world empire. In turn, this observation raises important questions about Cavendish's political philosophy. Will rulers inevitably keep seeking more power, until they inevitably overextend themselves and collapse? Does this make absolute monarchy, Cavendish's preferred form of government, inherently unstable in the long term?*

The spirits recommend that, instead of trying to rule over a "terrestrial world," the Duchess should create her own "celestial world" through imagination. Unlike in a terrestrial world, where monarchs constantly struggle to keep and exercise power, celestial monarchs have total control over every aspect of their worlds. While terrestrial monarchs can't see most of their worlds or share in their subjects' pleasures, celestial monarchs can. The Duchess is convinced: she will imagine an immaterial world instead of trying to conquer a material one. In fact, the Empress declares that she wants to do the same.

"Celestial world" is just another term for fantasy, so in this passage, the Duchess is really talking about the virtues of imagination—or fiction. If it's impossible to build and maintain a sustainable absolute monarchy in the "terrestrial world," then imagination *is the best solution to the human hunger for power. In this way, Cavendish presents one basic defense of science fiction, a genre that she arguably invented in* The Blazing World.

The spirits leave, and the Duchess and Empress go about creating their celestial worlds. The Duchess tries basing her world on a series of philosophers—Thales, Pythagoras, Plato, Epicurus, Aristotle, Descartes, and Hobbes—but all of these imaginary worlds fall apart. Instead, she tries to build one based on her own ideas, full of "rational self-moving matter." Its perfection, variety, and beauty "cannot possibly be expressed by words," and neither can the pleasure she takes in building it.

The Duchess's first worlds fail because Cavendish thinks all these previous philosophers' views were incomplete or inconsistent. Her own world is based on the theory of "rational self-moving matter"—the same theory that the Empress and the immaterial spirits agreed upon in their conversation. In this view, bodies and souls are both made of matter that is capable of motion on its own—and so life can exist without needing to depend on some special, divine, or immaterial ingredient to breathe life into inert things. This perfect, beautiful world of self-moving matter is clearly the Blazing World. Thus, Cavendish is really talking about the process through which she wrote this book.

Meanwhile, the Empress tries and fails to build several worlds of her own. The Duchess shows her world to the Empress, who is so impressed that she wishes she could live in it. But instead, the Duchess helps the Empress build a better world of her own. The Empress imagines a world full of various creatures, effective laws, and beautiful art. After all, she has nothing else to do, because the Blazing World is already so perfect and harmonious.

The Empress and Duchess imagine other worlds together. Put differently, they are writing utopian fiction, and their relationship shows how fiction can inspire and entertain both the people who create it and the people who read it. Cavendish's readers may never know if the Blazing World is the Empress's world, the Duchess's, or a mix of both. This is doubly true because the Empress imagines her own perfect world from within *the Blazing World. Still, it has the ideal creatures, art, and political system that she describes. One way to interpret this scene is that the Blazing World is* Cavendish's *utopia, but everyone else (including the Empress) might envision their own perfect world differently.*

The Empress wants to learn about the Duchess's world, where many different governments live by many different laws. The Duchess warns her that this other world is full of division and conflict, but the Empress persists. She asks the spirits to temporarily replace her soul with an "honest and ingenious [female] spirit" while she goes to visit the Duchess's world. They agree.

Cavendish describes her own world, which is distinct from both the Blazing World and the Empress's native world, in order to elaborate on her political theory. If the Blazing World is peaceful because a single Emperor rules it with absolute power and there are no laws or factions, then Cavendish clearly thinks that the real world is full of conflict and suffering because no single ruler has managed to bring everything under his or her sole control.

The Empress's and Duchess's souls travel together to the Duchess's native world. The Empress sees how, even though humans belong to many different nations and groups, they are all ambitious, dishonest, and selfish. She appreciates the nations' desire to expand, but wonders why they are willing to sacrifice so many lives to fight over a little bit of territory. On the other hand, the Empress also resents her own boring, peaceful world. She and the Duchess agree that the best world would find a healthy middle ground between total peace and constant conflict.

By visiting the Duchess's world, the Empress refines her thinking about how the perfect world would work. This shows that people's ideas of utopia can evolve over time, based on their knowledge and experiences. Specifically, the Empress realizes that the Blazing World's absolute monarchy is too harmonious, and growth requires a certain level of conflict and competition. This suggests that, despite Cavendish's love for absolute monarchy as a form of government, she may also recognize its shortcomings. On the other hand, the events of the rest of the book suggest that she would also be willing to sacrifice many lives for a bit more power.

The Duchess and Empress go looking for the best nation in the Duchess's world. The Empress praises the Sultan of Turkey, but the Duchess points out that he can't change the Islamic laws that his government is bound to follow. The Duchess shows the Empress her own country, England, where the government is smaller but stronger and wiser than Turkey's, so the people are happier than anywhere else. The Empress sees Londoners go into a theater and decides to follow them. She enjoys the play, but she remarks that the actors seemed too unnatural and wonders why writers keep creating new plays out of the same old stories.

Through the Duchess and Empress's adventure, Cavendish argues that Turkey and England are among the best societies on Earth because their rulers are the most autocratic. Indeed, according to the Duchess's comments about England, Cavendish thinks that a ruler's degree of power over the territory they rule is more important to their governing success than the actual amount of territory that they rule. Finally, the Empress's comments about theater suggest that Cavendish sees much other 17th-century literature as unoriginal and unrelatable. Of course, she tries to overcome both of these issues by telling an entirely new kind of story and merging her personality as a writer with her character in the book.

Next, the Duchess takes the Empress to meet the royal family at court, and the Empress declares that the King and Queen are the most affable, majestic, and divine monarchs she has ever seen. The Duchess is distraught because she misses her husband, and after court, she takes the Empress to meet him. The narrator interrupts to explain that the Duchess's and Empress's souls are occupying material bodies made of "the purest and finest sort of air, and of a human shape," so nobody else can see or hear them.

Cavendish defends the English monarchy by praising its leaders' personal virtues. Her family's political and financial stake in the monarchy certainly influenced her view, but this scene isn't mere flattery. Instead, Cavendish sincerely believed that England's leaders were benevolent, and that this destined England for greatness. Meanwhile, her description of the Duchess and Empress's souls reflects the eccentric philosophy of mind and body that the immaterial spirits explained to the Empress.

The Empress and Duchess reach Welbeck, the Duke's estate in the Nottinghamshire woods. The Empress is impressed by the estate and forest, and the Duchess explains that most of the rest of England's palaces and forests were destroyed in the Civil War—including the other half of her husband's estate. The Duchess shows the Empress the Duke's modest house, and when the Duke walks inside, her airy spirit-vehicle starts to joyously spin around. The Duchess and Empress watch the Duke expertly ride horses and practice sword fighting. But the Duchess worries that the Duke is overexerting himself, so her soul briefly enters his body to see if he's alright. The Empress's soul follows.

Cavendish uses this passage to proclaim her love for her husband and show off his virtue—much like he did for her in his introductory poem to the book. Similarly, she also wants to explain his misfortunes to her readers: in the English Civil War, Parliament defeated the monarchy and took away the property of noblemen like the Duke. Clearly, Cavendish ties her family's personal misfortune to her country's foolish decision to abandon absolute monarchy, and she hopes to convince her readers that the monarchy is at once more just, more effective, and more merciful to unlucky noblemen like her husband.

The Duchess, Empress, and Duke's souls are all in the Duke's body. The Empress adores the Duke's "wise, honest, witty, complaisant and noble" soul, and the Duchess briefly grows jealous, until she realizes that the Empress's admiration for the Duke is really a kind of Platonic love. The Duke's soul sings songs, gives speeches, and plays games to entertain the Empress.

Cavendish uses this unusual scene, in which three souls meet in one body, to clarify the distinction between physical and Platonic love. The Empress loves the Duke's soul because of his virtue, and this is the essence of Platonic love—which needs no physical or sexual component.

A spirit visits and informs the Empress that she should return to the Blazing World, since her soul is deeply missing the Emperor's. She agrees to return, but before she goes, the Duchess asks her for a favor: to broker a deal between the Duke and Fortune, who has been unkind to him. But the Empress worries that she won't be able to find a fair advocate for the Duke, or an impartial judge to hear the case. She asks the Duchess to accompany her to the Blazing World, so that they can try to get the Duke a fair hearing. The Duchess agrees, and the Duke decides to send "two friends, Prudence and Honesty, to plead [his] cause."

From the Roman Empire through the Middle Ages, Fortune was conventionally depicted as a fickle goddess. Cavendish continues this tradition. Just as she uses the Empress's rule to imagine fulfilling her fantasies of absolute power over the world, she uses Fortune's trial to fulfill her fantasy of actually achieving justice for her beloved husband. Of course, modern societies attempt to give people fair trials through democracy and equal laws, but Cavendish doesn't believe in either. Instead, she believes in absolute monarchy, under which the only way to get a fair trial is by convincing the monarch to create one. The Duchess does so because she's close friends with the Empress, but readers can only guess how—or whether—everyone else can receive a fair trial in Cavendish's imaginary Blazing World monarchy.

The Empress and the Duchess return to the Blazing World along with Prudence and Honesty. The spirits go looking for Fortune, but they tell the Duchess that Fortune is too fickle to hear their case. After a long struggle, they convince Truth to judge their dispute.

Cavendish insists that her husband was in the right by showing Prudence and Honesty defend him against Fortune before the judge of Truth. Even if the Duke never got his estate back in the real world, Cavendish's fictional trial could still shape his legacy and preserve his reputation. Thus, just as she chose to rule and do science in the fantasy Blazing World because she could not in the real world, she exonerates her husband in fiction because she lacks the power to do so in fact.

In her opening speech, Fortune asks why the Duke's soul has not come to plead his own case. She declares that the Duke "*hath always been my enemy*" because he has scorned her for her inconstancy, while preferring Honesty and Prudence over her. Next, the Duchess speaks to defend her husband. She says that he is a respectful gentleman who reasonably decided to side with Honesty and Prudence, instead of trusting Fortune with his valuable reputation. Rather than making peace with him, Fortune actively battled against him, ruining his estate and reputation. But the Duke never stopped respecting Fortune, the Duchess reports, and he asks for his friendship in the future.

Fortune's case against the Duke is entirely personal: she mistreats him because she is bitter about not receiving his personal favor and envious of those who do. Thus, Fortune rules like a tyrannous monarch: she uses her power however she wishes, without regard for ethics or justice. This is ironic because Cavendish advocates for exactly the same system of government: she believes that rulers should have absolute power and be able to do whatever they wish. Clearly, whether such a form of government works depends entirely on the virtue of the person running it.

Next, Folly and Rashness fight to speak on behalf of Fortune, and Fortune chooses Rashness. Rashness declares that the Duchess continues to insult Fortune by preferring Honesty and Prudence, and she threatens that this will ruin Fortune's reputation. Rashness recommends that Fortune "*fling as many misfortunes and neglects [as possible] on the Duke and Duchess of Newcastle.*"

The vices support Fortune's case against the virtuous Duke. It's clear that Truth will not really be judging the case—instead, Fortune will do whatever she pleases, whether or not it aligns with truth and virtue. Thus, Cavendish shows that good and evil both have power in the world, and that the only way people can choose one over the other is in their fantasies.

Then, Prudence declares that she wants to heal the rift between Fortune and the Duke, but Honesty interrupts and declares that everyone should speak "*plainly and truly*." Honesty raised the Duke like her foster-son and introduced him to all the other virtues, including Gratitude, Charity, Justice, Honor, and Experience. Honesty claims that Fortune is the Duke's only enemy, and only because the Duke was too honest to flatter her. But he also never despised her—instead, he treated her with humility, respect, and honor.

While Prudence and Honesty are both virtues, they don't necessarily get along—instead, Prudence often requires telling less than the whole truth, and Honesty is often imprudent. By showing Honesty win out over Prudence, Cavendish gets out the whole truth about her husband's legacy—even if she makes it likely that he will lose his trial. Again, while this technique may be unremarkable in fiction today, it was very innovative in Cavendish's time. It again shows her commitment to using fiction to change the real world (and vice versa). After all, writing was probably the most powerful tool available to Cavendish in her lifetime.

Fortune hates Honesty's speech, and she disappears in a fury. Honesty tells the Duchess that she is wrong to care so much about "Fortune's favors" and trying to interfere with the gods' decisions. The Empress asks what Prudence thinks, and Prudence replies that Honesty has gone too far. The Empress lets the Duchess return to her world, on the condition that she return to visit the Blazing World from time to time.

Fortune cannot stand the honest truth, and she clearly will not be changing her behavior toward the Duke. Cavendish concludes that people can fantasize about winning justice, but in the real world, they must simply accept fate—even when it is deeply unjust. Evil might easily win out in the real world, but the Empress and Duchess's friendship shows how people can fight this tendency by consciously identifying and promoting virtue in their relationships.

But just before the Duchess leaves, the Empress asks for her advice about how to govern the Blazing World. Since the Empress changed the religion and form of government, the different groups, like the worm-men and bear-men, have started to fight. The Empress even fears a rebellion. To return the Blazing World to its former state of peace, the Duchess suggests recreating the old system of "one sovereign, one religion, one law, and one language" and eliminating all the specialist factions (the philosopher bear-men, astronomer bird-men, and so on). Education causes conflict, the Duchess argues, because some people always think they know better than others.

While it may be easy for readers to miss, the Empress has changed the Blazing World by introducing her own religion and shutting down many of the native groups' professions (like logic and geometry). The Blazing World has not changed very much, and it is by no means democratic or pluralistic. Still, the Empress and Duchess agree that it has to be more *autocratic in order to remain peaceful. This shows how deeply Cavendish believes in absolute monarchy and the repression of dissent. At the same time, the Empress's failure to improve the Blazing World also ironically shows how arrogant rulers often create conflicts by seeking to control too much.*

The Empress agrees to follow the Duchess's advice, but she worries that it would seem disgraceful to undo the laws that she created. On the contrary, the Duchess says: if the Empress changes the laws back, she will really be demonstrating wisdom and honor. This will help her achieve "glorious fame in this world, and an eternal glory hereafter." The Empress's and Duchess's souls share "an immaterial kiss, and shed immaterial tears." They part, but they always remain true Platonic friends.

The Empress's willingness to change the laws shows that she truly is a worthy, benevolent ruler. Meanwhile, the Empress and Duchess's Platonic friendship shows how women could find guidance, power, and companionship in one another, during an era when they had little political or social power. But since the Duchess is just Cavendish, her Platonic love with the Empress also represents Cavendish's deep personal investment in the fiction she has written.

THE SECOND PART OF THE DESCRIPTION OF THE NEW BLAZING WORLD

The Empress reorganizes the Blazing World's laws and religion, and all is peaceful and quiet. But spirits tell her about a devastating war in her native world, which has destroyed her country. She wishes the Blazing World could send troops to her native world, but she knows that this is impossible. The Emperor asks whether they could arm the spirits, and the Empress says no, since they're immaterial and won't want to participate in violence. The Emperor suggests sending the spirits to fight in men's bodies, but the Empress doubts that it will be possible to find enough vacant bodies to raise a spirit army. And even if they could, the Empress continues, all the bodies would already be dead and rotting.

The Empress has overcome the Blazing World's problems by ruling wisely. Cavendish uses this as an example of why benevolent monarchy is the best form of government: when the king or queen wants to simply solve a problem, they don't need to wait around for anyone else's approval. But the Empress still has other loyalties and higher aspirations, which extend beyond the limits of the world she already rules. In particular, she feels loyal to her native country and wishes she could save it from destruction—much like Cavendish felt about England during her exile. The Empress's discussion with the immaterial spirits has already made it clear that spirits are only as strong as the bodies they inhabit, so she will need another military solution.

The Emperor is out of ideas, so he recommends that the Empress consult with the Duchess of Newcastle. She does, and the Duchess visits and promises to help with the war effort. First, she tells the Empress to have the fish-men look for a route back to her original world. They find a passage, but it's extremely narrow and often frozen over. The Duchess and Empress ask the giants (architects) to build ships that can travel underwater, and they promise to try. Meanwhile, the Duchess proposes sending bird-, worm-, and bear-men towards the passage. The Empress worries that they would all quickly die in a war, but the Duchess asks for the Empress's faith and patience, and the Empress agrees because she loves the Duchess. Then, the giants return with their underwater ships.

The Empress seeks guidance from the person she most loves and trusts, the Duchess. Beyond showing how loyalty and friendship can give people tools for making wise decisions, this conversation is also a metaphor for the process of writing fiction. Namely, to drive a story forward, an author must consult their characters (or combine their own ideas with their characters' traits and ways of thinking). After deciding to invade her original world, the Empress finally puts the Blazing World's extraordinary science and technology to use. This shows that her endless conversations with the bird-men, worm-men, bear-men, spirits, and more actually served an important purpose: they will help her build the most powerful army that the universe has ever seen.

Next, the Duchess declares that the Empress has to lead her troops into war. But the Duchess will accompany her by sending her own soul along in the Empress's body, together with the Empress's. Then, the Duchess hatches a plan. The fish-men will remain on the underwater ships, which are indestructible because they're made of gold, but have no weapons. The worm-men will mine the **fire-stone**, which can serve as a great weapon for destroying the enemy's wood boats, as well as a source of light for navigation.

The Duchess and Empress's close Platonic friendship culminates in this invasion. Moreover, their souls unite in one body, which carries important symbolism: Cavendish (the Duchess) or her protagonist (the Empress) become indistinguishable from the outside. It's impossible to say who is speaking or acting in the following section of the book. Of course, this represents the way that the Empress is just an extension of Cavendish's mind, work, and fantasies.

The Empress follows the Duchess's plan, and her army of bear-, bird-, worm-, and fish-men assembles at the entrance to the passage. The fish-men drag the ships through the underwater passage in the Icy Sea, and then they emerge in the Empress's native world and sail the rest of the distance to her native country. Using their telescopes, the bear-men see a large fleet of ships besieging the country. Carrying **fire-stone**, the fish-men and bird-men make it look like the sky and sea are burning. The enemy thinks that judgment day has come. In the morning, when the Empress's fleet sails toward land, the enemy is astonished to see that her ships carry no weapons.

The Empress reenacts the book's opening scene, but in reverse: she passes through the same channel that brought her into the Blazing World, but now to invade the world where she started. Where she left her world powerless, abducted by an evil merchant, she returns to it as a radiant goddess seeking to save her people from their enemies. Since the Blazing World represents the imagination, the Empress's transformation symbolizes the way that fantasy enables people to grow and empower themselves.

The Empress writes her native country's council of leaders to inform them that she is coming to their aid. But the council can't agree on what to do, and this frustrates the Empress, who nearly turns her army around and leaves—until the Duchess convinces her to have more patience. The council sends a messenger to ask the Empress where she comes from and how she will help the country. The Empress doesn't say where she came from, but she promises that she will appear where she is needed at one in the morning.

Readers know about the Empress's good intentions, but will also understand why her appearance worries people in her native country. From their perspective, a magical, seemingly all-powerful foreign princess has invaded their world, then dubiously claimed to be helping them. They have no way to test her true motives. Unfortunately, the Empress is too used to absolute power; she wants to simply save her country, without having to explain herself or negotiate with her people.

At one o'clock, the Empress appears to her country's fleet. She wears **shining clothing made of star-stone** and appears to be walking on water, because the fish-men support her on their backs. Her country's people start to worship her, and she gives a speech announcing that she has come from another world to save her native land. She promises to destroy her country's enemies and asks only for gratitude in return. But her country's people can't decide if she's an angel, goddess, sorceress, or devil. The next morning, dressed in jewels and star-stone, the Empress leads her army's attack. Her army sets the enemy fleet on fire, decimating it. Her country's people rejoice and decide that she's an angel.

The Empress becomes a Messiah figure, who visits her people from another realm in order to save them. By walking on water and sparkling with divine light, she makes these religious undertones all the more clear. She declares that her primary motives are love and loyalty for her people—the same values that motivate her to protect her husband's honor and help the Duchess. Of course, this scene is especially significant because the Empress is a woman, *which contradicts virtually all traditional depictions of the Messiah. Cavendish's message is clear: women can do anything that men can, from writing to ruling to saving the universe.*

The Empress meets with her country's king and promises to help him become the most powerful leader in his world. He asks the Empress to help him destroy all the enemy's other ships and establish naval dominance, and she agrees. She has her army burn all other countries' ships until they start paying tribute to her country's king, making him "absolute master of the seas." Then, all the other countries decide to band together and fight against the Empress's native country. These other countries form a large fleet, but the fish-men still easily defeat them **with fire-stone**.

The Empress doesn't merely want to save her native country from foreign invaders—she wants to help it achieve global domination, the same way that her kingdom has in the Blazing World. Of course, this aligns with Cavendish's belief in absolute monarchy. While achieving global domination requires excessive military force, Cavendish clearly thinks that this is worth the long-term benefits of peace and security.

Next, the Empress goes after the countries with no navies, who trade and travel exclusively by land. The bear-men use their telescopes to examine different towns and cities, and then the Empress develops a plan. In each country, she will send the bird-men and worm-men to **burn down** larger and larger towns, until the ruler submits and agrees to pay tribute to the king of the Empress's country. They begin their attacks: the bird-men lay fire-stones on top of each house, and the worm-men at the foundations. The stones start burning slowly, but when it rains, the whole town bursts into flame.

Thanks to the Blazing World's extraordinary science and technology, the Empress easily conquers the remaining countries in her native world. By doing so, she gradually builds a global empire for her country's king. Curiously, the bear-men use their telescopes as part of the Empress's campaign. This minor detail is significant because, when the Empress first dialogued with the bear-men about their research, she decided that telescopes are deceptive and unscientific. But clearly, she has changed her mind by learning about telescopes' practical uses. Similarly, Cavendish was famously interested in microscopes and telescopes, but also skeptical about the claims of scientists who used them.

The Empress repeats this over and over, until every country in her native world, except one, has pledged fealty to ESFI (her native country). The one holdout is a country where it doesn't rain, but there is a massive "flowing tide" once a year. The worm-men put **fire-stones** under the houses of this country's towns, and when the tide comes in, all the houses burn down. This country ultimately submits to ESFI, too, which gives the King of ESFI absolute control over his whole world.

During Cavendish's life, the British monarch was officially called the King of England, Scotland, France, and Ireland. This is why the Empress's native country is called "ESFI." Thus, the Empress invading her native world to build a global empire for "ESFI" is a clear allegory for Cavendish's royalist fantasy of helping the English monarchy conquer the whole world.

The "greatest princes" of this world all want to meet the Empress, so she agrees to reveal herself to them at sea before returning to the Blazing World. When she does, they think that she is a goddess. The same night, she puts on a show with the bird-men and fish-men: they **light up the sky and sea using the fire-stone**, she appears in her own glowing robes, and then they sing a beautiful melody. At daybreak, the Empress visits the King of ESFI's ship to promise him that she will always be available to assist him. Then, she gives a speech to the princes of her world, encouraging them to respect and pay tribute to the King of ESFI.

The people of the Empress's world view her in much the same way as the Emperor did when she first reached the Blazing World: as an all-powerful goddess. This is because what is ordinary in one world looks extraordinary in the other—just as the Empress's human form seemed otherworldly to the Emperor, the Blazing World's fire-stone and star-stone seem otherworldly to the princes (as they likely do to the reader). Thus, Cavendish suggests that people tend to confuse the extraordinary and unfamiliar for the divine—but that the universe is full of many more possibilities than most of them realize.

The Empress returns to her ship, and her whole fleet sinks underwater and begins its trip back to the Blazing World. The Empress's and Duchess's souls talk extensively on the journey. The Duchess asks why the Empress didn't enrich her own family or country with the Blazing World's endless reserves of gold and jewels. The Empress explains that riches drive people crazy—they constantly compete to get more than their neighbors, and the more they get, the more they want.

Even after she conquers her native world, the Empress's greatest pleasure in life is still talking with the Duchess. Everyone needs companionship in order to be truly happy, Cavendish suggests, including powerful people. The Empress's comments about riches show that, even though Cavendish believes that monarchs should have absolute power over society, she also clearly understands how power can corrupt them.

However, the Empress promises that, if the Duchess can find a pathway between the Blazing World and her *own* native world, she can have all the riches she wants from the Blazing World. The Duchess clarifies that she only wants enough riches to restore her husband's estate to its previous size, and that she would much rather have the Blazing World's elixir of youth than its gold and diamonds. The Empress promises to send the fish-men looking for a passage from the Blazing World to the Duchess's world, and she declares that she wants to help the Duchess become her world's "monarchess," too. The Duchess thanks her, and they declare their love for each other.

Like the Empress, the Duchess (Cavendish) values wealth out of a sense of honor, not greed. Specifically, she thinks that rebuilding her disgraced husband's reputation will require growing his fortune again. She really wants power and influence, not mere possessions. Of course, since she lacked the political and legal means available to men, she built her legacy through her writings instead. As she puts it in her introduction and epilogue to The Blazing World, *she has chosen authorship because ruling a fictional world is her best alternative to ruling the real one.*

In another conversation, the Duchess explains that she cares more about being original than being good—even though everyone who has met her knows that she is also virtuous and chaste. She only writes about "dishonest and wicked persons" to prove her wit.

Cavendish expresses important personal values in this passage. First, she prefers originality to virtue, and second, she sees no contradiction between them. While readers can only speculate about her motives for reaching these conclusions, it's clear that she became such a pioneering writer precisely because she was committed to expressing original ideas and leaving a legacy—and because she didn't care what her critics thought of her.

The Empress reaches the Blazing World and returns to her palace. The Emperor and Empress joyously reunite. The Duchess wants to return to the Duke, but the Emperor asks her to stay in the Blazing World awhile first. He tells her that he has started training horses, like the Duke, and shows her his magnificent stables made of gold and jewels. He asks for her advice about building a theater and directing plays, but she claims not to know very much about the subject. The Duchess admits that other playwrights look unfavorably on her plays, but she thinks that *their* plays are just a "nursery of whining lovers" with no artistic value. The Duchess stays in the Blazing World to build a theater and put on plays for the Emperor and Empress.

The Emperor borrows his new hobbies of horse-training and theater from the Duke and Duchess. As usual, Cavendish takes the opportunity to praise her husband's virtue and remind her readers of how art can inspire people (including them). She also uses this scene to prove that the Blazing World's Emperor is a wise, benevolent ruler: he knows how to identify and learn from other people's good ideas. Finally, Cavendish responds to her critics once again by declaring that they simply do not recognize the artistic value in her plays. Needless to say, she was right: like the Empress, critics have learned to appreciate her unconventional plays over the centuries. Many were not appreciated or performed until centuries after Cavendish's death.

But the Duchess also desperately wants to return to her own world and see the Duke. Eventually, the Emperor and Empress agree to let her go, and she returns back to her own body. She tells the Duke all about her plays, invading the other world with the Empress, and the Emperor's beautiful horses. The Duke and Duchess lament that there's no passage from their world to the Blazing World.

The Duchess's conversations with the Duke are no doubt the same as Cavendish's real-life conversations with her beloved husband about the book that she has written. Accordingly, her stories about visiting the Empress stress that, through the imagination, people can take transformative journeys to other worlds. This applies as much to writers imagining their own worlds as to readers visiting others' worlds.

The Duchess also tells her acquaintances about the Blazing World. She explains how the Empress likes to discuss the nature of the world with learned scholars, how the Blazing World's weather is always perfect, and how its bright stars light up the sky at night. She describes the Empress's extraordinary royal chariots, which are covered in **shining diamonds** and driven by unicorns. She explains how giants guard the Empress, fish-men and bird-men sing to her on her seafaring journeys, and fox-men and ape-men race for her when she travels overland. She describes the Emperor and Empress eating exotic fruit and dancing on the backs of singing fish-men. In fact, the Blazing World is full of all sorts of extraordinary music and instruments that cannot exist in this one.

Fact and fiction again merge in this closing passage. Cavendish (the author) tells her friends about the Blazing World by describing the Duchess (her character) doing the same. Thus, Cavendish ends by telling a story about herself telling the story that she has told in this book. In this way, she emphasizes how her desire to share the beauty of her imagination with others drove her to write and publish this book. Finally, the book's concluding passage focuses on the Blazing World's unfathomable art and beauty. This is what most captured the Empress's attention when she first arrived in the Blazing World. And this beauty is also a metaphor for the stunning power of the imagination.

THE EPILOGUE TO THE READER

Margaret Cavendish writes that she wants "not only to be Empress, but Authoress of a whole world." Her Blazing World is made of pure rational thought, and she built it faster than Alexander or Caesar could conquer the known world. She also caused much less turmoil and death in the process, and she enjoyed it far more than these great men did. Her Blazing World is peaceful and unified, but she could just as easily create any other kind of world. Cavendish made herself the hero of her world, and she wouldn't trade this for any amount of power in the physical world. She encourages her readers to imagine worlds of their own—just not to usurp hers. And she concludes by pledging her undying love and loyalty to her "dear Platonic friend," the Empress of the Blazing World.

Cavendish sums up the moral of her story. The Empress chose to give up absolute power over the Blazing World in order to build a fantasy world instead. This shows that being an "Authoress" is even better than being an "Empress"—that imagination is better than power, or that an intellectual life is better than a life of worldly success. Of course, this is doubly true for women, who lacked the same political, economic, and social opportunities as men, but have always been men's intellectual equals. In fact, Cavendish even challenges the idea that fantasy is unreal at all. Specifically, she does this by emphasizing how her book's plot is circular, and her appearance in the book (as the Duchess) is no different from her creation of the book (as the writer Margaret Cavendish). When she appeared to the Empress in the Blazing World, Cavendish decided to imagine a fantasy (or "celestial") world—which is likely the Blazing World itself. Thus, the book describes its own creation, and it gives readers a blueprint for creating fictional worlds of their own (whether through writing or just idle fantasizing).

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