

The blurring of genus, genre, and gender in Margaret Cavendish's utopias

Delilah Bermudez Brataas

Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), Norway

ABSTRACT

The Blazing World was the first utopia in English written by a woman, and likely, the first science fiction text in English. Yet it was not Margaret Cavendish's only utopic text. The separatist spaces of her plays, and the virtual communities of her epistolary collections, were earlier utopias that contributed to her construction of *Blazing World*. Cavendish established the characteristics of utopian literature through the transgression of categories and hybridity. I consider her blurring of genus, genre and gender in two of her utopic texts, *Sociable Letters* and *Blazing World*, and her strategic development of the blurring of these categories.

KEYWORDS: Margaret Cavendish; utopias; gender; genre; genus.

El desdibujamiento del género biológico, el literario y el sociocultural en las utopías de Margaret Cavendish*

RESUMEN: *The Blazing World* fue la primera utopía en inglés escrita por una mujer y, probablemente, la primera obra de ciencia ficción en inglés. Sin embargo, no fue la única obra utópica de Margaret Cavendish. Los espacios separatistas de sus obras de teatro y las comunidades virtuales de sus colecciones epistolares fueron utopías anteriores que contribuyeron a la construcción de *Blazing World*. Cavendish estableció las características de la literatura utópica a través de la transgresión de categorías y la hibridación. Considero el desdibujamiento del género, el género biológico y el literario en dos de sus textos utópicos, *Sociable Letters* y *Blazing World*, y el desarrollo estratégico que hace de la difuminación de estas categorías.

A mescla de género biológico, literário e social nas utopias de Margaret Cavendish**

RESUMO: *The Blazing World* foi a primeira utopia em inglês escrita por uma mulher e, provavelmente, o primeiro texto de ficção científica em língua inglesa. Contudo, não foi o único texto utópico de Margaret Cavendish. Os espaços separatistas das suas peças e as comunidades virtuais das suas coleções epistolares foram utopias iniciais que contribuíram para a sua construção de *The Blazing World*. Cavendish estabeleceu as características da literatura utópica através da transgressão de categorias e de hibrididade. Irei considerar esta mescla de género biológico, literário e social em dois dos seus textos utópicos, *Sociable Letters* e *The Blazing World*, e o seu desenvolvimento estratégico da mescla destas categorias.

* Translation into Spanish by Tamara Pérez-Fernández.

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PALABRAS CLAVE: Margaret Cavendish; utopías; género; género literario; género biológico.
PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Margaret Cavendish; utopias; género biológico; género literário; género biológico.

In July 2015, *New Statesman* published a conversation between Neil Gaiman and Kazuo Ishiguro titled "Let's Talk about Genre" that begins with their exasperation at the critical complaints garnered by Ishiguro's novel, *The Buried Giant* (2015). His novel was successful with readers, but critics and authors accused Ishiguro of disparaging fantasy by not publishing the novel as such despite its ogres and magical creatures. Gaiman and Ishiguro go on to discuss the how and why of genre, with Ishiguro proposing it is defined by shared elements that "titillate" or "satisfy" a reader and insisting that the "essence" of a genre must be distinguished from what is "merely characteristic of it." Gaiman, a renowned fantasy writer, counters with his theory that perhaps "subject matter doesn't determine genre" at all, blaming it on the needs of bookstores and publishers instead. Mostly anecdotal and jovial, their conversation confronts the very real stigma fantasy writers face, which Gaiman insists did not exist in the days of J.R.R. Tolkien. They conclude with the hopeful observation that the essentialist rules of genre are crumbling, and the barriers between them "breaking down." After all, both authors are renowned for writing in different genres through innovative textual forms. Yet Ishiguro's description of his reaction to the critics is most insightful. It was, he wrote, as if he "stepped into some larger discussion that had been going on for some time," and that led him to wonder, "What is genre in the first place? Who invented it?" and most intriguingly "Why am I perceived to have crossed a kind of boundary?" (2015, n.p.).

Indeed, this discussion *has* been going on for some time. Ishiguro asks the same question Margaret Cavendish asked 350 years earlier when she addressed similar doubts concerning the same genre, then generally known as "fancy." The first line of Margaret Cavendish's *Blazing World* (1666, 1668) is, after all, a question of wonder. Not because she introduces a wondrous new world as expected of a text titled *A Description of a New World called the Blazing World*, but because she immediately anticipates the wonder her mixture of forms would inspire. In her first letter to the reader, she writes "if you wonder, that I join a work of fancy to my serious philosophical contemplations;

think not that it is out of disparagement to philosophy" (Cavendish 2004, 123). She was aware of the skepticism that might arise from her crossing boundaries yet was certain of the value of mixing forms insisting, in a preface to *Sociable Letters*, that: "Variety of Forms did Please the Readers best" (Cavendish 1997, 9). The resulting texts included fantasy, science fiction, and most vividly utopia, which Cavendish wrote in several forms across her career. These include from the separatist female spaces of her plays, such as *The Convent of Pleasure* (1668) and the earlier *The Female Academy* (1662), to the virtual spaces of her epistolary dialogues in *CCXI Sociable Letters* (1664) and *Philosophical Letters* (1664), and in her most dramatic science fiction utopia, *The Blazing World*. Provocative in its categorization and designation, *Blazing World* is the earliest utopian text in English written by a woman, and perhaps the earliest example of science fiction in English by any author.¹

As her most recognizable utopia, *Blazing World* is a surprising combination of elements and forms that celebrate hybridity.² It is a work of hybrid genre, describing a world peopled with hybrid beings, ruled by an Empress and Duchess who embody hybrid characters from imagination and reality, communicate, and move, via hybrid means of spirit and body, and who ultimately unite to create infinite hybrid worlds. Moreover, this persistent hybridity is not restricted to

¹ Cavendish was one of only two women to write either science fiction or utopia before Mary Shelley's science fiction *Frankenstein* (1818). Sarah Scott's 1762 *A Description of Millennium Hall and Country Adjacent* is the other early utopia. The early modern utopia was most often an idealized structured society, rather than the imagined perfect places of divinity, legend, or mythology, but utopias existed long before Thomas More named the form. Cavendish's *Blazing World* is the closest to the early modern form, but she also wrote utopias the followed women such as Christine de Pizan whose *Le Livre de la cité des dames* (1405) is representative of a utopian same-sex space, a popular form for women.

² The concept of hybridity is loaded with "hybrid" literary, cultural, historical and linguistic capital. Each understanding contributes to reading Cavendish within her seventeenth-century context, but here I consider her hybridity as an anticipation of Bakhtin's heteroglossia, and particularly the hybrid utterance as Cavendish is often the only speaker in a text that employs several voices. Similarly, her hybridity participates in the challenge to authority of permitted language through the Carnavalesque, which she generates through the self-defined chaos of her forms, style, and content. These frame how Cavendish mixed styles, modes, and genre and how that hybridity reflects her hybrid characters. Such hybridity requires and facilitates a disruption of categories because it questions power and authority in all its conceptualizations.

Blazing World; Cavendish herself attests to the hybridity of *all* her texts in *Sociable Letters*:

Yet you will find my Works like Infinite Nature, that hath neither Beginning nor End, and as Confused as the Chaos, wherein is neither Method nor Order, but all Mix'd together without Separation, like Evening Light and Darkness, so in my Sixteen Books is Sense and No Sense, Knowledge and Ignorance Mingled together so that you will not know what to make of it. (1997, 140)

We might well call it “Cavendishian Hybridity” given its ubiquity in her texts and its prevalence in the critical literature.³ It was the primary means by which she demonstrated the potential of a fluid epistemology; one in which learning and teaching was more effective through a variety, or mixture, of narrative forms and writing styles. To that end, she chose elements purposefully from across literary forms if she felt one might better convey, demonstrate, or represent an idea, often explaining her reasoning repeatedly in her many prefaces. In *Blazing World*, her most thoroughly hybrid text, Cavendish’s only prefatory letter offers a detailed reasoning behind her mixture of forms (Cavendish 1997, 123–24).

In this article, I trace Cavendish’s hybridity as it emerges through three closely related categories. More broadly through *genre*, most provocatively through *gender*, and most explicitly through *genus*—which I show she establishes in *Sociable Letters* only to resolve in *Blazing World*. In the process, it becomes evident that her hybridity was less a characteristic born of an untrained approach to philosophy and writing, and more a decisive critical strategy. However, my goal here is more specific. Cavendish fashioned her hybridity through a deliberate blurring of categories that materializes through a metaphoric connection to performance, spectacle, and (most deliberately) in the hybrid beings that such fluid spaces could better contain. Her hybrid forms allowed for a rejection of categorization that I trace through *genre*, *gender* and *genus* because these were swiftly developing scientific, social, and cultural relevance and authority in the late seventeenth century—a process that led to their

³ In their introduction to *Authorial Conquests*, a collection containing several articles exploring Cavendish’s hybrid forms, Line Cottagnies and Nancy Weitz note that “Cavendish’s works, more than any others’, it seems, require a hybrid perspective, and it bears evidence to their complexity and modernity that they still challenge their readers’ responses and reading practices” (2003, 8).

progressively “categorical” definition. Two of the terms share the third as a Latin root, *genus*, which has varied etymological descendants emerging from *gene-* meaning “to give birth or beget.” Genus as easily meant *origin* and *race* as it did *kind* or *sort*, and thus represents a common semantic origin to the social and cultural violence of rigid categorization.⁴ It split across culture and history, giving way to both *genre* and *gender* in different languages, losing its more general form in English to become a specifically taxonomical term. In contrast, despite the diverse areas in which the word *hybrid* is applied, it has only ever meant specifically “offspring” or generally the “mixture of different elements.” Cavendish was writing against the moment of emerging scientific, linguistic and literary authority by demonstrating that if *genre* and *genus*, as they increasingly related to species, blurred in the hybrid beings found in her hybrid texts, so too could the categorical certainty of gender.

In *Sociable Letters*, Cavendish discusses topics generally considered unconventional for a women’s epistolary collection, like politics and philosophy, and when she discusses conventional topics, like marriage or society, it is her *approach* that proves unconventional. Less cautionary or instructive than essentially informative, some of her letters support marriage, and others warn against the abuses of marriage, yet always demonstrate that worthwhile and tenable alternatives exist and are not only feasible, but in certain situations, preferable. Yet content is not the only provocative quality of this text. Cavendish described her writing as “confused as chaos” often, but not as self-criticism (1997, 140). This “chaos” allowed for the fluid hybridity through which she realized utopia in her texts by challenging genre, and the categorization and assumptions of genus and gender. Here, she reveals the strategy of her chaos, prefacing this collection with a commendatory poem titled “Upon Her Excellency

⁴ The OED lists several related contemporary usages for all three words. As early as 1551, *genus* appears in connection to categorization of kinds and sorts, and in 1651, Hobbes used it regarding *species* suggesting the hierarchical categorization that would come to define the work of zoology and biology in the coming century. *Genre*, denoting literary kind, sort, or style would not appear until 1770, but *genre* was more directly associated with *gender*, though it referred to the quality of being male or female. Some languages today, like Swedish, retain *genus* as a word for *gender*. Moreover, several closely related terms also stem from this common root, including *genesis*, connecting doubly to *Blazing World*’s location of Eden and the Duchess as a creator of new worlds, and *genius* indicating a spirit or deity, who appear as teaching spirits in the *Blazing World*.

the Authoress" writing that "This Lady *only to her self* she Writes |And all her Letters to her self Indites; For in her self so many Creatures be, |Like many Commonwealths, yet all Agree" (1997, 10). If taken literally, Cavendish is suggesting that the collection contains only Cavendish talking to herself, but her detailed instructions to the reader in the first letter reveals her plan. In this brief letter, she establishes the requirements for her utopia. This is not a solipsistic text, but one that allows for a "you" that readers can embody to participate in the ideal commonwealth:

Wherefore I am never better pleased, than when I am reading your Letters, and when I am writing Letters to you; for my mind and thoughts are all that while in your Company: the truth is, my mind and thoughts live alwayes with you, Although my person is at distance from you; insomuch, as, if Souls die not as Bodies do, my Soul will attend you when my Body lies in the grave; and when we are both dead, we may hope to have a Conversation of Souls, where yours and mine will be doubly united, first in Life, and then in Death. (1997, 13)

Utopia is folded into these few lines: by noting the pleasure of reading and writing letters she evokes the means of access, with "distance" its spatiality, with "in your company" a physical presence within that space, with "conversation" a verbal exchange, with "souls" intimacy, and with "doubly united" in death and life evokes eternity while simultaneously evoking marriage on a physical and spiritual level as *both* her physical mind and spiritual thoughts are present. To populate this textual space, each letter is written to "Madam" from Cavendish (a very few are addressed to family and friends) and are *in media res*, including references to earlier conversations, rebuttals to ongoing debates, responses to questions Madam posed, and topics that Madam asks Cavendish to discuss; but we never see the letters to Cavendish from Madam. By generating a correspondence that suggests an ongoing exchange but leaving one side present yet absent, Cavendish allows for, and insists on, the reader adopting "Madam" as an avatar, embodying the other in an ongoing virtual conversation and, moreover, establishing an educational ethos to this utopic space that allows informative discussion and debate between women.

A literary utopia requires a vision, or plan for achieving, an ideal state, and a space (real or imagined) in which to realize it. Cavendish approached her texts as inhabitable spaces through which one could realize the ideal which speaks to her idealization of the potentiality of

the *topos* of texts, and the presence of hybrid characters that can “live always with you” in reality and fiction at once. The “doubly united” souls that appear in *Sociable Letters* will reappear in *Blazing World*, after all. Two elements were fundamental to realizing any utopia for Cavendish: choice and education.⁵ *Sociable Letters* allows for a virtual ideal community, for want of a real space of conversation with women, offering unity in commonwealth and learning if one chooses to participate. A critical facet of its ideality was learning through discussion and debate realized through the hybrid forms that allowed for a more fluid epistemology. Cavendish demonstrated this through a circular progression within, and across her letters, rather than presenting an argument and then resolving it as conventional rhetoric required. Accordingly, a common thread connects each new, or reintroduced, subject, and we follow the thread from letter to letter, and back again, as we might explore rooms within rooms. Irrespective of the subject, this common thread was often a deliberation of gender, or rather, what she termed the “nature” of men and women and when these blurred. Via hybrid texts (of mixed genre and form) peopled by hybrid beings (fictional and real characters, alter egos, or animal-people), Cavendish forces an association with hybrid gender to demonstrate the potential that hybridity allowed, and the resultant fluidity only seems chaotic. Several letters refer directly to effeminate men and masculine women who she defined first by juxtaposing them, and in later letters, by connecting them with theatrical performers.

Cavendish neither wholly retains nor reverses gender conventions; instead, she approaches gender from the inevitable impasse that prohibits men and women from reaching parity when this “nature” is narrowly defined. What is appropriate for each remains ambiguous through balanced contrast as she reflects on gender through socially

⁵ Cavendish’s discusses education, and the freedom of choice it offered, in almost all her books. Often mentioning it immediately in prefatory texts lamenting the educational inequalities between men and women and blaming her inadequate education for hindering the acknowledgement of her work. Her utopias consistently offer access to education and, thereby, the freedom to choose, for instance, in her two separatist utopias *The Female Academy* and *The Convent of Pleasure* women are offered education, choosing first to undertake it, and thereafter how to use it, and both her epistolary collections, *Sociable Letters* and *Philosophical Letters*, offer ideal spaces of conversation by and for women where they learn from each other choosing topics to discuss, while Part I in *Blazing World*’s follows the Empress learning from her academic societies and making leadership choices after learning from experience.

determined roles. As such, she elevates virtuous women and valorous men, and levels unvirtuous women with effeminate men. Gender assumptions emerge in contrast to individual qualities and act as a recognizable anchor to her more ambiguous examples. Letter 9, for instance, discusses women who use persuasion to gain “advancement in Title, Fortune and Power” (1997, 18–19). Cavendish offers this as evidence for women sharing a desire for ambition equal to men, and hindering such ambition, she warns, may manifest itself as a physical illness that will then influence society. She returns to persuasion in letter 12 by comparing two women who use it to different effects. The quality of their desire differs, but both women use “designs,” “insinuating flattery” and “perswasion” to make their husbands “Pimps to Cuckold themselves” because, she continues, “most husbands are either deluded with Politick wives, or forced to obey, or humour their Turbulent and Peevish wives, or deceived by their Insinuating and Flattering wives, to betray themselves” (1997, 20–21). The “state-ladies” of the previous letter are now “politic-wives,” and both are persuasive and influential, but neither are named masculine in their roles. One woman enjoys company and acts perfectly in that company, only to act badly in her husband’s presence, while the other hates company, but pretends to enjoy it. Persuasion becomes pretense, or rather, a performance of powerful roles chosen as need demands: politic, turbulent, peevish, insinuating, or flattering. Should we chide the wife for her manipulation, or celebrate her performance? Or chide the husband for neither recognizing the manipulation nor celebrating her social skills? Cavendish will only answer by saying she will not divulge “too much of the nature of our sex” (1997, 21).

A similar strategy emerges in letter 26 in which she discusses a woman who beats her husband. Cavendish insists that the woman’s anger and violence are inappropriate but describes her strength and size as positive physical qualities. She further emphasizes the woman’s strategy and forethought at choosing to beat her husband publicly so that he will endure greater shame. Whether the husband is weak or noble in his patience is left to the reader, but Cavendish does list the husband’s recourses: He may tame her (like a Shrew), bind her (like a criminal), or simply leave her (which would, incidentally, grant her freedom). Cavendish expresses distaste for the woman acting badly but concludes with a clear reason for the woman’s actions: women express “unruly passions and appetites” because they are not “instructed and taught more industriously”

(1997, 36–37). Thus, her true purpose emerges. What can you expect when a woman’s mind becomes “wild and barbarous” for lack of a civilizing education? Consequently, men are left with only one effective recourse: leave them to be educated so they can govern their own appetites with “ease and regularity” (1997, 36–37). A letter that began with a woman acting badly ends as a call for men to take responsibility for “binding” women to rigid categories so as to “tame” them. It should not escape notice that Cavendish is using language associated with animals in a letter discussing marital strife. She elaborates on the woman-as-animal connection only to reorient it.⁶ She is a character of hybrid gender in that she possesses a physical masculinity burdened by the weakness of an education deemed “feminine” which reveals and condemns the social structures “binding” women to categories, and by association, animals.

If we turn to the letters that confront men’s natures, there is a marked difference. In letter 33, Cavendish wonders why “Lord C.R.” likes to delight in “Effeminate Pastimes, as Dancing, Fidling, Visiting, Junketing, Attiring, and the like, because he is an Effeminate Man, fitter to Dance with a Lady than to Fight with an Enemy” (1997, 45). Cavendish resisted by using provocative language that did not immediately seem so. Here, Cavendish dismantles gender categorization by not calling these pastimes “feminine,” but rather “effeminate.” The prefixed form defines the *qualities* as effeminizing, not essentially feminine; the action, not the being. Critically, the “skills” she assigns to “effeminate men” are the same skills central to women’s inadequate education from letter 26, and Cavendish disparagingly defines them as indicative of “effeminate man.” In contrast, throughout *Letters* she uses “feminine” only twice, and each as a complaint of the categorization through contrast. Once in letter 21 condemning the irresponsibility of “Masculine Gamers” because gambling was “never so much practiced by our Feminine Sex,” (1997,

⁶ In her *Philosophical and Physical Opinions* (1655a), Cavendish offers her most thorough reflections on nature, including several discussions on animals. Though the text includes almost no reference to women, or gender differences, in her prefatory letter to “To the Two Universities” addressed to the “Most Famously learned” she cites the “despisements of the masculine sex to the effeminate” as reason for why women “quit all industry towards profitable knowledge” leading them “to become like worms that only live in the dull earth of ignorance” (n.p.). Women are thereby not equated with animals, but described as becoming *like* animals, suggesting the mutability of their bodies and minds, rather than monstrosity.

31) and in letter 16 in direct relation to women in power: "yet men will not believe this, and 'tis better for us, for by that we govern as it were by an insensible power, so as men perceived not how they are Led, Guided, and Rul'd by the Feminine Sex" (1997, 26). Women are simultaneously lauded and condemned because they rule in unacknowledged practice, but in *Blazing World*, they will rule in acknowledged, celebrated, fact. Only the world needs rewriting to achieve this ideal.

Through these effeminate men and masculine women, the feminine emerges as powerful, while *acts* that feminize emerge as diminishing. Through subtle shifts in references and terms evoking hybridity of natures and forms Cavendish facilitates the embodiment of hybrid gender constructions. She compares the qualities of good and bad men noting that she "does not wonder" why one is "Debauch'd" and the other "Generous," because one's actions show one's quality. The worst she describes as "Idle, Wicked, and Base," and as "The Slime and Dung of Mankind," but his "sins" only echo the skills women must master in their meagre education. Effeminate men are not monstrous because of her blurring of gender, they are monsters when they perform acts society deems categorically feminine. Critically, Cavendish closes by assigning men responsibility for the world no longer being utopic, or "a heaven," and then "rests" by "leaving them and Beasts." Her last word leaves them in the company of, and associated with, not animals but the more connotative "beasts" evoking not beings who reflect nature, but the unnatural, biblical form (1997, 46). This poignant ending is particularly shrewd in how it connects to Cavendish's hybridity in *Blazing World*. Often in Cavendish's texts, *animals* emerge as natural, *creatures* are lauded as the results of "creation" or the creative process, while *beasts* are reflective of social violence and strife.

She returns only briefly to the effeminate man in letter 53 in which a woman refuses the suit of an effeminate man whom she hates, as "nature abhors vacuity" (1997, 67). Cavendish leaves that woman "without a Husband's kisses or Blows," for neither affection nor cruelty will serve if it is better to have neither; remaining single emerges as a favorable option. Her discussion of effeminate men, considering her earlier insistence that women influence government, suggests, as Susannah Quinsee writes, that "implicit in this call for women to enter the public realm, is the idea that if men can assume

feminine characteristics women can appropriate masculine ones" (2000, 98). However, this appropriation emerges more specifically as a performance. Cavendish declares later "there are far more Effeminate Men than Masculine Women, that is, there are few Women so Wise as Men should be, and many men as Foolish as Women can be" (1997, 20). This is Cavendish's only use of "masculine women" in *Letters*. Her phrasing implies that masculine women are less common than effeminate men, and thus, less unnatural, but it also demonstrates Quinsee's argument that the continued exploration of the one implies the possibility of the other. Her deliberate use of modals further supports this because she is at once declaring that men "should" be wise while women "can" be foolish: the first denotes a failure, and the second a choice, leaving women empowered and men willful, but more importantly, choice and education are realized in this epistolary utopia. Kate Lilley characterizes Cavendish's use of "the gendered possibilities of chiasmus (mirror inversion)" as her means of rhetorical displacement (2003, 20). Cavendish does indeed displace categorization by discrediting effeminate men for their failure to be "natural" in their activities, but also by celebrating women when they surpass their roles, or the physical or intellectual limitations dictated by gender categories. Moreover, Cavendish is also foregrounding her discussion of the female performers in the Carnival Letter by connecting gender to pretense, or rather, performance.

It is not hard to imagine that Cavendish sensed the association of performance to gender that Judith Butler would come to identify much as she sensed the trouble with genre and fantasy that Gaiman and Ishiguro would discuss. If we privilege individual skill and talent instead of gender categories by focusing on one's "acts" (or actions) as they capture "performance," then gender categories will give way to the more fluid accuracy of natural skills. The doer indeed is fictional as only the deed suggests gender. A proto-Butlerian Cavendish is a hopeful concept, and I am not defending that notion. Yet Cavendish connected performance to gender directly through behavior, and later theatre, by weaving the same thread of gender and the hybrid being into her detailed analysis of the dramatist she emulated most. Cavendish was the first woman to publish a literary analysis of Shakespeare's works,⁷ arguing in letter 123 that he was both

⁷ While Ben Jonson, John Milton, Samuel Pepys, and John Dryden all reference, and comment on, Shakespeare or his works earlier or contemporaneously, Cavendish is the

transformative (“he had been transformed into every one of those persons he hath Described”) and metamorphic (“he had metamorphosed from Man to a Woman”). She also defends him against a “person” who claimed his plays are “made up onely with Clowns, Fools, Watchmen, and the like” (1997, 130) offering a direct response to contemporary criticism and then focusing on his skill at *becoming* a variety of characters. Shakespeare could “express naturally” all sorts of people and their traits to “deliver to posterity” an infinite variety of beings. Importantly, it is Shakespeare himself, not an actor, that Cavendish insists is “metamorphosed” from the Man that he is to the Woman he can become. He is a hybrid being, transformed or metamorphosed, but certainly not an effeminate man. Moreover, Cavendish is responding not to Shakespeare in performance, but to reading his plays. Hers is not a response to a transvestite actor’s performance, but to Shakespeare himself becoming a female character *in the text*, a very different dialogue emerging from her approach to the utopic potential of hybrid beings inhabiting texts. In this, Cavendish emerges as visionary on another point. There is a long tradition of privileging Shakespeare’s characterization over plot, particularly with the Victorians. Coleridge famously described him as “protean” and “myriad-minded” in that he enters sympathetically into all types of human characters. Similarly, Keats called him a “chameleon poet” who “continually filled some other Body” (Sawyer 2003, 20). Shakespeare’s characterization was elevated as a natural skill or, for the Victorians, a preternatural potential for hybridity. Cavendish identified, and indeed naturalized, Shakespeare’s hybridity almost 150 years before the Victorians whose promotion of Shakespeare contributed to his iconic status.

Between the hybrid gender in this text of hybrid genre, where does genus enter? For the early modern, mutability, metamorphosis, hybridity and monstrosity all carried associations with specific

first to discuss Shakespeare critically, rather than in a merely celebratory or condemnatory manner, especially with regard to his characterization. “Cavendish was the first to give a comprehensive assessment of Shakespeare’s work [even though] her attributions of native artistic genius, self-generated creativity, singularity and originality to Shakespeare were not, in themselves, novel. [...] Cavendish’s innovation is instead that she depicts Shakespeare’s gentle wit as one transcending gender, thereby clearing a place for women to lay claim to Shakespeare as a model for their own authorship” (Romack 2000, 26–27).

categories, yet often revolved around the figure of the hermaphrodite. In *The English Parnassus: or, A Helpe to English Poesie* (1657), Joshua Poole defined the hermaphrodite as “ambiguous, promiscuous, mixed, sex-confused, mongrell, neuter, effeminate,” terms that employ suggestions of monstrosity and sexuality more than mutability or metamorphosis (111). Caroline Walker Bynum, on the other hand, argues that in Middle English and Early Modern texts, metamorphosis (which she terms it “replacement-change”) and hybridity (or “visible multiplicity, where something has the parts of more than one creature”) were the two formulations for concepts of “change” (2001, 20–32). While Dana Oswald, following Bynum, argues that the two categories are not “independent of one another, but that hybridity also defines metamorphosis. That is, when a creature transforms from one thing into another, the transformed creature becomes hybrid [...] the metamorphic monster is always in some way hybrid” (2010, 24). Cavendish deliberates upon these forms in letter 195, often called the Carnival Letter, which offers a rare moment of her years in Antwerp as very few letters in either her epistolary collections are autobiographical. In the letter, Cavendish describes a travelling carnival that is at once fluid in its itinerancy, fleeting in its transience, and, in language and spectacle, undeniably foreign. She connects her discussion of beings of hybrid gender to the carnival performers, and from there to her critical discussion of Shakespeare in the same collection. This one letter materializes into an invaluable venue for the three categories.

The language of transformation and metamorphosis may well have suggested monstrosity as well as hybridity, but Cavendish distinguishes between the terms when she connects this thread to gender through her experience with three female performers. The letter begins with a detailed account of the first performer, a woman “who was like a Shagg-dog, not in Shape, but Hair, as Grown all over her Body” (1997, 205). Though she is strange, she is a woman first, *and then* a Shagg-Dog, and so hybrid in gender before genus (see figure 1).⁸ Cavendish sustains ambivalence in her description by reacting

⁸ Several sources identify Cavendish’s “Shagg-Dogg” as Barbara Ursler/Urselin/Urselerin, a well-known woman with hypertrichosis who was exhibited as an oddity while playing the harpsichord. There is little certain about her, but she was likely German or Dutch, was born in 1629, married and reportedly had a child. Samuel Pepys records this experience in his diaries on 21 December 1668. It is perhaps not coincidental



Fig.1. R. Gaywood, *Barbara van Beck, a hirsute woman*. Etching, 1656 Wellcome Library, University College London, no. 1926i from <http://catalogue.wellcomelibrary.org/> (Accessed 21 April 2018).

physically against the memory that remained “not for its pleasantness, but for its strangeness.” She both “kicks it away” and insists she is too “dull and lazy by *nature*” to bother. The image disturbs her, but the wonder so surpasses the disturbance that she worries she may fail to forget it and moves quickly to the more comprehensible scene of the “Mountebank’s Stage”⁹ where two female actors skillfully play men’s parts. She describes their clothing, form, and movement connecting her experience to the English theatrical tradition through which male actors performed women’s roles, returning to the naturalness of her

embodiment of masculinity:

she was of a Neat, Slender Shape; but being in her Dublet and Breeches, and Sword hanging by her side, one would have believed she never had word a Petticoat, and had been more used to Handle a Sword than a Distaff. (1997, 206)

One of the performers plays a man so naturally that Cavendish describes her as if “she had been of that sex” and is so enthralled she hires a private room to extend the presence. While she reacts physically to the memory of the Shagg-dog woman (by kicking it

that Pepys discussed Cavendish and Urselin in much the same way as Cavendish discusses her letter. For Pepys, both women were spectacles that suggested masculinity: Urselin in her body (“with a beard as much as any man” 21 Dec 1668) and Cavendish in her dress (“her dress so antick” 30 May 1667).

⁹ Though a “mountebank” has come to mean *charlatan* or *swindler*, a mountebank sold medicines in public places, like carnivals, adding another category of performance to this carnival.

away) and demands a physical presence to firm up the memory of the two transvestite women (by requesting the private performance), both experiences evoke hybridity in each of the categories – genre (in that it is a letter discussing a performance that is itself both theatre and mountebank presentation), genus (in the spectacle of the dog woman that is monstrous as animal-human, and in her body hair woman-man), and gender in the ambiguity of all three women. Cavendish requires that we focus on the quality of the women’s “natural” acts of masculinity, one in her physical hairiness, the others in their performance; they become men as fluidly as Shakespeare became a woman.

For Sophie Tomlinson, this moment suggests an important “act of suppression” for Cavendish though it is an ambiguous one as she is simultaneously “enthralled and disturbed by the actress’s ambidextrous shifting between sexes.” The female performers, Tomlinson writes, might be “disturbing as well as pleasurable” in that their “performance seals the argument which Cavendish’s texts constantly broach as to whether gender difference is natural or constructed. [...] The female actor embodies a potent fantasy – not just of freedom from natural femininity – but of liveness, aptitude, art and aspiration” (1992, 136). Cavendish appreciated their deeds – their “aptitude” – because if these women can become men yet remain women, then surely skill (gained by education) is more definitive than gender. She may have struggled with their ambiguity, but she includes *both* images while condemning neither for she never directly calls either monstrous. Readers have the choice and can decide if the dog-woman is wondrous rather than monstrous, and from there decide if the transvestites are skilled actors rather than unvirtuous women.

The construction of hybridity and monstrosity in the late seventeenth century were closely connected to the related redefinition of animals, with species and genus coming to the forefront of authoritative categorization in scientific taxonomy. A need to justify and defend anatomical dissection, and even vivisection, which were growing in practice (particularly on the continent) required a more definitive othering of animals. In great part, the work of René Descartes influenced the categorization of animals as distinct from humans. In brief, under a Cartesian philosophy, man could reason while animals could sense and perceive only as automatic mechanical

acts in reaction to pain or stimuli.¹⁰ While Cartesian views were not universally accepted, they endured, and were used to justify the increasingly brutal use of animals in science and industry for centuries to come. Vitalism, one of the leading contemporary approaches within natural philosophy, did not believe vivisection could offer any knowledge of value because it was an intervention that fundamentally distorted the subject being studied or observed, and thus only lead to faulty truth.¹¹ Lisa Walters has outlined Cavendish's consideration and questioning of vitalism writing that:

Cavendish's view of self-moving matter resembles vitalism, which also perceived matter as self-moving. Yet for vitalists matter had an active spirit that permeated and suffused passive inert matter. While mechanism emphasized a more secular worldview where God played a more distant role, both held parallel views upon the state of matter. (Walters 2014, 70-71)

Cavendish departed from vitalism in assigning "much more status and importance to corporeality. In the *Blazing World*, for example, spirits are unable to perceive the material world without the body" (Walters 2014, 70-71). She adamantly opposed forms of experimentation she believed not only failed to reveal, but distorted, the material truth. For one, she had little trust in optics,¹² but she also repeatedly discussed her inability to abide the suffering of animals writing in her autobiography that "I am tender natured for it troubles my Conscience to kill a fly, and the groans of a dying Beast strike my soul" (Cavendish 1886, 313-14). Philosophically and ethically,

¹⁰ Descartes discusses his theory on animals in *Discourse de la Méthode* in 1637, arguing that while the bodies of both man and animal were machines, only man can reason and use speech (1985, 131-41).

¹¹ Vitalism was a philosophical approach proposing the fundamental difference between living and non-living entities, and that both were governed by different principles. Definitions of the "vital" difference could be anything from the *pneuma* of the ancients to the *soul* of Christianity, but the seventeenth century redefined it as an organizing mechanist force that distinguished, with Cartesian dualism of mind and body, this vitalist force as reason, or mind. Animals were unreasoning to exemplify the categorical distinctions. For a thorough reading of the intersections of animal experimentation and vitalism, see Wolfe (2013).

¹² Cavendish's husband owned several telescopes. Along with his brother, Charles Cavendish who studied them and developed their construction, Newcastle invested heavily in the swiftly growing trend and by 1648 owned two telescopes, including one that was over sixteen feet long (Whitaker 2002, 98-99). Cavendish was skeptical about the use of optics and she negotiates her doubts in several texts, including *Blazing World*.

Cavendish championed the notion that animals reasoned and, at some level, were more reasonable because they demonstrated their “nature” more reliably and consistently. In *The World’s Olio* (1655b), an early philosophical text, Cavendish argues that animals show judgement and wit in their choices, enjoy company, show joy in playing and delighting in fancy (such as when birds sing), and clearly demonstrate love and grief. She also rejected the premise that animals have no memory (which was closely associated with reasoning) because, for example, they always know how to return home (Cavendish 1655b, 142–43). Significantly, she was not elevating animals above man. Animals were capable of similar evils, for she notes how they war against, and steal food from, their kind, however if both animals and man could be cruel, so could animals and man both reason:

Again, they say there is no War nor Tyranny, in other Creatures or Animals, but man; Yet certain there are many other Animals more Tyrannical & Creull even to their own kind than man, and will take as heavy a Revenge one upon another, and love Superiority and Power. (Cavendish 1655b, 143)

Against the contemporary epistemological and philosophical movements, Cavendish was proposing that animals were not only reasonable, but had access to knowledge that man did not, so birds would know more of air, and fish of the waters, than man could (Cavendish 1655b, 143). It is from this philosophical premise, and her establishment of the potential of hybridity in her utopias, where Cavendish realizes her most ambitiously hybrid utopia.

In *Blazing World* Cavendish completes the utopic ideals she discusses in *Sociable Letters* and dramatizes in her utopic plays. *Blazing World* follows the abduction of a young maiden whose captor’s ship is caught in a tempest that forces it towards the North Pole. Unprepared for the cold, all the men freeze to death, but she endures by “the light of her beauty” and “the heat of her youth” (Cavendish 2004, 126). Her light and warmth prove sufficient for her to survive the extreme cold. She is then saved by a procession of anthropomorphic beings – Bear-men, Fox-men, and Geese-men – who carry her to safety, but not before she recognizes their exceptional actions:

[She was] extreemly stricken with fear, and could entertain no other Thoughts, but that every moment her life was to be a sacrifice to their

cruelty; but those Bear-like Creatures, how terrible soever they appear'd to her sight, yet were they so far from exercising any cruelty upon her, that rather they shewed her all civility and kindness imaginable; for she being not able to go upon the Ice, by reason of its slipperiness, they took her up in their rough arms, and carried her into their City, where instead of Houses, they had Caves under ground; and as soon as they enter'd the City, both Males and Females, young and old, flockt together to see this Lady, holding up their Paws in admiration; at last having brought her into a certain large and spacious Cave, which they intended for her reception, they left her to the custody of the Females, who entertained her with all kindness and respect. (1992, 127)

Cavendish at once describes their physical “animal” characteristics and natures, in that they wave with “paws” and live in “caves,” but shifts the focus, repeatedly, to their civility or kindness, only to carry it further by noting their intelligence. For instance, they understand her inability to walk on ice, and the danger of her remaining in their harsh environment: “they were resolved to carry her into another Island of a warmer temper; in which were men like Foxes, onely walking in an upright shape, who received their neighbours the Bear-men with great civility and Courtship” (1992, 127). In the interaction between animals of different genus (both predators) they still demonstrate civility in their commonwealth, for they do not war with each other. Their hybridity is not only in their names (bear-men), or in how their bodies move like men (in walking upright or waving paws), but like the hybrid beings of *Sociable Letters*, their actions allow for the realization of the ideality of this utopia. The animals bring her to their Emperor who then immediately makes her his Empress, grants her absolute rule, and then disappears from the narrative. She has free reign over this new world and its peoples that include “wonderful kinds of Creatures” along with the animal beings, people of infinite colors, and fantastical and mythological creatures (1992, 127).

Part I follows her establishment of philosophical and experimental societies each led by the beings whose animal qualities and knowledge best suit them for the subject (for example, bird-men are astronomers, while magpie-men are orators). Their natural skills give them the means to demonstrate their intelligence and reason, though at times it proves faulty. Their nature grants them unique knowledge the animal-alone, or man-alone, could not convey. She instructs them to present their findings and they debate each topic in turn, but

because of the skills their hybridity allows, knowledge is revealed, and the Empress learns. Later, she establishes a religion based on the material and chemical qualities of the new world, debates the nature and meaning of life with “immaterial” genderless beings that are neither angels nor ghosts, and finally, forms a relationship with “The Duchess” (another alter ego for Cavendish) who she communicates with across worlds in spirit form and recruits as a scribe. They join forces, become intimate friends that unite spiritually, and finally join in creating and then traveling through infinite worlds. *Blazing World* is a highly detailed text whose science fiction qualities are revealed through the wealth of debate about several emerging sciences from the celestial to the chemical. These are discussed, experimented, applied, and observed; some experiments fail, others succeed, but all contribute to etching the *Blazing World* as a space of absolute alterity, and Cavendish approaches alterity as a choice—an alternate—that (like the choice offered in *Letters*) is not only feasible, but in some situations preferable—and in utopia, required. This is an alternate world, accessed through an alternate pole that exists in an alternate universe, in which we observe nature through scientific means that do not hinder the nature of the observed. *Blazing World* offers a critique of both contemporary society and experimental philosophy through hybrid forms. These are characteristics of genre we have come to associate with science fiction, with utopia emerging as an alternate space within the many textual worlds. Curiously, the many worlds interpretation of the universe, formally proposed by Erwin Schrödinger in 1952 (who himself named it a “lunatic” idea at the time) had certainly been discussed earlier, but always in terms that kept it squarely in the realm of fantasy (Deutsch 2010, 310). Long before, Cavendish’s most anthologized poem, “Of Many Worlds in This World” (1653) imagined the possibility of worlds within worlds, which she metaphorized as nesting boxes, that might be incomprehensible to “our dull senses.” Discussions of atomic science led her to imagine the potential of alternate worlds nearly 300 years before Schrödinger through poetry:

If atoms four, a world can make, then see
 What several worlds might in an ear-ring be
 For millions of those atoms may be in
 The head of one, small little, single pin.
 And if thus small, then ladies may well wear
 A world of worlds, as pendants in each ear. (Cavendish 2018, 128-29)

On these many scientific and philosophical levels, Cavendish understood the hybridity required to convey such options, or alternatives, and the genre followed suit.

Peopled with beings of hybrid genus with its animal beings, of hybrid gender with its immaterial spirits, the *Blazing World* also includes the familiar monstrous hybrid beasts of mythology (satyrs and mer-people). Yet central to the expression of this hybridity is the Empress, a powerful regent and academic leader because she *becomes* a skillful religious leader, civil administrator, and military general. She does not appear in the text in this perfection of roles; she is not performing but developing into these roles. Likewise, the Duchess, Cavendish's other character-self, wields textual authority as her scribe specifically because of her writing skills. Yet these are not in her nature alone, she becomes a scribe through the development of her writing. She first attempts to write textual worlds similar to those of several famous men, like Plato, Pythagoras, and Epicurus (amongst others) and in that process, she learns that she must write her own worlds. The two women are hybrid in that they *become* authorities through the same transformation and metamorphosis that resulted in hybrid beings. Boundaries of gender and sex are made immaterial, rather than blurred, between them as the women spend most of the narrative communing in spirit form and learning from genderless spirits and animal hybrids. The social categories restricting the Empress are also progressively dismantled because in her entrance into the utopia, her physical and personal qualities render her warmer than the men who kidnap her, and thereby she survives the journey across the poles that pull her into the "other" world. This was a reversal of the Galenic one-sex model that proposed women were the unfortunate result of insufficient heat, and unable to ascend (or progress) spiritually or intellectually because of leaky, overly material bodies. Only in the *Blazing World* the Empress' kidnappers die in the extreme cold and leak noxious gases from the material remnants of their bodies, and are described, in detail, as beasts. She leaves behind the men of her world whose bodies seem human, but whose actions prove bestial, and crosses into a world populated by men whose bodies are bestial, but whose actions prove honorable. If we recall that Cavendish "left" the men whose actions performed femininity in letter 26 with "Beasts," then between *Sociable Letters* and *Blazing World*, men-as-beasts *become* beasts-as-men. In this becoming other, hybrid, alter, utopia is achieved.

Cavendish used hybridization in *Blazing World* much like Donna Haraway appropriated the idea of the hybrid in her creation of a cyborg myth from the blurred boundaries between human, animal, and machine. The cyborg realizes both materiality and fluidity, or opacity, in a hybrid being. One can sense the pleasure that Haraway notes exists in the confusion of boundaries in Cavendish's texts given the materiality of her textual presence, and the spatiality of her texts. For instance, her Empress-self experiences ecstatic pleasure in the presence of the genderless "immaterial" spirits that she communes with who anticipate the post-gender construction of Haraway's cyborg.¹³ Cavendish blurred essentialist boundaries through hybridity, and the result for her, as with Haraway, was a blurring of the boundaries. Cavendish's hybrids manipulated the material *and* ether, like Haraway's cyborg, and both Haraway and Cavendish were confronting the monstrosity of such hybridity in moments of epistemological shifts redefining the animal and human. Both women sought the clarity of whatever was beyond limiting categories, and for Haraway, that would lead to imagining beyond the human towards the posthuman. Though the approaches are distinct, and firmly rooted in their respective contemporalities, both are offering a reconsideration of ideal origins. Haraway's *Manifesto* defines the cyborg as a "creature in the post-gender world" that can be both a creature of lived social reality *and* a creature of fiction. Yet in all its forms the cyborg has no origin story (Haraway 1991, 150). Cavendish was, through the language of her contemporary science, negotiating the same forms through hybrid beings that could be, at once, fictional and real, and thus could exist in the spiritual genderless existence, which required a reconsideration of origins—a trait of utopian literature.

Hybridity, in all the ways Cavendish applies it emerges as transformative, metamorphic and critical to achieving the ideal, unlike the monstrous that was so often disparagingly connected to

¹³ At one point in *Blazing World*, the Empress is deep in discussion with the genderless "immaterial spirits" who teach her about the nature of the universe when they depart unexpectedly at which point she falls into a trance "wherein she lay for some while, at last being come to her self again, she grew very studious" (Cavendish 2004, 174). The OED defines "ecstasy" as synonymous with "trance" for much of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Importantly, this ecstatic moment directly precedes her discussion with the spirits about the nature of their bodies as immaterial and colorless, and therefore, without the "parts" that identify sex.

hybridity. Cavendish mentions monstrosity only three times in a book full of hybrid animal-beings, and each is in direct association with how nature becomes monstrous through failed scientific observation: “the confusion of those Atoms produced such strange and monstrous figures as did more to affright than delight her” (1992, 187) and earlier upon seeing a Louse warped through a microscope “after the Empress had seen the shapes of these monstrous Creatures, she desir’d to know whether their microscopes could hinder their biting” (1992, 144). Cavendish’s text also focuses on the more philosophical deliberation of the privilege of “natural” skills over social gender because the Blazing World contains *the origin—genus* in the Latin form, *genesis* in the Christian mythology—of humanity. The immaterial spirits confirm to the Empress that the capital city, named Paradise, is not just like Eden, it *is* Eden. A woman rules the prelapsarian utopic space, and the “real” world is now condemned as eternally fallen. The “corrupt” men of monstrous actions that she left behind now become the beasts left out of “heaven” from *Letters*. Moreover, they cannot enter because they are to blame for its loss. To further establish this connection, the Empress and immaterial spirits discuss the Biblical Fall in detail, but not from a position of regret at Eden’s loss, nor of condemnation of Eve for weakness or disobedience, or even shame at her temptation of Adam (the proof usually cited to support the subjugation of women). Instead, the Empress asks “Whether they were none of those Spirits that frighted Adam out of Paradise, at least caused him not to return thither” (Cavendish 2004, 170–71). On this point, we gain no further insight because their answer confirms nothing but that the Empress left the world Adam fled and was now in Paradise again. Yet the new origin story of the Biblical Fall that emerges is not the fault of Eve’s disobedience, or of women’s weakness to temptation. Instead, the question over Adam’s fear of the spiritual lingers, always unanswered, as the most likely reason. Or rather, the exact state of being by which the Empress and Duchess transcend gender and genus in this text, and Cavendish, through her alter egos, transcends genre. Through this shrewd reversal, God’s requirements that Adam rule over women and name all the beasts are reclaimed by a new hybrid Eve in a new hybrid world. She is hybrid in her presence between material and spiritual, between the genus text she rewrites, and the new genres she imagines with her Duchess-scribe. Lisa Sarasohn’s argument further contributes to this point in that by endowing beasts with humanity, Cavendish is also

recognizing that “beasts and women share the same fate” because “they are both enslaved by masculine tyranny.” Cavendish emphasizes, as Sarasohn writes the “rationality that characterizes stones, beasts, and women” and how these became “both animate and free, and the existence of a female natural philosopher possible” (2003, 53–54).

Such possibility, also imagined as an alternative nativity—an alternate genesis—is essential to *Blazing World* because in its performance of spectacular hybridity, it imagines a space not only where a female natural philosopher is possible, but one in which she has a choice. In that choice to study, she can also learn from her mistakes in practicing what she learns. Perhaps it is not surprising that in the progression between these two texts, Cavendish realizes what Gaiman and Ishiguro name as the “mutation,” rather than the “metamorphosis,” of stories. Through a Cavendishian blurring of genre and genus they grant animal characteristics to stories as they wonder at the emergence of “hybrid stories” now awakening from a “mysterious kind of hibernation” that leaves readers to discover which story-beings are “long-lived creatures,” or “deeply sly and untrustworthy,” or “uplifting,” or even simply “bad.” The critical question they ask is “how would we ever find out” about these “hybrid story-beings if we subject them to such the rigidity” (2015, n.p.). We answer this question every time we read Margaret Cavendish’s hybrid stories, or when we adopt her hybrid characters and inhabit her hybrid texts to experience the choice and learning by which we might achieve utopia.

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Author's contact: delilah.brataas@ntnu.no

Postal address: Dept. Teacher Education – Faculty of Social and Educational Sciences – NO-7491 Trondheim – Norway

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