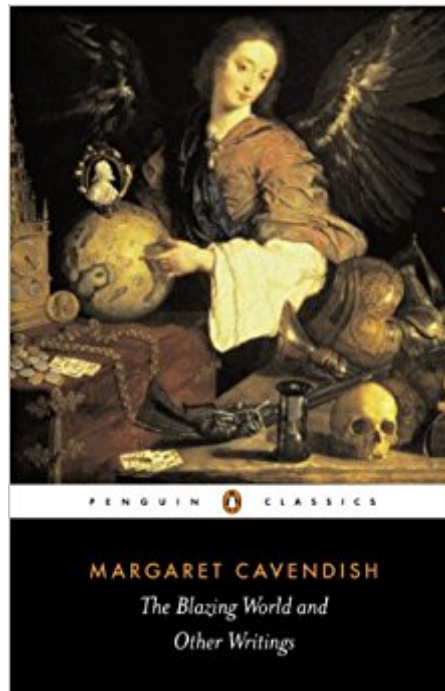




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The Blazing World And Other Writings (Penguin Classics)



Synopsis

The Blazing World is a highly original work: part Utopian fiction, part feminist text, it tells of a lady shipwrecked on the Blazing World where she is made Empress and uses her power to ensure that it is free of war, religious division and unfair sexual discrimination. This volume also includes The Contract, a romance in which love and law work harmoniously together, and Assaulted and Pursued Chastity, which explores the power and freedom a woman can achieve in the disguise of a man. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

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Customer Reviews

Margaret Lucas Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle (1623 - 1673). A Royalist during English Civil War, Margaret Lucas was Maid of Honor to Queen Henrietta Maria from 1643 to 1645. She wrote a total of fourteen works on a broad selection of topics: scientific and philosophical treatises, science fiction, a biography, an autobiography, essays, letters, poetry, "orations", and several plays. Kate Lilley was born in Perth. She completed her doctorate on Masculine Elegy at the University of London and went on to postdoctoral research at St Hilda's College, Oxford as the Julia Mann Junior

Research Fellow. She now teaches Literary History and Critical Theory at the University of Sydney. She has published many essays on contemporary Australian and American poetry, especially the work of John Tranter, and on 17th century women's writing.

The book lives up or down, depending on your perspective, to Cavendish's inclusion in Nick Page's *In Search of the World's Worst Writers*. Bizarre plot, bad writing, and other entertaining features of the spectacularly bad writer are readily available here. The introduction, likewise, can be viewed as either entertaining or depressing depending on how you take suggestions such as bad grammar being an act of feminist defiance.

This is specifically a reaction to the Kindle edition of Cavendish, which I just purchased (23 August 2011). Two obvious typos in my first 30 seconds of reading (locations 193, 2794). Come on Penguin! If you are going to be a serious leader in ebooks, clean things up. You are doing better than most, but your work is still sub-standard. Etexts should now be of the same quality as print. This is no reflection on the work of Kate Lilley the editor, or on the fascinating concoction of Margaret Cavendish's *Blazing World*, but on the sloppy conversion of this text. For prospective purchasers of this Kindle texts, I think despite my complaint you can go ahead. The book is readable, despite a few font errors and some obvious typos. It's not as bad as the Penguin Chaucer and some of the other poetry texts. My complaint is directly to the publisher, and I am probably wasting my time. Yet, without criticism, there will be no improvement.

good

Reading *The Blazing World* for class. I go back and forth on hating and loving it. There's not much of plot to this story (it's not that kind of story), and there's no character development. It's a funky sci-fi type of story about a very different world from ours and an Empress who eagerly wants to understand what things are all about. Question is, can you understand this *Blazing World*? Did I mention the interesting mix of feminism, LGBTQ, Kabbalah?

“A Merchant travelling into a foreign Country, fell extremely in Love with a young Lady” writes Margaret Cavendish in the opening sentence of *The Blazing-World*. Though this sounds like the introduction to a typical love story, the book quickly proves itself to be something entirely different. Cavendish details the Lady’s

kidnapping, shipwreck, and rescue by strange creatures, half animal half human, in a foreign land named the Blazing World. As one of the pioneers in the genre of science fiction, Cavendish gives remarkable descriptions of the new world and of its inhabitants through the Lady, who soon becomes the world's Empress, and her unrelenting curiosity. This is remarkable for two reasons. Firstly, though written in the seventeenth century during the Scientific Revolution, as a woman, it is surprising both that Cavendish made the decision to delve deeply into scientific thought, and that she was educated enough to do so. The second reason is what sets *The Blazing-World* apart as a feminist utopia; not only does she include long passages filled with questions about how the world works, she also uses a female protagonist to do so. After being granted unlimited power to rule as she pleases through marriage to the Emperor, made possible by Cavendish's creation of a world unlimited by gender stereotypes, the Empress calls together each species on the Blazing-World and divides them into the societies for which they are most suited. Through her discourse with each species, the Empress explores philosophy, astronomy, chemistry, politics, mathematics, and religion, among other things. Though some of the explanations Cavendish writes are long winded and at times dry, they show the great effort to make the world realistic; the world she has created may be fantasy, but Cavendish uses it as an outlet to explore topics relevant to her world and culture at the time in a way she would not have been able otherwise. After a discussion regarding religion, the Empress comes into contact with beings she calls immaterial spirits, and though the plot slows at this point, it begins to pick up pace when Cavendish introduces herself as a character in the novel; the Duchess of Newcastle's soul visits the Empress in the Blazing-World and engages in a discussion of building worlds in fictional literature, transforming the work once again into something vaguely autobiographical. Upon hearing that her home world is being disrupted by war, the Empress uses her wits and logic to devise a plan, travel to her world, install an absolute monarchy, and bring peace before returning to the Blazing-World. Through this plot point, Cavendish explores the ideal government while indicating the capability for female leadership and success. I read *The Blazing-World* as a requirement for an English class, and in the context of feminist and utopian prose, it is my opinion that this novel is a must read. While it uses somewhat archaic language and is at times dense, Cavendish offers quite a bit to ponder in her work. I echo my own sentiments as well as those of several other reviewers who would draw parallels between this work and the later feminist science fiction writer Mary Shelly's novel *Frankenstein*. One thing to keep in mind when reading *The Blazing-World* is Cavendish's tendency to reference scientific discoveries, theory, and philosophical arguments specific to the time period. During my

reading, I found that though I did not understand every reference Cavendish made, a brief understanding of her background and the Scientific Revolution was enough to guide me through the book. Cavendish's striking realism serves to further her point regarding the power of literature as empowerment for women, and renders *The Blazing-World* an interesting and important read for those seeking to understand the time period (particularly for women) or the origins of science fiction. My advice? Read the book. Don't be discouraged by the long paragraphs filled with difficult jargon; when read slowly and thoughtfully, they offer quite a bit of material to ponder. *The Blazing-World* has many facets; it can be read as a feminist utopia, a work of science fiction, a romance, an adventure, and an inquiry into science and philosophy, all of which make it a unique and worthwhile read.

This is one of various works touted as "the first science fiction novel" (especially in contexts where people are pointing out the strong influence of female authors in the early development of science fictional concepts). The full title is *The Description of a New World, Called The Blazing-World*, first published in 1666, but with an expanded version (as discussed below) published in 1668. In brief: a young woman is abducted by a would-be suitor but the ship carrying them is blown off course to the North Pole and enters a passage into an alternate world, in the course of which everyone on the ship except for the young woman perishes of the cold. From the description of the transition and the destination, the world seems to be not so much located in the interior of the Earth, but accessed as a sort of Klein bottle concept where both worlds are "exterior" to each other. The text seems to alternate between treating the home world of the young woman (who is never identified by name -- first she is simply "the lady", later referenced by another title) as our own world, but later on there is reference to three worlds, with the third being the one the author herself dwells in, which is not directly accessible to the other two. The "Blazing World," as this destination is called, is clearly utopian, being united under a single emperor and a single religion where everyone lives in peace and harmony. The inhabitants are of a number of different races, partaking of the nature of various animals (bird-men, fish-men, bear-men, worm-men, in addition to unmarked humans) to each of which is attributed some inherent set of intellectual skills. Unsurprisingly given the era when it was written, there's a lot of unexamined essentialism, colonialism, and "white savior" issues. "The lady," by virtue of her inherent virtue and purity is instantly recognized as being worthy to be the spouse of the emperor and is thereafter referred to simply as

“the empress.” After this elevation in status, the text bogs down in a long philosophical treatise, presented as the empress’s inquiries of the various beast-scientists as to the nature of the world she has come to rule. The Wikipedia entry on the book suggests that this section had originally been a separate and purely factual treatise “Observations on Experimental Philosophy,” which was appended to the fictional tale in the 1668 edition. (If this is the case, I’d dearly love to get ahold of the simpler 1666 text to see if it holds up better.) If I’d been reading this as a text, I probably would never have gotten past the first few pages of this section, but I had quite wisely chose an audiobook version in preparation for a long road trip. Even so I had to take a break to avoid being put entirely to sleep. Eventually, the dramatized lecture on experimental philosophy shifts into a more complex story when the Empress turns her hand to introducing Christianity to the Blazing World (though she knowingly uses stage-magician’s tricks to convince her subjects of its truth) and then has her beast-philosophers summon up immaterial spirits to satisfy her curiosity about the condition of the world she left behind. They discourse for some time on theology and philosophy and in the end the Empress sets her heart on creating a Cabbala. The Empress asks the spirits to recommend to her a scribe who can write up the Cabbala for her and they recommend one Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle. There’s only one problem: the Duchess lives in an entirely different world inaccessible to the Blazing World, but they can procure her spirit to talk to the Empress by a sort of astral projection, “and truly their meeting did produce such an intimate friendship between them, that they became Platonick Lovers, although they were both Femals.” [swoon] The Empress expresses a desire that the Duchess should rule over a similar realm to her own, but the spirits point out that every person is capable of creating an infinity of worlds within their own imagination over which they could rule, so why be content with just one? Both women exercise this power for a while, creating and abandoning invented worlds at whim. Oh, and the Duchess introduces the Empress to several important English concepts including Theater, with which she is much taken. (There are also digressions where the Duchess laments her husband’s financial woes and how badly Fortune has treated him.) The Empress decides she wants to visit England for herself, so she and the Duchess to the astral projection thing again and somehow both end up sharing the Duke of Newcastle’s body with him and there’s this discussion of the awkwardness of three spirits sharing a single body and the jealousies that arise thereby. The next section involves a court case against the personification of Fortune, who is being indicted for crimes against the Duke of Newcastle, during which the Duchess pleads his case most eloquently and

successfully. After this, the two women's souls take leave of each other, promising to visit regularly (by astral projection, of course). And that's the end of Part 1. Part 2 can be summarized as, "The Empress checks out how things are going back in her home world, discovers that her homeland is beleaguered and throws the scientific and natural resources of the Blazing World at the problem of how to smite her homeland's enemies and make it the dominant political power of its world. This involves the invention of submarines and chemical warfare. A great deal of the world-building info-dump from the beginning of the novel now becomes relevant as the special physical resources of her new realm are weaponized against the unsuspecting folks back home. They are victorious and the Empress returns home to the Blazing World considering it a job well done. There is a last episode where the Duchess visits the Empress in spirit once more and is lavishly entertained. The story concludes with an epilogue to the reader from the Duchess, describing the supreme delights of world-building and encouraging others to do the same. For me, it is this emphasis on the self-conscious creation of an inventive secondary world, and the exploration of its nature, properties, and consequences, that places The Blazing World solidly in the lineage of modern science fiction and fantasy. If the plot seems a bit sluggish to the modern reader, and the language overly florid, and the social politics more than a little cringe-worthy, this must be chalked up to being A Product of Its Times and, if not forgiven, at least understood. As an imaginative creation, the Blazing World ranks solidly up there with Middle Earth, Narnia, and Barsoom. For that matter, when stripped down to the essence of the plot, the story could hold its own against many a straight-forward quest adventure. But do yourself a favor and listen to an audio version while doing something tedious like housework or weeding. I doubt many modern readers would have the patience to slog through it otherwise.

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