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Contemplation on the "World of My Own Creating": Alchemical Discourses on Nature and Creation in *The Blazing World* (1666)

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World* from an alchemical perspective, with special references to passages regarding the perception of the cosmos and the creation of immaterial worlds. Even though the text is not the first work addressing the Utopian theme, it is innovative in utilising alchemical allegories to present both the author's philosophical thoughts and the process of creative writing. In order to explore the complexity, versatility and richness of *The Blazing World*, my reading focuses on the Empress's discourses on nature and the narrative surrounding her creation of worlds, while at the same time draws from early modern alchemical texts, particularly the treatises by Paracelsus and Michael Sendivogius. I argue that it is necessary for modern readers to revisit the esoteric and mystical nature of alchemical imagery, in order to develop a more profound understanding of the ways in which the Duchess of Newcastle created and refined her various imaginative worlds.

Keywords : alchemy, Paracelsus, Michael Sendivogius, The One, creation, Margaret Cavendish, fiction, Utopian literature.

以煉金術觀點解讀《炫麗新世界》當中的自然觀與創世情節

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摘　要

本論文試圖從西方煉金術的角度，解讀瑪格麗特・柯芬蒂詩的奇想故事《炫麗新世界》，關注的重心主要在於宇宙觀與創世概念等議題。儘管就文學史上的創世論述觀之，此文本並不是首開先例之作，但其創新之處，在於以煉金意象來闡釋作者的哲學思想與創作歷程等觀念。爲探討並重新評估《炫麗新世界》作品本身的複雜性、多變性與豐富性，本研究以早期現代西方煉金術作爲基礎，特別是帕拉賽瑟斯（Paracelsus）以及參帝沃吉爾斯（Sendivogius）等人的煉金論述，來解讀作品當中主人翁的自然觀以及創世的情節刻劃。研究者主張，現代讀者藉由分析此文本中的煉金意象，能夠進一步了解柯芬蒂詩創造、錘鍊筆下異想世界的心法。

關鍵詞：煉金術、帕拉賽瑟斯（Paracelsus）、參帝沃吉爾斯（Sendivogius）、「合一」思想、創造、瑪格麗特・柯芬蒂詩、烏托邦文學

Contemplation on the "World of My Own Creating": Alchemical Discourses on Nature and Creation in *The Blazing World* (1666)[1]

Tien-yi Chao

> …I chose such a Fiction as would be agreeable to the subject I treated in the former parts; it is a Description of a New World, not such as Lucian's or the French man's World in the Moon; but a World of my own Creating, which I call the Blazing-World…if it add any satisfaction to you, I shall account my self a Happy Creatoress; if not, I must be content to live a melancholy Life in my own World; I cannot call it a poor World, if poverty be only want of Gold, Silver, and Jewels; for there is more Gold in it then all the Chymists [alchemists] ever did, and (as I verily believe) will ever be able to make ('To the Reader', *The Blazing World*, sig. b1r-b1v).

So writes Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, in *The Description of A New Blazing World* (subsequently referred to as *The Blazing World* in this paper), one of the author's most extraordinary works. Published as a supplement to her scientific treatise, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, the text presents an extensive array of mystical and philosophical issues. It was fashionable to add a piece of literary fantasy to a formal, scientific treatise. Kepler, for example, attached a work of fiction (about a voyage to the moon) to one of his academic books (Cavendish, *Paper Bodies* 28).[2] Apparently the Duchess was aware of such a convention. As she mentions in the preface, her work is distinctive from Lucian's Description of a new world and a French author's world in the moon. In the preface the Duchess explains

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[1] This article is a revised and expanded version of the paper I presented at the International Margaret Cavendish Society Conference (Sheffield, UK, 28 June–1 July 2007). Part of the paper was extracted from a chapter in my doctoral thesis, in which I discussed the female characters in *The Blazing World*. I am indebted to the helpful comments of numerous delegates at the conference, particularly Professor Sara Mendelson, Professor Lisa Sarasohn, and Dr Brandie Siegfried. My heart-felt thanks are also to the anonymous reviewers of *NTU Studies* for their invaluable comments on earlier versions of this paper.

[2] In their annotated edition of Cavendish's *The Blazing World*, Sylvia Lorraine Bowerbank and Sara Heller Mendelson have established a strong link between seventeenth-century Utopian literature and contemporary cosmology (28-9).

that the reason for writing such a book is "to divert my studious thoughts" and "to delight the *Reader* with variety" (sig. b1v).[3] Turning her "Fancy" into words is a useful aid, she claims, to her learning of philosophies and scientific theories; it enables her "to recreate the Mind, and withdraw it from its more serious Contemplations" (sig. B1v). *The Blazing World* can thus be read as a survey of the author's wide range of interests and her various writing styles. This was clearly stated in a quotation about the book's structure: "the first part whereof is *Romancical*, the second *Philosophical*, and the third is merely *Fancy*, or (as I may call it) *Fantastical*" (sig. B2r).

The plot of *The Blazing World* revolves around an anonymous "young Lady", who progresses from a victim of kidnapping to the Empress of the Blazing World, and later achieves personal development through a series of adventures and by overcoming potential dangers. The first part of the story commences with her survival from a sea voyage to the Blazing World, where she becomes the wife of the Emperor. The heroine, now the Empress of the kingdom, acquires extensive knowledge from her virtuoso advisors, ranging from natural philosophy to alchemy. The plot then turns into a more mystical setting, in which the non-human spirits appear as the heroine's spiritual consultants, answering her queries about the "Truth in Nature" (sig. B1r). The Empress then takes the spirits' advice by choosing the soul of "the Duchess of Newcastle" as her scribe; the two women's souls develop an intimate friendship, even to the extent of being "*Platonick* Lovers" (Part I, 92). Later they follow the spirits" guidance to create their own "immaterial worlds". As I will elaborate in this paper, the passages regarding creation contain strong allegorical overtones based on alchemy. The narrative sustains and further develops a sense of authorship, echoing Cavendish's self-fashioning in the preface, in which she positions herself as not only the author, but also a "Happy Creatoress" (sig. b2r). In the second part of the story, the Duchess helps the Empress to win a battle in ESPI, her native country. The victory enables the Empress to succeed in being recognised as a "great and absolute Princess" (Part II, 13) in her own country and as "the Princess of the several Nations of that World" (23).

The Blazing World has attracted much scholarly attention in recent Cavendish studies, the focus of which has been on political and gender issues.

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[3] In the 1668 edition of *The Blazing World*, the preface was replaced by "To all Noble and Worthy Ladies". The revised preface in this volume indicates Cavendish's increasing interest in female readership: "by reason most Ladies take no delight in Philosophical Arguments, I separated some from the mentioned Observations, and caused them to go out by themselves, that I might express my Respects, in presenting to Them such Fancies as my Contemplations did afford" (sig. B1r).

It is widely accepted among academics, including Earla S. Willputte (110–1), Rosemary Kegl (119–40), Rachel Trubowitz (231–2, 236–7, 240) and Catherine Gallagher (26–27), that there is a strong link between the Empress and Margaret Cavendish. In his monograph *Margaret the First*, Douglas Grant terms *The Blazing World* as an "extraordinary work" that offers "an illustration of Margaret's character, of her inordinate ambition" (208). Adopting a different angle from the bio-critic approach, Helen Hackett uses the analogy of the hall of mirrors to articulate the intricate layers of self-presentations enshrined by the Empress and the Duchess of Newcastle, who can be easily and inevitably identified with the author (183–35). She also refers to the tradition of *roman à clef* and French romance, including Lady Mary Wroth's *Urania* and Madeleine de Scudéry's *Ibrahim*, published in 1641 (189). In addition, Susan James speculates about the symbolic meanings of the Empress as a protagonist from political and feminist perspectives, emphasising female agency (Cavendish, *Margaret Cavendish* xx).

Yet subjects such as the author's life and gendered writing have almost been thoroughly studied, which makes it necessary to revisit *The Blazing World* from a fresh angle. As Cavendish describes in the preface, the text is a combination of various genres and schools of thought. In order to better understand the author's "Philosophical" and "Fantastical" ideas (*The Blazing World* sig. B2r), it would be helpful to explore the text's metaphysical implications. It is especially crucial, in my view, to interpret the seemingly puzzling narratives within the context of alchemy.

The influence of alchemy in early modern literature is gradually coming to gain scholarly attention after Francis Yates *Theatre of the World* (1969). In this pioneering study, Yates associated Renaissance literature with occult philosophies, an area seldom studied by early modern researchers. Her greatest contribution lies in formulating a "Yates paradigm", as in Wouter Hanegraaff's words (507-8), which regards Renaissance hermeticism as an inseparable part of European culture. John Michael Krois also celebrates Yates as a ground-breaking historian, who "drew attention to philosophical traditions from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that philosophers and even historians of philosophy have largely ignored" (149). Her approach has a profound impact on later scholars of literature and alchemy, in particular Douglas Brooks-Davies and Stanton Linden, whose studies underline the importance of alchemical influence on early modern literature and culture.

In a paper published in 1977, scholar Lynn Veach Sadler also offers much insight into alchemy and poetry. Her study elaborates on the role played

by alchemy in seventeenth-century literature, with special reference to poems by John Donne and John Milton. She makes an intriguing point as such:

> The alchemist and the poet are intimately involved with nature, and each feels that he helps her….On the most basic levels, alchemist and poet use the powers of the imagination and of inspiration, and *both are creators*'. (69; my emphasis)

According to Sadler's observation, poets and alchemists have many things in common, such as the use of obscure language, imitation of nature, and most importantly, both devoting themselves to the work of creation. Her argument supports an alchemical reading of the preface of *The Blazing World*, in which Cavendish views herself as "a Happy Creatoress" and likens *The Blazing World* to the desired end product in alchemical practice, namely "Gold" (sig. b2r). Accordingly, the context of alchemy helps in deciphering the intricate images of the creator, the alchemist, and the author in *The Blazing World*.

After Sadler, scholars such as Douglas Brooks-Davies (1983), Lyndy Abraham (1990), Stanton Linden (1996), and Shu-hua Chou (1998) have contributed to the understanding of "art". For example, the studies by Brooks-Davies and Chou have confirmed substantial alchemical imagery in Edmund Spencer's *Fairie Queene*. In her study of Marvell's poetry, Abraham identifies the reason for re-visiting the gradually forgotten and easily overlooked subject of alchemy:

> Since such knowledge [alchemy] is no longer part of the general twentieth-century storehouse of reference, its recovery can assist the reader in gaining a new perspective on the work of writers in the seventeenth century. (28)

Abraham's views are echoed by Linden in his book *Darke Hierogliphicks*. His study shows that literary writers in the seventeenth century, including John Donne, often exploited a mixture of allusions to both material and spiritual alchemy (154–90). Affirming the weight of alchemical imagery in Donne's poetry, he concludes that the poet's achievement lies in his ingenious use of "poetic alchemy" in which he created a set of more positive alchemical allegories (160, 166–8). Linden's reading develops an effective critical approach to early modern literary works by distilling their metaphysical meanings in the light of alchemy.

Building on the above studies, my paper seeks to associate *The Blazing World* with early modern alchemy. In order to explore the various alchemical discourses in this text, I will focus on two issues: the first is the Empress's views on nature, and secondly, her creation of worlds. The reason for my choice is that they contain the most significant alchemical allegories. The narrative will be studied in parallel with treatises by alchemists such as Paracelsus and Michael Sendivogius. In so doing, I hope to stimulate more profound discussions on Cavendish's exploitation of alchemical imagery.

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In *The Blazing World*, the most direct reference to alchemical ideas lies in the Empress's discussions on nature with her virtuoso consultants. She starts by enquiring of the worm-men the generation of frost, ice, springs, mineral and vegetables (38-40), "which relation added a great delight to the Ape-men, who were the Chymists [alchemists], concerning their Chymical principles, Salt, Sulphur and Mercury" (38). Later the Empress's interest shifts from nature to alchemy, as she asks: "Whether Gold could not be made by Art [alchemy]?" (40) The worm-men address the question in a tentative and prudent way, affirming the possibility of producing gold through alchemy. They soon suggest that metals such as "Tin, Lead, Brass, Iron and Silver" would be used "for such an Artificial transmutation" (40). Hearing their answers, the Empress continues to ask, "Whether Art could produce Iron, Tin, Lead or Silver" (40). The worm-men consider it impossible, which seems to disappoint the Empress, for she soon dismisses it by saying, "your judgments are very irregular" (40). Her scepticism is based on the premise that if the "work" is capable of producing precious metals such as gold, it should be able to generate other "far weaker, and meaner metals" (40). The dialogues between the Empress and the worm-men convey two important messages. First, they present and then ridicule the common myth about alchemy, namely its goal is to obtain gold and change the nature of things. Secondly, the worm-men's negative response regarding the creation of less precious metals suggest that alchemy transmutation is basically an ascending process, rather than descending. In other words, the main purpose of alchemy is to create purer and more refined substances or mental states, not in the reverse order.

After finishing the meeting with the worm-men, the Empress calls for Ape-men ('her Chymists'), and "commend[s] them to give her an account an account of the several Transmutations which their Art was able to produce"

(46). The Ape-men then deliver "a long and tedious Discourse concerning the Primitive Ingredients of Natural bodies, and how, by their Art, they had found out the principles out of which they consist" (46). Yet these alchemists begin to dispute on the components of substances: some of them are in favour of Aristotle's four elements, believing that "the Principles of all natural bodies were the four Elements, Fire, Air Water, Earth"(46); some support Paracelsus's theory about three elements', arguing that "the onely principles of natural bodies, were Salt, Sulphur, and Mercury"(47); some reckon that substances are composed of elements other than the previous ones.

The above passages regarding the Empress's conferences with the Worm-men and the Ape-men illustrate the complexity of alchemical approaches towards Nature. The passage shows that the study of alchemy in early modern Europe was a mixture of various modes of practice and philosophies. Acknowledging its diversity, Linden even proposes that it would be more appropriate to use the plural, namely "alchemies", to cover all the philosophies and the modes of practices within this discipline.

In addition, the narrative shadows the relationship between alchemists and their patrons in early modern European courts, especially that of Queen Elizabeth I. According to Abraham's account, the queen employed Cornelius de Lannoy as her private alchemist, while many Elizabethan courtiers were involved in alchemical practice (Abraham 2; 29n7).[4] In *Scientific Lady*, historian Patricia Philips points out that monarchs and courtiers in Europe, such as Jean d'Espagnet in Bordeaux, offered generous financial aids to alchemists, and even had private laboratories (54). Although some alchemists did receive generous sponsorship and rewards from their patrons, tension was common in the partnership. For instance, the renowned Alexander Seton of Scotland was once imprisoned and tortured for he refused to disclose to Christian II the secret of the Philosopher's Stone. Similar tension is depicted in *The Blazing World*, when the Worm-men and Ape-men answer the Empress's enquiries. Confronted by an inquisitive and ambitious monarch, the learned masters are extremely cautious about the extent of their knowledge and the probability of successful results in alchemical operation.

The lengthy debate among the Ape-men on the generation of things seems to lead nowhere, which makes the Empress "so much tired that she was

[4] Abraham, *Marvell and Alchemy*, 2. See also Ralph M. Sargent, *At the Court of Queen Elizabeth: The Life and Lyrics of Sir Edward Dyer* (London: Oxford UP, 1935), 99, cited in Abraham, *Marvell and Alchemy*, 29n7.

not able to hear them any longer" (47). Her lack of enthusiasm for the alchemists' report suggests her dissatisfaction with the Ape-men's approach to nature. It also indicates her scepticism towards practical and material-based alchemy, which tends to ignore the spiritual work.

After "impos[ing] a general silence upon them [the Ape-men]", the Empress begins to declare her opinions on the proper use of alchemy:

> I am too sensible of the pains you have taken in the Art of Chymistry, to discover the Principles of Natural Bodies, and wish they had been more profitably bestowed upon some other, then such experiments. (47)

Clearly, her interest lies in the nature and the *opus operandi* of the cosmos, rather than material exploration, such as the generation and the manipulation of substance. The ultimate goal for alchemical maters, in her view, is not to simply experiment with salt, sulphur and mercury, or generate endless debates on the ingredients of Nature. Instead, she expects her alchemists to "discover the Principles of Natural Bodies" and study the laws of "several Transmutations which their Art was able to produce" (46).

With such an understanding in mind, the reader will find it easier to follow the Empress's declaration of her own theory of Nature in a later passage:

> [F]or both by my own Contemplation, and the Observations which I have made by my rational & sensitive perception upon Nature, and her works, I find, that Nature is but one Infinite Self-moving Body, which by the vertue of its self-motion, is divided into Infinite parts, which parts being restless, *undergo perpetual changes and transmutations* by their infinite compositions and divisions. (47–48; my emphasis)

The Empress's statement presents a substantial alchemical perspective of Nature as a dynamic entity comprising "Infinite parts" (48). Within such a mechanism, all the components are mobile and changeable. Although there appear to be "infinite compositions and divisions", all these seemingly independent elements are associated with one another and united in Nature, where they "undergo perpetual changes and transmutations" (48), a process of regeneration. It is such a dynamic force, generated by the union of all the parts, that makes Nature "one Infinite Self-moving Body" (48). She then goes further elaborating on the principle of unity:

> [B]y reason 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. (43)

Here the Empress portrays the cosmos as an entity unifying various self-moving elements which cannot be separated from each other. The notion of unity is pervasive throughout her extensive lecture on Nature, and reappears elsewhere in the text. When it comes to the picture of a perfect world, she denotes it as "to have but one soveraign, one Religion, one Law, and one Language, so that all the World might be but as one united Family, without divisions" (121). This is particularly evident in the state of the Blazing World, which is "well and wisely ordered and governed" (120). There are a variety of peoples and species living there, while overall, there is a sense of harmony and shared identity.

A number of researchers interpreted this as political absolutism. In her study, Catherine Gallagher points out that *The Blazing World* is a model of the author's Toryism and her "absolutist model of subjectivity" (26-27). The text serves as an outlet of the author's political ambition, through which "restrictions on her [Cavendish's] worldly ambitions have directed her inward, toward the microcosm of the self" (27). Adopting a different perspective, Anna Battigelli emphasises the influence of Hobbes's *Leviathan* on Margaret's political writings, including *The Blazing World* (40–55). This is particularly obvious, she argues, in passages about creating the worlds (54). The above studies tend to link the text to absolutism and Cavendish's position as a Royalist. It should be noted, however, that *The Blazing World* is more likely to embody Cavendish's philosophical thoughts rather than political ones, given that it was published together with *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*.

From an alchemical perspective, the Empress's celebration of unity underlines the alchemical notion of "The One", a topic frequently addressed in early modern alchemical treatises. As Stanislas Klossowski De Rola defines, "the Infinite Eternal One" in alchemy is a combination of "perfect stillness and perfect motion" (De Rola 14). He also points out that "all things have been, and come from *One* by the meditation of *One*; thus all things have been born from *this single thing* by adaptation" (15; my emphasis). The "One" in the above quotation means "a chaotic globe, or a chaotic mass" (16), while

"this single thing" refers to "a confused mass [the *Materia Prima*, the fundamental material used in alchemical transmutation]" (16). Given the alchemical notion of unity, the Blazing World, an orderly and harmonious nation, is not only a miniature replica of Nature, in which all parts "are composed in one body" (*The Blazing World* Part I, 43), but also a representation of the perfect and balanced state of being.

The Empress's interpretation of nature seems to correspond with alchemists such as Philippus Theophrastus Aureolus Bombastus von Hohenheim (namely Paracelsus, 1493-1541) and Michael Sendivogius (also called Michal Sedziwój, 1566-1636 or 1646). Born in Switzerland, Paracelsus was a doctor and hermetic scholar, who consistently came up with controversial ideas about medicine and alchemy. He developed a comprehensive process of mineral-based preparations for medical treatment, conflicting with herbal-based Galenism (Linden, *The Alchemy Reader* 151). In addition to medical study, Paracelsus moved beyond orthodox alchemy, the goals of which are to obtain gold and Philosopher's Stone, into the exploration of the principles of Nature (151) and the ultimate balance between microcosm and macrocosm. According to Henry M. Pachter's study, Paracelsus had endeavoured to study the secret of "The One": "With Trithemius he [Paracelsus] agreed on the necessity of achieving unity between reason and existence, between man and the Universe, between God and the world" (89). After Paracelsus's death in 1541, the Polish Michael Sendivogius was another important figure in early modern alchemy. Sendivogius was not only an alchemist, but also a philosopher, a scientist, and a physician. He used to be active in the court of Emperor Rudolph II ("the German Hermes"). Legend has it, he obtained the secret of producing Philosopher's Stones from his mentor Alexander Seton. This equipped him with the methodology of generating gold from quick silver, enabling him to win the favour of Rudolph II (Linden, *The Alchemy Reader* 174). In addition, he used to correspond with John Dee and Edward Kelly in England, and was often associated with Rosicrucianism (Prinke 72-98). Sendivogius contributed to alchemy in two ways. In terms of chemistry, he discovered oxygen in the air. In spiritual practice, he developed a theory which regards alchemy as a process of experiencing and exploring one's higher state of being; the mental drive in such process later becomes the major source of creative energy (Raff 107).

Noticeably, an English translation of Paracelsus's *Of the Nature of Things* and Sendivogius's *A New Light of Alchymie* was published jointly in London in 1650. Both texts regard the process of alchemical transmutation as

a practice of striving towards the perfect state of unity, which is close to the Empress's perspective in *The Blazing World*. For instance, Paracelsus's *Of the Nature of Things* provides theoretical discussions on nature, including the three fundamental substances of Nature: mercury (spirit), sulpher (soul), and salt (body) (Linden, *The Alchemy Reader* 153-54). It also presents detailed instructions of alchemical transmutation, in which the base material has to pass through several stages in order to reach the perfect state of being (157-60). Most importantly, the treatise depicts Nature as an entity consisting of seemingly separated elements:

> [W]hereby every one of them [natural things] is apart and distinctly separated, and divided materially and substantially, *viz.* seeing that two, three, or foure, or more things are mixed into one body, and yet there is seen but one matter. (160)

Similar views appear in the first treatise of Sendivogius's *A New Light of Alchymie* (London, 1650), which presented the author's observation of nature: "Nature is but one, true, plain, perfect, and entire in its own being, which God made from the beginning, placing in his spirit in it" (Sendivogius 3; sig. B2r). A later passage in the same book further confirms the alchemical perception of the cosmos, namely a single lively entity unifying various forces and elements:

> Wee conclude therefore that there is but only one Nature, as well as in Metalls as in other things, but her operation is various, also there is one universal matter according to Hermes. *So from this one thing all things proceed*. (Sendivogius 124; sig. R2v)

The notion of "The One" and the model of one nature unifying various elements are resonant throughout Sendivogius's discourses on Nature. These ideas are reiterated in the twelfth (last) treatise:

> [T]here is one Nature, one Art, but many Artificers [alchemists who attempt artificial creation]….Every Element is [in] its own sphere; but one cannot be without the other; one lives by virtue of the other, and yet being joined together they doe not agree. (183)

The above quotation is resonant in the Empress's statement, in particular the image of nature as an entity unifying various elements. Accordingly, her

views on nature do not merely suggest political absolutism; rather, they present an alchemical approach to the contemporary debate on the cosmos in natural philosophy.

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The later passages in the first part of *The Blazing World* turn from nature to the creation of worlds. Here the two female protagonists, namely the Empress and the Duchess of Newcastle (the Empress's scribe), create their own worlds through the guidance from a group of spirits. A number of studies regard the narrative of creation as the author's celebration of female agency. Reading the text in the context of Utopian literature, Emma L. E. Rees views *The Blazing World* as "a fiction of mind" (179), in which the "overt configuration of an omnipotent female ruler represents a coalescence of the themes of this book" (179). Rachel Trubowitz takes a feminist point of view, affirming that Cavendish constructed her "imperial selfhood" by "feminiz[ing] the Utopia" (230). The Empress's decision to turn inward for purification and perfection, as she argues, celebrates the agency in the process of creation which allows the two female protagonists to do as they desire (229). The above studies tend to focus on the symbolic representation of female potency, highlighting the significance of political and gender issues in the narrative. These issues are important in *The Blazing World*, though the text might be better deciphered within the philosophical context. Accordingly, my reading is based on a less gender-specific and political, but more metaphysical, point of view. As I will demonstrate shortly, the narrative surrounding creation contains a common motif in contemporary alchemical texts, namely human achievement in materialising thoughts.

The creation passage starts as the Duchess of Newcastle desires to rule a material world. She confesses to the Empress that "my melancholy proceeds from an extreme ambition" (*The Blazing World*, Part I, 93). The reason for her "extreme ambition" stems from her aspiration to rule the world: "my ambition is, that I would fain be as you are, that is, an Empress of a world, and I shall never be at quiet until I be one" (96).[5] To help the Duchess find a world to govern, the Empress seeks advice from the spirits. After a survey of the existing worlds, the spirits report that there is no place available, and it is point-

[5] In the 1668 edition, this sentence was revised to"it is not possible to conquer a World". See Cavendish, *The Blazing World* (1668), Part I, 95.

less to conquer one. Finally they suggest that the Duchess should create a world in her mind rather than search for a material world: "[w]e wonder…that you desire to be Empress of a Terrestrial World, when as you can create your self a Celestial World if you please" (96). Hearing her immortal consultants" proposal, the Empress enquires in disbelief, "Can any Mortal be a Creator?" The spirits assure her:

> Yes,…for every humane 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; nay, not onely so, but he may create a World of what fashion and Government he will, and give the Creatures thereof such motions, figures, forms, colours, perceptions, etc. as he pleases. (96-97)

In the above quotation, the spirits affirm mankind's creative ability, which is achieved by associating the internal to the external. Such ability is a key to success in alchemical creation and transmutation. As Paracelsus puts forth in *Of The Nature of Things*, there are two ways of generating things: the first is by nature, and the second is through artificial creation (Linden, *The Alchemy Reader* 153). In *A New Light of Alchemy*, Sendivogius also mentions the word "artificer" several times, referring to alchemists who pursue artificial creation. For alchemical masters the real purpose of alchemy is not necessarily obtaining gold. Rather, through alchemical practice, they took the apprenticeship of the Creator by imagining, observing and imitating the process of creation in nature. Once they master the secret of Natural creation, they are able to create natural substances and those not existing in nature or better than natural things. Hence the spirits comment that the world created in mind will be better than a material world:

> "And since it is in your power to create the world, What need you to venture life, reputation and tranquility, to conquer a gross material world?...since glory, delight, and pleasure lives but in other mens opinions, and can neither add tranquility to your mind nor give ease to your body, Why should you desire to be Empress of a Material World, and be troubled with the care that attend Government? When as by creating a World within your self, you please, and enjoy as much pleasure and delight as a World can afford you?" (97)

The Duchess finally decides to take the spirits' advice, ready to "create a World of [her] own" (97). Inspired by their dialogue, the Empress also wants to create a "world within". She tells the spirits: "If I do make such a world, then I shall be Mistress of two worlds, one within, and the other without me" (98). The spirits soon grant her their permission, and "[leave] the two Ladies to create two Worlds within themselves" (98). Here the creation of the worlds becomes a quest for an improved inner state and an articulation of the Empress's views on nature. This can be seen as a way to fulfil her desire to be the real ruler of both inner and outer world. More importantly, the task of creation sets a test on her ability to manifest her perception of the cosmos.

There is no easy path to success. The art of creation, referring to "the Great Work" in alchemy, is long and laborious. Like many alchemists who struggled to improve their "work", the Empress encounters obstacles during the course of "making and dissolving several Worlds in her own mind" She "was so puzled, that she could not settle in any of them" (101). In spite of all the difficulties, she eventually succeeds in perfecting the world she created:

> [A]fter she [the Empress] had quite finished it, and framed all kinds of Creatures proper and useful for it, strengthened it with good Laws, and beautified it with Arts and Sciences; having nothing else to do, unless she did dissolve her Imaginary World, or made some alterations in the Blazing-World. (102)

The above quotation vividly illustrates a perfect world: an orderly, harmonious and beautiful paradise. No more artificial interference or alternation is needed, because a world "composed of sensitive and rational self-moving Matter" has come into shape (101). Again, the world she created is a manifestation of her ideal cosmos, an orderly, "Infinite Self-moving Body" in which all parts "are composed in one body" (47, 43).

The various stages of Empress's creation remind the reader of the process of transmutation from chaos to cosmos in the Art. As Paracelsus puts forth in *Of the Nature of Things*, the process consists of several phases (he addresses them as "degrees"): calcination, sublimation, solution, putrefaction, distillation, cohobation, coagulation, and tincture (Linden, *The Alchemy Reader* 157-59). In addition, the progress in transmutation is usually represented by four colours in an alchemical lexicon: nigredo (black), albedo (white), rubedo (red), and citrinitas (yellow-green). The first nigredo stage

suggests the primary condition of chaos, in which all substance is massed up. This is followed by the albedo stage, in which the *materia prima* are refined and begin to change their nature after coagulation. In the rubedo stage, the mixture, after laborious heating, purification, and input of vast mental energy, comes into a new shape and identity—it is not the same as its *materia prima*, but it carries their nature. At the final stage of cintrinitas, the alchemical "work" (*opus*) is fulfilled by obtaining the metaphysical "gold". Similarly, in *The Blazing World*, the Empress faces a chaotic situation at the preliminary stage of her creation, almost losing her control. Then she works out ways to improve the structures of the worlds she has created. Finally, she succeeds in bringing the worlds into an orderly yet vigorous state, which pleases and satisfies her as a "creatoress" (*The Blazing World*, sig. b2r). During the stages of transmutation, both the Empress and the Duchess of Newcastle learn the way of creation through empirical practice and experience sharing. This is close to early modern alchemical apprenticeship, in which novice alchemists developed skills through trial-and-error, with guidance from their mentors.

Given the analogy between poetry and alchemy, the creation passage in *The Blazing World* may also be understood as a symbolic depiction of Cavendish's literary creation. As Sadler's study has demonstrated, the merger between poetry and alchemy is pervasive in poems by Donne and Milton—as alchemists, both poets position themselves in the texts as creators. With this perspective in mind, I see the narratives of creation as a projection of the author's endeavour to provide a refined interpretation of nature, and to manifest her thoughts by creating an imaginary world in her story. In parallel with the Empress's painstaking process of creating her beloved world, Margaret Cavendish, the author of *The Blazing World*, entered the nigredo phase, searching in the chaos for a way to "purify" various and contradictory philosophies and sources. This is followed by the albedo phase, in which she selects and mixes the materials for her writing, and in which her thoughts begin to take shape. In the rubedo phase, a brand new textual entity comes into shape—a hybrid of genres, knowledge and experience that ranges from alchemy, Cabbalism, biblical allegories, medical studies, natural philosophy, Utopianism, romances, court masques and contemporary political science. Finally, she achieves the "cintrinitas" phase by completing her own "work", a unique piece of writing that contains "more Gold in it then all the Chymists ever did" (*The Blazing World*, sig. b1r-b1v).

* * *

To conclude, the intertextuality between *The Blazing World* and treatises by Paracelsus and Sendivogius is significant in several ways. As discussed earlier, the text sheds much light on Margaret Cavendish's ingenious undertaking of alchemical discourses. The enticing passages involving the Empress's views on the cosmos and the process of her creation of the worlds apparently share the alchemical principles of "The One" in both the material and the spiritual domains. As the plot progresses, the two heroines achieve a higher state of being via creation, like alchemical masters equipped with the power of transmutation They eventually complete the great "work" by constantly pursuing and practicing the ultimate truth of the cosmos.

Accordingly, an alchemical reading of *The Blazing World* helps modern researchers to explore further the text's philosophical underpinnings. The seemingly mysterious and even obscure plot of Cavendish's "fantasical" story, I argue, can be better understood within the context of early modern alchemy. Whatever the author's actual stance on the "Art", her ingenious use of alchemical allegories distinguishes her writing from orthodox natural philosophy and Utopian literature. The esoteric and mystical nature of alchemical imagery in the passages discussed undoubtedly appealed to the Duchess of Newcastle, who exploited them not only to demonstrate her intellectual capacity, but also as an effective means of literary expression. The inspirations from alchemy might have empowered her to complete her extraordinary works of creation with insight and joy, as she declares proudly in the epilogue to *The Blazing World*:

> By this Poetical Description, you may perceive, that my ambition is not onely 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 Cesar…. And in the formation of those Worlds, I take more delight and glory, then ever Alexander or Cesar did in conquering this terrestrial world. (Part 2, 159; my emphasis)

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