

Margaret Cavendish: *TRAILBLAZER*



‘The Blazing World’ Plot summary for KS 1-2

Introduction:

Margaret Cavendish was born into the Lucas family in Colchester in 1623, at their manor house St John’s Abbey. During the second English Civil War she accompanied the Queen into exile in France. Here she met her husband, William Cavendish, Duke of Newcastle. They returned to England after the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660. Having lost her family during the war, she never returned to Colchester.

Margaret became a prolific writer, publishing over 12 original texts under her name at a time when women were largely removed from publishing, or published anonymously. She was a philosopher, poet, scientist, fiction writer, and playwright. Her novel *The Blazing World* was published in 1666, reprinted in 1668, and remains in print today.

The tale follows an unnamed Lady who becomes the all-powerful Empress of a fantastical parallel world, where everything from popular religion to the laws of nature is radically different than in our own. Taking place on a parallel world with animal-people, ships that sail underwater, and strong female protagonists, the book is considered both as proto-science fiction and utopian feminist literature, centuries before these genres existed as we know them today.

As Cavendish explains in her author's note, she published the fanciful *Blazing World* alongside her more rigorous *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* to show how fiction could help readers explore philosophical ideas enjoyably.

This resource accompanies the exhibition ***Margaret Cavendish: Trailblazer*** which is at Hollytrees Museum, Colchester, from 14th February to 21st September 2025.

- For more information and downloadable resources, visit the exhibition microsite here:
<https://colchester.cimuseums.org.uk/collections/cavendish/>
- For other learning resources:
<https://colchester.cimuseums.org.uk/learn/teacher-resources/>
- For a full transcript of *The Blazing World*, go to Project Gutenberg:
<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/51783/51783-h/51783-h.htm>

What follows is a simplified plot, with some suggestions for further exploration or activities.

The Blazing World

by Margaret Cavendish



One day a merchant falls in love with a Lady. (A merchant is someone who buys and sells things to make money.) But she doesn't like him! So he gets cross, and takes her away on his sailing ship, even though she doesn't want to go.

But the gods see this happening and are angry, so they blow the ship off course to the North Pole, to a strange place where our world meets another world. The bad merchant and his crew all freeze to death, but the Lady survives! She crosses over the frozen North Pole into the strange new world. Here she meets curious people who are part human and part bear.



Bear-Men

In the Blazing World, the Bear-Men are “experimental philosophers” or scientists who conduct experiments.

They take the Lady to their home in underground caves. All the bear-people – men and women, young and old – are amazed to see this strange Lady and hold their paws up in amazement! But they soon realise that she is very cold, so they take her to their neighbours, the Fox-people, who live on a warmer island. Eventually they all decide to take her to the beautiful golden city of Paradise, to meet their Emperor.



Fox-Men

The Fox-Men are the politicians of the Blazing World.

The Emperor lives in a golden palace covered in jewels: he soon falls in love with the Lady, and they get married. He makes her the Empress of the Blazing World.

So the Lady becomes an Empress!



The Empress

The Empress was a young woman from the Kingdom of ESFI (Cavendish’s acronym for England, Scotland, France, and Ireland) before she escaped to the Blazing World.

The Blazing World has lots of different animal-people. They all have different jobs.

The Bear-men are **scientists**, who use telescopes and microscopes – **telescopes** to see things that are very far away, and **microscopes** to examine tiny things like butterfly wings.

The Bird-men look like geese - they are **astronomers**, who look at the sun and the moon and the stars. They have telescopes too.



Bird-Men

The Bird-Men are the astronomers of the Blazing World.

The Fox-men are **politicians**.

The Ape-men are **chemists** and teach her about the elements in nature.

The Fish-men, Fly-men and Worm-men are **naturalists**, and tell her all about the natural world – about the lives of animals, why water freezes, where minerals come from and lots of other things.

The Magpie and Parrot-men are **orators**. (These are people who love to give speeches and talk a lot!)



Parrot-Men

The Parrot-Men are “orators” (public speakers) and logicians from the Blazing World.

The Spider-men and Lice-men are **mathematicians**.

There are other strange people called Satyrs - men with the legs and horns of a goat. They are **physicians**, which is another word for a kind of doctor.

And there are Giants, who are the **architects** of this world. Architects design and build things, from little houses to giant skyscrapers.

There are also the ‘ordinary’ people, who have human bodies, but are all kinds of beautiful colours - like deep purple, grass green, red, orange or blue.

They all speak the same language, have the same religion, and live peacefully without fighting.

The animal-people use their different skills to teach the Empress about the Blazing world.

She learns from the Bird-men that this world is called the Blazing World because all the stars were blazing, which means burning very brightly as if they were on fire.

She also learns about its **science** and **philosophy**. These are both different ways of understanding what the world is like, and how it works.

The Empress also meets strange spirits, who have no bodies but can become any shape. They can travel between worlds. They answer some of her philosophical questions. She finds their ideas very different from the way people thought at home, and all very interesting. So she decides to write a book, and asks the spirits to bring her a companion to help her write about philosophy.

They bring (from our world) the soul of the Duchess – who is Margaret Cavendish herself!

The two become great friends, and they spend happy hours together talking about all sorts of things like science and philosophy, but also art and plays and music. Their souls, or spirits, travel back and forth between the two worlds, visiting all kinds of interesting places.

One day the Empress learns that a war is happening in her home country. She wants to go back home, to see if she can help. The fish-men discover an icy passage between the two worlds which she can travel through. Then the giants build golden ships for her, that can travel underwater! The Empress takes an army and travels on these ships back to her world.

She appears in front of the armies standing on the backs of the fish men, so that it looks like she is standing on water, and wears clothes covered in shining star-stones. Everyone who sees her thinks she is a goddess! She soon defeats the enemies of her country, and then returns to the Blazing World.

She and her friend the Duchess go back to spending time together. But eventually the Duchess gets homesick and decides to return to her world – which is our world. When the Duchess gets home, she tells everyone about the Blazing World, and writes a book about it.

This is the book that you are reading now!



Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle (1623 – 1673)

Suggested activities:

- Look at the descriptions of the animal people. What others would you imagine?
- What would their special skills be?
- Can you draw them?
- There are lady animal people as well, but they don't have roles. Should they?
- Imagine a beautiful fantasy world of your own. What would it look like?
- What would you call it? Who would live there?

Colouring-in sheets (at end of document): in addition to colouring, pupils can be encouraged to add their own decoration to suit each character – for example, little insects or other animals for the Bear-man, or stars and moons for the Bird-man. What could they add to the Fox-man or Parrot-man to show their roles? Could they draw a better Empress?

See also:

- ***Philosophical Concepts***

BBC: KS1 / KS2 PSHE:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/teach/class-clips-video/articles/zjbf39>

- ***The Sciences***

Natural History Museum:

<https://www.nhm.ac.uk/schools/teaching-resources/key-stage-2.html>

- ***Politics***

Twinkl:

<https://www.twinkl.co.uk/resources/ks2-pshe/living-in-the-wider-world-pshce-subjects-key-stage-2/government-and-politics-living-in-the-wider-world-pshce-subjects-key-stage-2>

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<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/51783/51783-h/51783-h.htm>

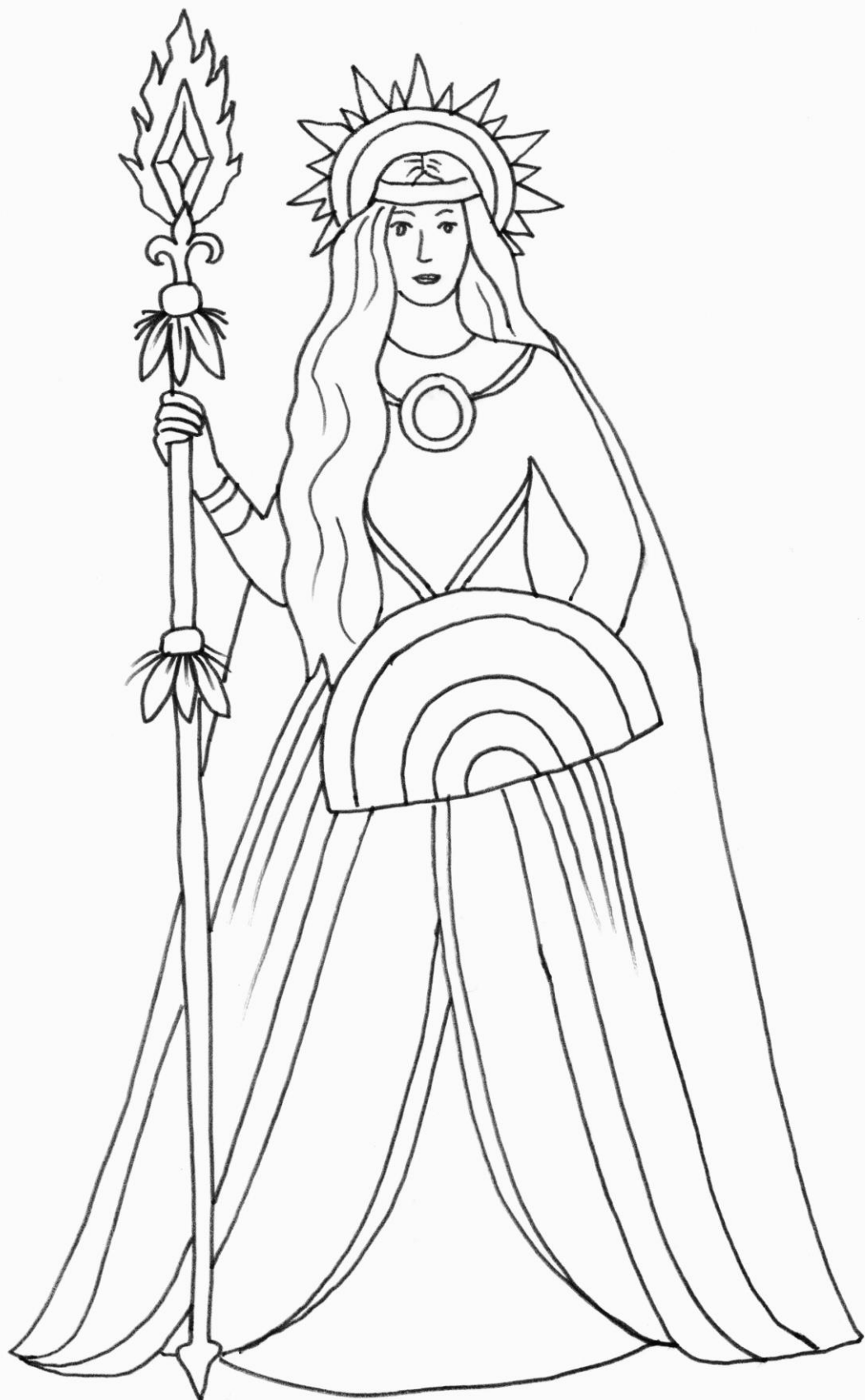
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Illustrations by Catalina Carvajal for 'Margaret Cavendish: Trailblazer' 2025