

Ellie Goetz

Two Souls in One Body

Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World* explores ideas around scientific advancement, women in power, and platonic friendship. Following the story of an Empress and a Duchess throughout multi-world dominating conquests, Cavendish's characters engage in thought-provoking conversations around philosophy, death, and kinship. The Duchess of Newcastle and the Empress arguably demonstrate aspects of Margaret Cavendish's identity throughout the novel. Cavendish lived in the 1600s as the Duchess of Newcastle in a time of strong gender roles and prejudice against women's rights. Many ladies were considered lesser than their husbands, with little influence in political and economic life. The fictional Dutchess represents practicality, and nobility while embodying aspects of Margaret's identity that adhered towards her everyday life. The Empress embodies the author's aspirations and revolutionary ideas for a world of her own. Cavendish uses dialogue about souls to reason with and express the internalized struggle between her life as Dutchess and her goals as Empress. The author navigates the complexities surrounding a soul by asking a series of questions to spirits, who help to provide the Empress with guidance as to what a soul is, how it functions, and where it goes after death.

The spirits are immaterial beings that are described to have no figure or body and can not commit any evils. Throughout their conversation with the Empress, they provide explanations for the physical world while dividing it into three sections; the sensitive is the life, the rational soul, and the inanimate part, the body of infinite nature. The spirits discuss how matter and forms are foundation to the material world and the people inhabiting it. This provokes a series of inquisitive questions from the Empress. She asks the spirits where the soul goes once it leaves

the body. Does the soul go to Heaven or Hell? Are souls required to have a host body? The spirits respond by telling her that a soul can only be in four possible places; Heaven, Hell, Purgatory or the natural world. As soon as a soul is parted from one body it must enter another one. For human souls, the spirits claim that bodies make human souls active, giving them motion. Without a body, humans can have no soul. Additionally, the spirits note that if actions are ever causing issues for the soul- the body would also be impacted but harm to a body does not harm the soul. Since the spirits themselves are immaterial, on page 176 they claim that “spirits and divine souls have a life of their own” being purer than a ‘natural’ life (Cavendish). This excuses their need for a body. That being said, the idea that the soul is separated from the body, and that a body is nothing more than a vehicle, validates Cavendish’s own varying roles and ambitions in the real world.

Even though Cavendish’s *The Blazing World* is a work of fiction, she still made the decision to leave certain questions unanswered, despite having creative reign to make up answers that best suit her wants. For example, she asks the spirits when they were made, to which they respond that they did not know. Next, the Empress asks if all souls were made at the first creation of the Earth. The spirits inform her that they know no more of the human soul than they know of themselves. Many of the answers that the spirits provide the Empress with rely on the salvation and almightiness of God. For example, on page 176 the spirits confirm a “supernatural good, which was God” and add that they “knew of no supernatural evil that was equal to God” (Cavendish). The response of the spirits demonstrates both Cavendish's beliefs and the limitations of her imagination because they are reinforcing a truth pushed out through Catholic religious beliefs.

The most important question that the Empress poses is whether it could be possible to have two souls in one body. The spirits answer her saying that it is impossible to have two immaterial souls in a singular body but it is very possible that two or more material souls. The reasoning behind this logic is that “by reason every material part has a material natural soul; for nature is but one infinite self-moving, living and self-knowing body” the text goes on to reference the three parts of the material world of the rational, the sensitive, and the inanimate body in order to justify their answer even more thoroughly. Cavendish notes that this response pleased the Empress, alluding to the idea that Cavendish likes the possibility of having multiple souls in one body. This is important when examining the friendship between the Dutchess and Empress under the belief that they are simultaneously representing aspects of the author's own identity. The spirits also inform the Empress of the Platonics' idea that the souls of lovers lived in the bodies of their beloved. Later in the book, the Duchess and the Empress both enter the body of the Duke of Newcastle. Cavendish discusses how there is no jealousy between the two women whilst they are inhabiting this body. This can be interpreted to mean that both “souls”/aspects of Margaret Cavendish’s identity love the Duke equally.

Choosing to emphasize Cavendish’s two souls as a platonic friendship between women, Cavendish steers the attention away from a male savior complex. The Emperor is hardly relevant to the novel, with his kinship towards the Empress taking a backseat to that of the Dutchess. This demonstrates feminism as the women rely on one another, rather than a man, to solve problems. Additionally, it abolishes themes of romance or desire, giving the books leading women significantly more depth. It also helps relay themes of self sufficiency and self love for women during a time when they faced discrimination and inequality.

The Dutchess, just like the Empress, makes a world of her own. She describes the Creation of the Imaginary World as a World of her own Invention, composed of sensitive and rational Matter. This provides an outstanding resolution, considering that the Empress had stood as a figure for the aspirations of Cavendish's soul and the Dutchess, her more practical soul. On page 188, Cavendish writes "it cannot possibly be expressed by words, not the delight and pleasure which the Duchess took in making this world of her own." This is a grand embodiment of how Cavendish felt while finishing her *The Blazing World*, achieving her goal and finally transforming into the powerful character she wrote about. Additionally, as the Dutchess makes her own world, "the Empress was also making and dissolving several Worlds in her own mind, and was so puzzled, that she could not settle in any of them" (Cavendish). This shows her the soul of Cavendish's which took on the role of Empress has continued to dream and seek new possible writing ideas, stretching her imagination even further.