Feminized Worldmaking: Margaret Cavendish's Theory of Fiction in *A Blazing World*

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Chapter 5

Feminized Worldmaking: Margaret Cavendish's Theory of Fiction in *A Blazing World*

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"[F]or every human creature can create an immaterial world fully inhabited by immaterial creatures," the "spirits" in Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World* inform the Empress and the Duchess of Newcastle.[1] Anyone who desires to create a world can allegedly do so, but this investigational enterprise of worldmaking, for Cavendish, operates in a strictly feminine environment. Arguably, the text of *The Blazing World* itself is Cavendish's product of worldmaking, as much as the Empress's and the Duchess's immaterial worlds are also products of this very same process. However, worldmaking can only take place, I argue, through a queer feminine reproduction that produces strictly feminized environments; through the immaterial imaginations of Cavendish, the Empress, and the Duchess, worldmaking adopts a uniquely feminine, homoerotic teleology. My interest lies in viewing worldmaking as something akin to procreation through (female/queer) copulation and in discovering what sort of productive theory of fictional environment emerges from this optic. A collective and collaborative character imbues female creative power, an act Cavendish struggles to reconcile with her imperialist notions of absolute supremacy. I am interested less in arguing whether Cavendish's work promotes absolutism or whether it allows for the possibility of communication and collaboration between worlds than I am in closely reading her articulation of the maternal and female environment within her work and the feminized production of worlds and fictions, which for Cavendish are indistinct from one another (and because Cavendish conflates the two, I will use them fairly interchangeably throughout the essay). Finally, I look at how the homoeroticism between two women reimagines the Platonic idea of "intellectual offspring" *vis-á-vis* reproductive freedoms.

Unusual for female writers of her time, Margaret Cavendish published all of her volumes under her own name. Not a few skeptics questioned her authorship, claiming it was "highly improper and ridiculous" for a female to write, much less

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lay claim to those writings.[2] These skeptics further claimed she could not have written on subjects which were firmly within the male realm. Much of Cavendish's early work, including an introductory epistle in *Philosophical and Physical Opinions* (1655) in which she argues that women have "rational souls as well as men," claims equal inherent rationality in women and men. Cavendish's work is frequently preoccupied with the idea of rationality and the "spirits" or "soul" of natural things. *The Description of a New World, Called The Blazing World* again takes up these ideas of rationality and the soul in an imaginative utopian environment. *The Blazing World*, as it is commonly known, was published as a companion to a longer philosophical treatise, *Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy* (1666). Her professional writing life lasted about twenty years, from her first publications in 1653 (*Poems, and Fancies* and *Philosophical Fancies*) until her death in 1673. She was only fifty when she died, having produced no less than twelve original publications and nine revised editions (including third editions of two of her works). She personally oversaw many of her reissues and revised editions.[3] *The Blazing World,* situated at the mid-late period of her writing career, is a text that many of her other works foreshadow, both in content and in experimentation with genre. *The Blazing World* resists easy and definite categorization as much as her other works, and in many ways it is the culmination of ideas found in her earlier work, *World's Olio* (1655). In particular, her section "Noble Souls, and Strong Bodies" espouses her proto-feminist attitudes—that "Women that are bred, tender, idle and ignorant (as I have been) are not likely to have much Wit."[4] Her rhetorical sophistication, her imaginative acrobatics, and her professional success compounded in a figure of spectacle that was inconsistent with female consciousness and perception at the time; in other words, if "in former Ages were Bodies and Minds matcht," her body and mind are *mis*matched, an idea explicit within *The Blazing World*. The bodies of the female figures are matched to other (female) souls, "their spirits were answerable to their bodies."[5] *The Blazing World* brings to fruition scattered ideas found in Cavendish's earlier works, as she dexterously blends scientific treatise, philosophy, fiction, "fancy," and utopia to produce an entirely uncategorizable work that centers female (re)productive power, collaboration, and (pro)creation.

Female collaboration within the context of *The Blazing World* (both the text and the titular world) exercises a decided power, evidenced by the Empress and Duchess, who acts as scribe, working together to create worlds. The Empress decides not to honor "Aristotle, Pythagoras, Plato, Epicurus, or the like" as her creative partners because they "would never have the patience to be scribes" (181). She further excludes "Galileo, Gassendus, Descartes, Helmont, Hobbes, H. More" because they are "so self-conceited, that they would scorn to be scribes to a woman" (181). They would also, presumably, resist being implicated in a project of fiction. The Duchess of Newcastle, who "although she is not one of the most learned, eloquent, witty and ingenious, yet she is a plain and rational writer . . . and she will without question, be ready to do you all the service she can," receives scribal

authority from the Empress, her fervor to do so belied primarily by her gender (181). In other words, the ability to participate in worldmaking requires a conspiratorial fervor to participate in another's work (and world) **as well as** gender homogeneity among said participants. The selection of a female scribe anticipates the expressly feminized worldmaking in *The Blazing World*; the male gender excludes themselves from this worldmaking enterprise. Their exclusion is bifold: directly by the Empress, and indirectly by their inability to condescend to participation in an activity with female creative authority. Male self-exclusion reiterates the feminine power present in the locus of worldmaking by recognizing their inadequacy to partake in the project. Not only is worldmaking a strictly feminized process for Cavendish, but it is also one emphasizing the necessity of eroticism and arousal for completion (both creative and sexual). Copulation without male participation becomes possible through Cavendish's proposition of self-actualized processes. Procreation through intimacy between the female mind and female imagination replaces procreation through heterosexual intimacy. Worldmaking results when female desire and fancy climax (climax here operating as a *double entendre*).

The language of desire permeates the text of *The Blazing World*; the island where the Emperor cedes his power to the Lady (who becomes the Empress) is "Paradise," and the Emperor, upon seeing the Lady, "conceived her to be some goddess, and offered to worship her" (132). Though his offer to worship precipitates from his "conceiving" her, acknowledging a visual encounter with her body, Cavendish withholds actual description of the Lady's body, further eschewing the male gaze. Instead of description of the body, Cavendish provides a lengthy description of how the Lady (now the Empress) adorns herself: "Her accoutrement after she was made Empress, was as followeth: on her head she wore a cap of pearl, and a half-moon of diamonds just before it; on top of her crown came spreading over a broad carbuncle, cut in the form of the sun; her coat was of pearl, mixed with blue diamonds, and fringed with red ones; her buskins and sandals were of green diamonds: in her left hand she held a buckler, to signify the defence of her dominions; which the buckler was made of that sort of diamond as has several different colours; and being cut and made in the form of an arch, showed like a rainbow; in her right hand she carried a spear made of a white diamond, cut like the tail of a blazing star, which signified that she was ready to assault those that proved her enemies" (132–33). The lengthy description of how the body is adorned without actually describing the body itself demonstrates Cavendish's reluctance to offer her body up for the male gaze; instead of being an object of pleasure for the Emperor, her wealth, power ("she was ready to assault those that proved her enemies"), and deified status fuel desire in the Emperor. Ceding his power to the Empress, the Emperor tells her she can "rule and govern all that world as she pleased" (132). Again, we observe the recurring language of pleasure, as whatever the Empress *pleased,* she could perform. Furthermore, the total relinquishment of power on the part of the Emperor confirms the totalizing feminine power and exclusivity in this environment. Cavendish slyly mentions an "eldest

son" of the Emperor and Empress, but the son does not participate in the economic, creative, or political maneuvers that the Empress does; his power, as far as we know, is as limited as the Emperor's.

Though Cavendish avoids articulating the body of the Empress when the Emperor sees her, she does mention the body when the Empress requests souls to come into her body; the spirits respond to her query, "but many spirits may enter into your body, if you please" (189). The Empress's response exhibits her craving for these spirits to inhabit her body, saying she "desired but one spirit to be viceroy of her body in absence of her soul . . . and if it was possible, a female spirit" (189). Though men desire women (the Emperor desires the Empress), women never direct desire at their male counterparts. Feminine desire is reserved for either other women or for the pleasure inherent in worldmaking and its successive female and erotic environment. Allowing a male spirit the role of "viceroy" of her body would grant a male figure unprecedented control over her body, as well as reinstate a heterosexual framework for fictional production. The framework Cavendish builds relies on queer collaboration, power, and agency *without* intermediating male figures. For this reason, ceding power to the Empress becomes the operative mechanism for feminized worldmaking. Furthermore, Cavendish ensures a female spirit inhabits her body, denying any physical or spiritual entanglement with men.

Cavendish repeatedly describes the relationship between the Empress and the Duchess as that of lovers. The Empress requests the spirits to "send me the Duchess of Newcastle's soul," so she can act as scribe and co-creator of the worlds. She asks of the immaterial spirits, "can the soul quit a living body?" (181). The immaterial spirit replies, "according to Plato's doctrine, there is a conversation of souls, and the souls of lovers live in the bodies of their beloved" (181). This reference to Plato's *Symposium* reinforces homoeroticism but cleverly inverts Plato's own idea. In the *Symposium,* Socrates relates a discussion of Love and Desire to a group of other philosophers—but it was not Socrates himself who first understood what he considers the true nature of love, Socrates heard "an account of Love . . . from a woman called Diotima, who . . . was an expert in love."[6] This theory of love is attributed to Plato/Socrates, and the figure of Diotima was essentially written out of the dialogue. However, Cavendish is fully aware that the one who was able to divine the true nature of desire was female, and it was the female who schools the entire gathering of philosophers, by proxy, about the nature of desire and love. For Plato, love is "desire for something which is inaccessible and absent," and the philosopher's entire life is spent seeking knowledge that he/she lacks (200e).

The soul of the Duchess and the body of the Empress combine; Cavendish, though she insists "they became platonic [*sic*] lovers, although they were both females," (for according to Plato, the lover/beloved relationship is reserved for the stronger sex—male) she also describes their united soul and body in terms evocative of marriage: "for between dear friends there's no concealment, they being like

several parts of one united body" (183). This tension between insisted Platonic lovers and the inhabiting of each other's bodies operates as grounds for understanding the erotic pleasure and female desire imperative in worldmaking. Souls, according to the spirits, need "corporeal vehicles" in order to move, for "there can be no motion without body" (174). In other words, the Duchess's soul is entirely dependent on the vehicle, the body of the Empress, for motion and speech. Furthermore, though Cavendish never explicitly admits the soul of the Duchess inhabits the *Empress's body*, she affirms through the knowledge of the spirits that "as soon as a soul is departed from one body, it enters into another; and souls having no motion of themselves, must of necessity be clothed or embodied with the next parts of matter" (175). The soul of the Duchess, then, necessarily inhabits the body of the Empress when she speaks and/or moves. The Empress and Duchess, inhabiting one body, begin conception of their environment. The Empress insists on the Platonic character of their relationship despite the consistent presence of desire and allusions to pleasure in her interactions with the Duchess. Their relationship reaches a zenith when the "Empress's soul embraced and kissed the Duchess's soul with an immaterial kiss . . . such was their Platonic friendship" (202). The simultaneous insistence on Platonism and eroticism between the Duchess and the Empress becomes possible only within the environment of the immaterial and fictional world. Unlike the material world, the immaterial souls cannot express sexual arousal through the body or in a physically incriminating manner. Rather, the space of the immaterial, "other" world, formally labeled by Cavendish as "fiction," allows for sexual fantasy and subsequent denial of that fantasy, which acts as a protective measure.

Though no physical, explicit copulation between the Duchess and the Empress exists that would produce worlds, there is a pervasive understanding that without each other, worldmaking would be an impossibility. For example, the Empress *requires* the Duchess's scribal work, for only when the Duchess records the Empress's world does her imagination reach palpable fruition. Throughout this process, however, the language of desire becomes more forceful and difficult to ignore. Desire for each other and for their worlds reaches both a literary and orgasmic climax when the Empress sees the Duchess's world, who "was so ravished by the perception of it, that her soul desired to live in the Duchess's world" (188–89). The "fiction of the mind" is the result of fancy, "which creates of its own accord whatsoever it pleases"—meaning also Cavendish has plausible deniability, if she truly has no control over her fancy (123). A further implication that fictions are the result of climactic fancy is Cavendish's description of fictions as "an issue of man's fancy" (123).[7] "Issue" has the connotations of something birthed, the result of procreation. It is through seeing that the Empress's fancy is ravished—and subsequently births a world. One definition of "ravish" means "to carry away, snatch, seize . . . to drag (a person) away from a place or other person."[8] The Empress's mind has been carried away into the (immaterial) world of the Duchess. "Ravish" also means to "fill with ecstasy, intense delight, or sensuous pleasure; to entrance,

captivate, or enrapture."[9] The Empress's reaction is literally imbued with language of pleasure and desire. If worldmaking results from copulation between a woman's mind and her fancy, as is made explicit through the worldmaking of the Empress and the Duchess, then worldmaking is an inherently female enterprise resulting from female sexual activity (though, as noted earlier, not *physical* activity). Worlds, being the "issue" of the mind and fancy, are an impregnation. An impregnated woman has sole physical possession of the embryo, as well as the inability to move about in her environment without it. The same holds true of worlds, according to Cavendish, who describes the "Duchess [who] carried her beloved world with her" (188). The worlds are portable; issues of minds and fancy, they are secured, womb-like, within the body of a woman. It is not insignificant that the language of desire *between women* propels the activity of worldmaking. Cavendish's *The Blazing World* suggests the possibility of female agency and power through an illicit, queer eroticism. While eroticism and sexual desire are reserved for the realm of the male, and female sex and desire is understood through the lens of the patriarchy, Cavendish produces a work in which she centers an unvoiced and yet unavoidable female desire. In this sense, the immaterial desire and reproduction is a queering of heteronormative reproduction. As noted earlier, the Empress does have an "eldest son" with the Emperor (133). While there exists a product (the son) of the heteronormative reproductive process, the articulation of desire, mothering, and caring for this son remain conspicuously absent. For the Duchess and the Empress, however, the movement from desire to copulation to impregnation are centered as much as the issue (the world) itself.

For worldmaking to take place, there must first exist a freedom for women to express sexual desire for one another and participate maternally (carrying the world) without being either objectified, sexualized, or fetishized. A passage particularly useful in mapping the journey from desire to impregnation to birth of worlds takes place when the spirits convince both the Duchess and the Empress of the superiority of immaterial worlds to material ones (and arguably, to material sons, as the lack of interest in her own son demonstrates). The "power to create such a[n immaterial] world" is, to Cavendish, imperative for both the Duchess and the Empress (186). Though the worlds are immaterial, they are also distinctly understood and experienced through the language of the body. Immaterial worlds "add tranquility to your mind [and] give ease to your body" (186). Recurring forcefully in this pregnant passage are the words "delight(s)," "pleasure," "enjoys," and "please." Repeated in hypnotizing fashion, we become immune to their voluminous presence in the text. However, they are important markers of the necessary arousal in order for worlds to be, quite literally, born. The Duchess clearly prefers immaterial worlds, saying, "I'll . . . reject and despise all the worlds without me, and create a world of my own [within]" (186). "Within" evokes the womb and pregnancy, an organic and physiological state possible for the biologically female; pregnancy, the womb in a state of procreation, however, requires fertilization. Fancy fertilizes the mind, resulting in the "world within" (186).

The fact that worlds are "issue" of mind and fancy and are "born" of the cohabitation of souls within the body privileges female anatomy and agency.

The destruction of the Empress's world by her own hands in inhumane and particularly violent ways poses problematic questions for this discourse. Because the Duchess carries her world with her, and the Empress sees it and desires to mimic it, Cavendish explores the possibility of encountering, visiting, and dwelling in other worlds. The multiple worlds are adjacent to each other though tenuously connected. This archipelago of cosmologies attempts to exist simultaneously as independent empires and yet in relationship with the other worlds. The Empress articulates her desire to be sole sovereign over her world ("she possesses a whole world"), but willingly relinquishes other worlds—and possible worlds—to the sovereign authority of another, such as the Duchess (186). These worlds can hypothetically exist simultaneously because they are not "material worlds" but rather "artificial" immaterial worlds, without geographic loci (186). Given the creator has power within their own creation, "without . . . opposition," and are able to "make what world you please and alter it when you please" implies the possible destruction of the worlds (186). The implication becomes a viable reality when the Empress, unimpressed with her worlds, "annihilated" them (187). With this annihilation comes the decimation of her power over and within an environment in which female reigns supreme, leading both the Empress and the Duchess to immediately create new worlds in place of the old ones. If we view Cavendish's worlds within the Platonic context in which she constructs them, then we cannot ignore Plato's statement that these worlds are "eternal," that they "do not cease to be . . . or diminish" (210e). For Cavendish, these worlds are not eternal unless the parental figures decide to make the world eternal, another way in which women exert a control over their worlds that men cannot; her argument implies an autonomy over maternal pregnancies, whether biological *or* intellectual. The Empress and the Duchess each have the ability to "cleanse and clear [their] mind[s]" of their "issue," paralleling the practice of abortion of a material foetus: essentially, Cavendish argues, contrary to Plato, that when two women rather than two men engage in this Platonic relationship, they can "dissolve" immaterial children (187–88).

The insistently repetitive cycle of creation and destruction can be articulated as one, ethically problematic for the maternal nature of the worlds or two, as a self-actualized form of agency. Women were unable to dissolve marriages, end betrothment, break off or form engagements, own or sell property, or bequeath belongings. For the Empress and the Duchess (and possibly, Cavendish herself), resisting normative patriarchy, maintaining the power and ability to both create and annihilate worlds, is a compelling fantasy entirely antithetical to their real-world secondary status in seventeenth century England. There are also parallels between the reproductive freedoms (or the lack thereof in many places) of women in the twenty-first century and in Cavendish's *The Blazing World*. The destruction of her worlds coupled with the ability to continually reproduce worlds in many ways

represents the crisis of reproductive freedoms in the United States. The inhumane and apparently thoughtless destruction of both the Blazing World and the Philosophical world aligns perhaps with the current argument that reproductive freedom (specifically abortion) is itself an inhumane and thoughtless process. However, Cavendish clearly loves her worlds, as she says in her Epilogue, "And in the formation of those worlds, I take more delight and glory, than ever Alexander or Caesar did in conquering this terrestrial world" (224). Her destruction and departure of her worlds is anything but thoughtless—and it is indeed a loss. In this sense Cavendish mirrors the desires of women to have reproductive freedoms: they make difficult choices and defend the choice to "[dissolve] of particulars, otherwise named deaths" if necessary or needed (224). Cavendish proposes that this self-actualized agency is perhaps the most difficult, but often "necessitated" (224). So yes, while there are severe ethical implications of destroying one's own creation—whether material (a foetus) or immaterial (a world)—Cavendish suggests that this choice is exclusively the woman's. She concludes her argument by calling women to "create worlds of their own, and govern themselves as they please" (225). And she ensures women know they have a choice, saying women must "choose to create another world" rather than usurp her own. However, they can also choose not to create worlds, and instead "be willing to be my subjects . . . in their minds, fancies, or imaginations" (225). In other words, Cavendish's admonition to women encourages women to make the choice that is right for them in the same way that reproductive rights allow women the same freedom of choice.

Cavendish and her husband, William, Marquis of Newcastle, never had children. We can also read in her *The Blazing World* a critique of the woman as only useful in the production of children as heirs and ensuring the family name lives on. Cavendish posits that intellectual progeny are equally as noble a pursuit as being a mother to human offspring. Signing her name to her work is a way of claiming these "children" as her own, a way for her to participate meaningfully in the reproductive process, though her "children" are not biological but intellectual. In this she echoes Plato's assertion that those "who are mentally pregnant . . . are people whose minds are far more pregnant than their bodies" (209a). It is these intellectual children that are much more desirable than the biological offspring; for, according to Plato, though "mortal nature does all it can to achieve immortality and live forever," the only way this is possible is through humanity's ability "constantly to replace the past generation with a new one" (207d). Thus, the "offspring of this [Platonic] relationship are particularly attractive and are *closer to immortality* than ordinary children" (209c, my emphasis). Perhaps this explains the singular reference to the biological "eldest son" of the Emperor and the Empress in *The Blazing World*: not only is this son not immortal in the same way that the children (i.e., the worlds) of the Empress and the Duchess are, but this son cannot embody fully the "virtue, and especially wisdom . . . self-discipline, and justice" (Plato, 209a) that their intellectual children can and do within the Blazing World.

The worldmaking taking place in Cavendish's *The Blazing World* is to the creation of fiction more than analogous to fiction, worlds *are* fiction. Cavendish herself acknowledges "the end of fancy [is] fiction" and that the worlds being created and destroyed are "fictions of the mind" (123). As I argued earlier, this production of fictional worlds allows possibilities for women the real, material world prohibits. Having the imaginative power to rule a world in a nation where initiating a divorce with one's husband was nearly impossible must have been a deeply attractive idea. However, I am interested in how feminizing fiction becomes a (re)productive process for Cavendish. If fiction remains the only space which the female mind and body can possess and exercise agency, it is also an environment where women can explore sexual fantasies otherwise considered impossible and inappropriate. However, this female agency, being immaterial, is easily deniable and dissolvable. And, as noted earlier, the cyclical pattern of creation and annihilation poses problems for the understanding of fiction as feminized and maternal. Worlds, being "issue" of mind and fancy, carried in the immaterial womb in an ethereal pregnancy, have parallels, of course, with human offspring. However, the annihilation of a product of feminine desire and procreation in order to replace it with another until it is "brought . . . to perfection" implies the cyclical pattern is a redefinition of the terms "feminine" and "maternal" (186). Maternal implies the instincts of motherhood or relating to a mother, according to the *OED*. "Maternal deprivation" in psychology refers to a "lack of maternal care . . . regarded as a cause of psychological problems in later life."[10] Granted, immaterial and fictional worlds are by no means equal to human children. Though maternal properties do not generally include annihilation (which necessitates a kind of violent eradication) of offspring, maternity is also knowing when motherhood, and therefore offspring, is a viable possibility. I cannot help but think of these embryonic worlds as somehow representative of a male infant—and their destruction representing the belief that all males will participate in and perhaps make worse the "real" world for women. I also cannot help but return to the parallels between abortion of biological children as the right and choice of the mother and the right and choice of both the Duchess and the Empress to dissolve those worlds which are not viable or desired.

The reorganizing of "femininity" means Cavendish must provide a new definition. For the Empress and the Duchess, feminine power lies in the ability to self-procreate, the permission to destroy their creations, and the non-necessity of possessing traditional maternal values. Rather, the femininity depicted in Cavendish's *The Blazing World* promotes it as sexual agency without necessarily the biological products or consequences. In the seventeenth century, pregnancy and birth were extremely dangerous and often deadly. Family planning was certainly risky and unreliable and bearing children (specifically heirs) was not often a choice made by women. Sex for women was not unalloyed by the ever-present anxiety over potential (and probable) pregnancy. In Cavendish's immaterial world, however, sexual intimacy takes place without a male counterpart, without the resulting human

offspring, but instead an immaterial "issue" that does not require maternal attention in the traditional sense. The offspring possesses entirely female seed and, unlike a human child, can be destroyed without legal repercussions. There are, potentially, ethical repercussions to the destruction of one's personal creation, however. The Empress's rather violent rampage of destruction raises questions about the ethical obligation that authors or creators have toward their characters or creations. Cavendish's *The Blazing World* offers a new optic for understanding the role of fiction for female biology and physiology. Her work offers the possibility of an environment strictly designated for female power and agency over both their minds and bodies. *The Blazing World*, chaotic and self-contradictory as it is, argues for fiction as worlds created immaterially as a space for female power, agency, and expression without fear of biological repercussion or ethical responsibility.

Notes

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1 Margaret Cavendish, *The Blazing World and Other Writings*, ed. Kate Lilley (New York, 2004), pp. 119–225, at p. 185. Subsequent references to this edition are given by page number in the text.

2 Douglas Grant, *Margaret the First: A Biography of Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle 1623–1673* (London, 1956), p. 212.

3 Kate Lilley, "Introduction," *The Blazing World and Other Writings* (New York, 2004), pp. ix-xxxii, at p. xi.

4 Margaret Cavendish, *World's Olio* (London, 1655), F fol. 2v-3r.

5 Cavendish, *World's Olio,* F fol. 2v-3r.

6 Plato, *Symposium,* trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford, 1994), 201d. Subsequent references to this edition are given by page number in the text.

7 It is important to note that "man" refers to humankind in this time so does not always exclude female or necessarily include male.

8 *Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 20 vols. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989. Continually updated at http://www.oed.com/.

9 *OED*.

10 *OED*.