Notes on the Hungarian Translation of Margaret Cavendish's *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing-World* (1666)[1]

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Abstract

The paper offers insight into some of the challenges of translating Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World* (1666) into Hungarian. Although Cavendish appears in some comprehensive literary histories and magazine articles published in Hungary, her works have never been translated into the language. The current paper is based on the ongoing translation of Cavendish's widely studied utopian romance. The paper opens with a brief glimpse at the intellectual context of the author and her peculiar position in the male-dominated world of the Scientific Revolution. This is followed by a discussion of questions encountered during the translation of the first, "romancical" part of the text, with special focus on its unique use of Northern geography. While examining the geographical context of the utopia, the paper also explores the potential influence of contemporary maps on the imaginary geography described by Cavendish, together with the maritime lexicon characteristic of this section of the text.

Keywords: translation, geography, cartography, utopia, romance, Margaret Cavendish

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Margaret Cavendish (1623–1673) was probably the most representative female thinker of the period of the Scientific Revolution, and the institutional developments of her time had a profound impact on her public life and her literary works. The establishment of the Royal Society in 1660 was a prominent milestone in seventeenth-century scientific life, however, it was quite exclusive: women could not participate in its activities, and their pursuits were "ignored or unvalued [and regarded as] leisure activities" (Mendelson 11). Despite obvious male dominance, some women could not renounce their ambition to participate in the academic life of their age, the best example of such an attitude being Cavendish herself, who, despite the odds, even managed to visit the Royal Society.[2] On the other hand, her works reflect a genuine

1 This paper is a companion study of my Hungarian translation of the Romance part of *The Blazing World*, published in 1749 in December 2023, see Cavendish, "Leírás."

2 On the complex relationship between Cavendish and the Royal Society, see Wilkins.

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interest in and deep knowledge of the scientific discoveries of her time. For example, Galileo Galilei's (1564–1642) development of the telescope, dated to 1611, not only opened the door towards new astronomical observations but it also had a profound impact on literature in general and Cavendish's works in particular.[3] Another optical device with a similarly radical change of vision was the microscope invented by Robert Hooke (1635–1703), which enabled the close examination of various minuscule creatures and objects—and also had a visible impact on Cavendish's *The Blazing World*.[4] Her works have been the subject of critical interest at least since Virginia Woolf's (1882–1941) famous reference to her in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), and they have been discussed in innumerable new editions, monographs, projects, and scholarly articles. Many of the more recent works are celebrating the generic plurality/hybridity (or "bricolage" to use Cottegnies' terminology)[5] of Cavendish, which a particularly strong trait of her *The Blazing World*, published in a compound volume together with a work on natural philosophy, and admittedly consisting of three different parts with vastly different generic background. In light of this international popularity, her reception in Hungary has been surprisingly limited so far: apart from a number of references in more comprehensive literary histories, some Hungarian critical articles, and some magazine pieces,[6] not much is available, and to the best of my knowledge, no Hungarian translation of any of her works has ever been attempted. The present study discusses some of the problems faced during the first phase of the ongoing translation of *The Blazing World*, with particular focus on the contextual background of certain lexical decisions the translator had to make in order to deliver a meaningful translation for Hungarian readers, bearing in mind the complications emerging from this process.[7]

Turning our attention to the source text now, Cavendish published *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing-World* in 1666 as a companion volume of her *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*. Both works are concerned with scientific topics, yet, in *The Blazing World*, the author uses a different tone and genre to talk about these themes, using a unique linguistic register crossing literature and science. Cavendish speaks here in a rather imaginative voice, experiments with genres and goes against the conventions regarding scientific texts. According to Robert Boyle (1627–1691), and other members of the intellectual community, romance, poetry, and fiction are "not legitimate means for expressing philosophical ideas" (qtd. in Sarasohn 2). Cavendish, on the contrary, "embraced all genres as a vehicle for her ideas" and presents the reader with a mixture of genres in *The Blazing World* (Sarasohn 2). As Mendelson argues, the work can be considered a romance, travelogue, fantasy, utopia,

3 On this see Spiller 2000, or, in the context of a more general connection between science and literature in the period, Spiller 2004.

4 On Cavendish's criticism of Hooke, see Cottegnies, "Margaret Cavendish."

5 See Cottegnies, "Generic Bricolage."

6 For one of the more bombastic pieces, see https://fidelio.hu/konyv/orult-madge-a-feminista-hercegno-aki-megirta-a-vilag-elso-sci-fijet-13804.html.

7 As Lawrence Venuti puts it, "Translation never communicates in an untroubled fashion because the translator negotiates the linguistic and cultural differences of the foreign text by reducing them and supplying another set of differences" (468). This is particularly relevant when translating an atypical seventeenth-century text heavily embedded in its own English context outlined above.

satire, and the forerunner of science-fiction (9). This generic fluidity, together with the embeddedness of Cavendish's texts in the linguistic debates of the Royal Society's early years[8] not only make the book a difficult reading but also present the translator with hardships in finding the adequate voice in the target language.

As for the structure of the work, *The Blazing World* opens with an introduction in which Cavendish addresses the "Noble and Worthy Ladies" and explains the ambitions, content and structure of her work: "The First Part is Romancical[9]; the Second, Philosophical; and the Third is meerly Fancy; or (as I may call it) Fantastical" (Cavendish, *The Description* 56). After the dedication, the first, Romance part of the work begins, setting the frame for the story. A Lady is kidnapped by a merchant while she is collecting seashells. The merchant drags her onto his boat, and the ship sails towards the North Pole and given the harsh weather conditions, everyone dies but the Lady. Then, the ship sails through a "portal" that transports her to the Blazing World, where later she is chosen to be an Empress.

The second, Philosophical part of *The Blazing World* can be viewed as a "survey of the state of the scientific knowledge of 1666" (Mendelson 28). In this section, Cavendish's female character establishes philosophical societies and "discusses the findings and scientific achievements" of the strange hybrid creatures of the Blazing World (White 40). These dialogues, however, reveal Cavendish's hidden motives. Given that the Royal Society did not accept her as its member, she established her own scientific society in her utopian universe to convey her criticism of the male-dominated scientific community of her times from behind the disguise of the Empress. The final section of *The Blazing World*, Fancy, is not only different in tone from the rest of the work but instead of dialogues, the reader is presented with a more action-filled and eventful closure.

The generic fluidity of *The Blazing World***,** and finding the appropriate tone for the three distinct sections in the target language, are not the sole challenging aspects of translating Cavendish's pioneering volume, but also the necessity for a thorough cultural-historical awareness on the part of the translator. Although the primary function of the Romance part is not criticising the male dominated scientific community or highlighting the authoress' knowledge in science, but establishing the frame of the story and creating an artificial environment where she can freely convey her disapproval of the practices of the Royal Society, this section still reveals Cavendish's extensive and comprehensive knowledge and her awareness of recent discoveries. In what follows, some of the challenges of translating Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World will be discussed*, with a restricted focus on the so far completed Romance part of the work. The main focus is on the generic complexities of the Romance part of the work, and some aspects the translator has to pay particular attention to when finding the appropriate tone for a Hungarian rendering of this section. The practical lexical difficulties of translating the voyage to the Blazing World and its imperial city will also be explored in light of the wider cultural-historical background.

8 See, for example, Sutton.

9 "Romancical" is an archaic form of the word "Romance." In this paper, I will use the modern term "Romance" when discussing the "Romancical" part of *The Blazing World*.

Subverting the Genre of the Romance and the Voyage to the Blazing World

The beginning of *The Blazing World* seems to follow the patterns of a typical romance established by literary conventions. Yet, as the story progresses, it becomes evident that Cavendish "pushes the boundaries of the generic conventions far beyond [their] natural limit" and eventually presents the readers with something new and unusual (Leslie 26). The story tells of a beautiful young Lady who is kidnapped by a merchant and thus "suffers the typical fate of virginal beauty in danger" (ibid.). The man falls in love with her, but being inferior in both wealth and birth, he would have no other chance to fulfil his desire but to kidnap and imprison her on his boat. The diabolical plot is, however, foiled when the Heavens take pity on the Lady and raise an enormous storm which drives the ship towards the "Icy Sea." Unprepared for the harsh weather conditions, the men freeze to death while she is saved by "the light of her beauty, the heat of her youth and the protection of the Gods" (Cavendish, "The Description" 57).[10] Then, a mysterious portal takes the Lady to the Blazing World. The anthropomorphic inhabitants of this strange place welcome her with wonder and admiration and decide to take her to "the imperial realm of *The Blazing World*," Paradise, and present her to their Emperor (Trubowitz 233), who, as soon as he sees the beautiful Lady, perceives her as a goddess, marries her and makes her an Empress—by which name she is referred to for the rest of the book—and then quickly disappears from the narrative. As Leslie puts it, from that point on, the Lady's role shifts from victim to heroine, and the "Romance plot turns from a conventional narrative of feminine vulnerability to [. . .] a narrative of female power" (13).

One of the difficulties of producing a Hungarian translation of Cavendish's pioneering volume is that the translator has to be aware of such changes in the Lady's roles within the text and translate it accordingly. At the beginning of the Romance part, the Lady is vulnerable and afraid, not knowing whether "her life was to be a sacrifice to [the] cruelty" of the strange, hybrid creatures or she reached safety after the fouled voyage (Cavendish, "The Description" 58). Once the Lady decides to learn their language and is no longer afraid of their company, is the point where she begins her transformation towards a strong heroine, but here a minor change can be observed in the narration of the story as well. When the Lady reaches the Blazing World and begins her journey to the imperial city accompanied by the hybrid creatures, whilst describing the world, the "attention of the reader is [quite often] diverted to maritime details," and geographical data (Wynne-Davies 233). After the Lady feels safe and happy in this place, however, the descriptions become more detailed regarding the scenery and the appearance of the inhabitants, implying her genuine enthusiasm and increasing confidence. Her transformation culminates when she is elevated as the Empress of the Blazing World, marking that the lady is now ready to "act out [Cavendish's] philosophical fancies" (Wynne-Davies 233).

10 All references to the original English version of *The Blazing World* are to the edition of the text in *Restoration and Augustan British Utopias* (Cavendish, "The Description"). All quotations in Hungarian refer to my translation, published in December 2023 (Cavendish, "Leírás").

The translator has to consider this slight change in the descriptions and prepare the Hungarian translation accordingly, and it must also be ensured that the beginning of the text, with the frequent descriptions of the sea and the geography, also transmits the dreamlike and fanciful quality of the text. Finding the right tone in the target language is not the sole difficulty of the Romance part of the text, but the geographical conditions of the fouled journey likewise present the translator with several hardships. Cavendish discusses the entry into the Blazing World in particular detail; from the movements of the merchant's boat amongst the ice slabs to the geographic positions of this world and the portal through which one can enter this place, the authoress presents the readers with a quite elaborate description:

> the Vessel [. . .], was carried as swift as an Arrow out of a Bow, towards the North-pole, and in a short time reached the Icy Sea, where the wind forced it amongst huge pieces of Ice [. . .] At last, the Boat still passing on, was forced into another World; for it is impossible to round this Worlds Globe from Pole to Pole, so as we do from East to West; because the Poles of the other World, joining to the Poles of this, do not allow any further passage to surround the World that way; but if any one arrives to either of these Poles, he is either forced to return, or to enter into another World [. . .]. ("The Description" 57)

As the passage highlights, Cavendish's utopia is located in the "far North" and it is both "realistic and imaginative in space" (Brataas 225). The poles of the Blazing World are connected to the farthest point of our world, and if one reaches this point and is worthy of entering, they can pass through the portal. It is no wonder Cavendish chose this particular location as the entry point of her utopia; the North was fairly undiscovered and thus surrounded by a sense of mystery—the first maps of this territory were "inspired by imaginative narratives," not actual knowledge—in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Brataas 224). Contemporary explorers likewise showed a sparked interest in discovering this relatively unknown territory, and it can be supposed that such interests also "fed Cavendish's imagination" when she wrote her pioneering volume (Brataas 224). Therefore, to provide an authentic translation, it is essential to review and research the historical background of the age, especially when it comes to the description of the position of the two worlds to each other. Finding the Hungarian equivalents for seemingly straightforward phrases like "Icy Sea" can be surprisingly difficult,[11] because it is not entirely clear whether Cavendish uses "icy" as an adjective (as in "jeges tenger") referring to the iciness of the sea or, in geographic terms, as a proper noun ("Jeges-tenger"). To explore the exact nature of "Icy Sea" in

11 "Icy Sea" starts with a capital letter, yet it does not necessarily mean it was used as a proper noun in the text, as in the early modern times, using capitalised letters had a slightly different purpose than it has today. As David Crystal highlights, John Hart, a sixteenth-century teacher, suggested that sentences, proper nouns and important nouns should start with a capital letter. By the seventeenth century, this "practice had been extended to titles (Sir, Lady), forms of address (Father, Mistris), and personified nouns (Nature)," and also to emphasise certain words and phrases. This extended use of capital letters was flourishing at the end of the seventeenth century—writers used a capital for "any noun they felt to be important"—and then it gradually disappeared (Crystal 67).

this particular context, thorough research is necessary on both possibilities before any informed decision is to be made.

The Geographical Context: Search for the Northwest Passage

The North was more or less unknown up to the sixteenth century, and, as Degroot puts it, previous representations of the territory "largely relied on hazy and imprecise recollections of adventurers, who had never reached the very high latitudes" (71). This, however, was about to change at the turn of the century. Henry Hudson's expeditions were the most remarkable amongst the various English voyages in the Arctic and probably the ones causing the greatest stir in the public. He made four journeys in the attempt to find the Northwest Passage, and even though they were not successful in their initial endeavour, they largely contributed to a better understanding of the geographical conditions of the North (Degroot 74). Degroot examined the nature and conditions of these expeditions based on the journals Henry Hudson kept of his travels, which reveal that each of their expeditions was severely hindered by the harsh weather conditions and the icy seas (74-80).[12] Given that the merchant of Cavendish's volume takes a similar route, and Henry Hudson's voyages had a considerable resonance in England, it can be surmised that Cavendish was informed about the events, and reflecting on them, used "Icy" as an adjective. However, to provide an authentic translation one has to examine the other possibility, that the phrase "Icy Sea" refers to an exact location, and functions as a proper noun in the text.

Seventeenth-century scientific achievements and maritime expeditions brought about significant improvements in navigation and cosmographic tools, and led to the "increased production and popularity of maps" (Brataas 224). As Tom Conley highlights, early modern studies witnessed "a sudden and dramatic development" in the two decades leading to the early 2000s regarding the connection of literature and cartography, and some researchers recognised that "printed maps informed the creation of poetry and fiction" in the era (401). Given that the merchant of *The Blazing World* sails towards the North Pole when he reaches the "Icy Sea," it is worth elaborating on early modern cartography to explore what that particular territory was called in Cavendish's time since it may be possible that, influenced by contemporary maps, the authoress used "Icy Sea" as a proper noun referring to an exact location.

For a long time, the North was relatively unknown, and early maps were based on imaginative narratives. The first and best-known atlas of the North was created by Gerardus Mercator (1512–1594) in 1595. According to Helen Wallis, the renowned scientist and cartographer's concept of the North Pole was widely influential and a source of inspiration for several sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century maps (454). Mercator's depiction of the Arctic supposedly "stems from a lost 14th-century work"

12 As Degroot highlights, the Little Ice Age presumably had its impact on Henry Hudson's journeys, as the 0.5°C cooling of the climate between approximately 1565 and 1720 "dramatically altered the distribution of sea ice" and causing, besides unpredictable weather conditions, frequent storms and strong ocean currents (69).

and stories from contemporary explorers (Briså 253). In his *Atlas sive Cosmographicae meditations de fabrica mundi et fabricate figura* (1595), the Arctic is depicted as a continent of four distinct islands, which are separated by narrow channels that lead to the Pole, imagined as a large rock surrounded by a giant whirlpool (Mercator, et al.). In his map, Mercator never refers to the waters around the continent as "Icy Sea" nor does he mention anything that could help the translator gain a better understanding of the nature of the phrase within the context of *The Blazing World*. The map still bears significance regarding the translation, if in an indirect way: Cavendish's narrative meticulously records the voyage to the imperial city, Paradise, and those descriptions imply the influence of Mercator representation:

> [T]here was but one way to enter, and that like a Labyrinth, so winding and turning among the Rocks, that [only] small Boats, could pass, carrying not above three passengers at a time: On each side all along the narrow and winding River, there were several Cities, [. . .] all which after the Lady had passed, she came to the Imperial City, named Paradise, which appeared in form like several Islands; for, Rivers did run betwixt every street [. . .]. ("The Description" 60)

The narrow straits clearly resemble the North Pole as depicted in Mercator's atlas. The layout of Paradise likewise corresponds with the cartographer's version, as the city is divided into small islands by rivers. While Mercator's map cannot provide answers to the original question, it does suggest a possible inspiration for Cavendish's utopian universe. To explore the possible nature of "Icy Sea" in that particular section of *The Blazing World*, it is worth exploring other contemporary maps.

The next highly influential map is Robert Walton's work from 1659, and on this map the territory in question is called "Mar de Nort" (= North Sea) (Walton). Its location roughly matches the present-day Arctic Sea and the territory where the merchant of *The Blazing World* presumably sails, based on Cavendish's descriptions. John Gibson's map from 1760, however, uses a more detailed name for the same territory: "The Icy or Great North Sea." Based on this cartographical context, it can be assumed that "Icy Sea" and "North Sea" were used interchangeably in Cavendish's time to refer to the same geographical territory, and, regarding *The Blazing World*, it may also be possible that the authoress too, used "Icy Sea" as a proper noun in the text. From the above discussions, however, it is also possible that by "Icy Sea" Cavendish is referring to the iciness of the sea, reflecting on Henry Hudson's ill-fated voyage. Since a firm decision could not be made, the Hungarian translation of the passage quoted at the beginning of this subsection uses "jeges tenger" (= "icy sea") showing a preference for the adjectival interpretation, but it adds an explanatory footnote as well (Cavendish, "Leírás").

The Translation of Maritime Expressions

Throughout the journey towards the Blazing World and its capital, Paradise, Cavendish frequently presents the reader with information on types of ships and nautical equipment, which, as Wynne-Davies puts it, "suggests [her] reasonably accurate knowledge

of shipping" (226). The reader gets acquainted with a particular type of boat at the beginning of the work when the beautiful young Lady gets abducted by the merchant; she was collecting seashells on the shore when the merchant carries her away on a "little light vessel, not unlike a packet-boat" (Cavendish, "The Description" 57). Packet boats were typically used to carry mail, yet they were "also able to take a few passengers under cramped conditions" (Wynne-Davies 226), and even though these ships only became widely used in England in the mid-or late seventeenth century, Cavendish presumably knew packet boats early on. As Wynee-Davies highlights, when Cavendish and her husband lived in Antwerp, they "sailed regularly along the Scheld River," where they could have seen such watercraft (226). Based on that, in the Hungarian version the word "postahajó" (mail ship) stands for "packet boat," along with a short explanatory note on the function of such vessels in the seventeenth century.

After the Lady arrives in the Blazing World, Cavendish introduces various other types of unusual ships. The authoress' utopian universe is home to "fantastic anthropomorphic animals" (Trubowitz 232)—Birdmen, Foxmen and Bearmen, for instance—and these hybrid creatures seem to use watercrafts fitting to their physique or social status. For instance, the Birdmen use boats resembling bird nests, while the Foxmen travel on boats similar to fox traps. Meanwhile, the Emperor's ships are made of gold and the merchants of leather. While the golden ships strive to symbolise the richness of the Blazing World, leather ships have a peculiar cultural-historical significance. In his study on the history of sea travel, Mark Dunkley argues that, unfortunately, leather boats are almost "absent from the archaeological record" (198). However, from the extant data, it can be suspected that leather vessels were used as ferries, fishing boats and trading vessels (Dunkley 188–191). Henry Coleman Folkard also elaborates on leather boats in his early, pioneering volume, *The Sailing Boat: A Description of English and Foreign Boats*. Moreover, the scholar devotes a chapter to coracles, the specific type of leather boat used by Scottish and Welsh sailors in the sixteenth century. Folkard describes the coracles as small boats having a "shape something like the half of a walnut shell" (24), which are quite similar to the Birdmen's rounded, bird's nest-shaped boats in *The Blazing World*. Coracles, furthermore, were light and fragile, and their hulls were made of willow covered with animal skins. The leather was then treated with a thin layer of pitch to make them waterproof (Folkard 25). In *The Blazing World*, Cavendish mentions the very same method whilst elaborating on the construction of leather boats: "But the Leather Ships were not altogether so sure, although much lighter; besides, they were pitched to keep out Water" ("The Description" 59).

Furthermore, Cavendish's text also refers to various nautical equipment, another challenging aspect of translating the work. On the voyage towards Paradise, the authoress comments upon how skilled seafarers the habitants of the Blazing World are and compares them with mariners of her own world:

> Very good Navigators they were; and though they had no knowledg of the Load-stone, or Needle or pendulous Watches, yet (which was as serviceable to them) they had subtile observations, and great practice; in so much that they could not onely tell the depth of the Sea in every place, but where there were shelves of

> Sand, Rocks, and other obstructions to be avoided by skilful and experienced Sea-men. (“The Description” 58–59)

Besides the professional terminology, this particular section represented another translation challenge: the archaic nature of the text had to be preserved when finding the Hungarian equivalents for the instruments. Therefore, I used “mágneskő” for “loadstone” instead of the more modern versions “mágnes” or “mágnesérc,” and I translated “Needle” not as “iránytű” but as the more archaic “tájolótű.” Finding the Hungarian equivalent for “pendulous watches,” however, required more careful consideration.

By “Pendulous watches” Cavendish is presumably referring to the early pendulum clocks used by mariners to calculate longitudes. In the early seventeenth century, Galileo was the first to experiment with pendulums, and following his path Christiaan Huygens (1629–1695) “set out to solve the longitude problem” and strived to find a method that could help mariners determine longitudes and thus help them in navigation (Bennett et al. 563). Huygens created the first successful pendulous watch in 1657, and there were many sea trials to explore the reliability of the instrument. Most of these trials can be linked to Sir Robert Holmes (1622–1692), who collected and published his experiences in the pamphlet entitled “A Narrative Concerning the Success of Pendulous Watches at Sea for the Longitudes” in 1665. This pamphlet highlights that the results surpassed Holmes’ expectations, yet pendulous watches do not always work accurately aboard a ship (13–15). Based on these data, I eventually translated the term as “ingaóra,” but provided an explanatory note on the navigational use of pendulous watches.

Conclusion

The late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries can be considered among the most prosperous periods of England in terms of science. The Scientific Revolution brought about the invention of various instruments that helped scholars better understand the world around them. For women, however, participating in scientific discourses was nearly impossible as they were by and large disregarded by the scientific community. Nonetheless, some women were not willing to give up their ambition to engage in the emerging scientific discourse of their time. A notable example is Margaret Cavendish, who, after being rejected by the Royal Society, wrote her influential *The Blazing World*, in which she established her own scientific society, thus ridiculing her age’s scientific men from behind the thin disguise of the Empress.

The Hungarian translator has to be aware of the endeavours of the authoress besides being familiar with the cultural-historical context of the age. As mentioned earlier, the primary function of the Romance part of the work is to establish the frame for the story and to create an artificial fictitious environment where Cavendish can freely express her disapproval of the practices of the Royal Society, at the same time highlighting the authoress’s extensive knowledge and awareness of the latest discoveries of her age. For instance, when discussing the merchant’s fouled voyage, Henry Hudson’s expeditions and contemporary maps may have influenced Cavendish in choosing the location for

the entry point to her utopian universe and throughout the journey towards the imperial city. Cavendish quite frequently elaborates on different types of ships and maritime instruments in particular detail. Without reviewing Cavendish's potential influences, including contemporary expeditions, documents and inventions, producing an authentic translation of *The Blazing World* is nearly impossible. A full translation of the work in the future, due to the demonstrated context-bound specificity, could certainly represent an interesting case for translation studies, as the development of scientific language in Hungarian and the establishment of scientific institutions takes place significantly later. Taking everything into account, Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World* gives an imprint of the contemporary scientific worldview, is considered by some as the first science-fiction narrative, and also a significant milestone in the history of literary works written and published by women. Translating Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World* is a challenging task, given the complexity of the work. Cultural-historical awareness and in-depth research are necessary from the side of the translator, yet I consider the translation of the text an important task, as it would make Cavendish's work available to a wider, more precisely Hungarian readership, settling at least some of our debts in the reception of early modern English women writers.

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