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“Between Nature and Art”–The Alchemical Underpinnings of Margaret Cavendish’s *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* and *The Blazing World**

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Abstract

This paper examines the discourses on nature and art in Margaret Cavendish’s *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* and *The Blazing World*. Despite profound differences in content, style, and structure, both texts address the intricate relationship between nature and art: a popular topic in contemporary alchemical treatises. The art-nature debate was frequently pursued by Renaissance and seventeenth-century alchemists, whose writings and drawings presented diverse views on the extent to which alchemy was capable of improving on, or even re-creating,

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natural entities through human artifice. My study reveals that *Observations* and *The Blazing World* should be read together and alongside the works of specific alchemical authors. In addition, the philosophical and fictional musings on nature and art in the two texts participate in highly provocative discourses that present the author's insights into literature and natural philosophy. Despite her dismissal of alchemical practices, Cavendish was influenced by some medieval and contemporary alchemical theories that celebrated the idea of "nature before art."

Key Words: Margaret Cavendish, seventeenth-century literature, alchemy, natural philosophy