

2019 Seminar Abstracts: Shakespearean Skies: Weather and Climate
Sophie Chiari (Université Clermont Auvergne)
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“The Weather-World of *The Tempest*”

Piers Brown
Kenyon College

In *Shakespeare's Storms* Gwylim Jones describes the reaction of audiences at the modern Globe watching plays during a storm. But, what if we think of early modern playing in open-air amphitheatres as not merely exposed to the weather, but as part of what Shakespeare, in *Richard III*, calls a “breathing world”. Taking Tim Ingold's concept of the “weather-world” as a model, I will explore this possibility in *The Tempest*, focusing on the storm scene with which the play opens and the Prospero's speech at the end of the masque. In doing so, I hope to show how treating the theatre as involved in the world's weather changes how we understand invocation and depiction of meteorology on the early modern stage.

“Climatic Issues in Early Modern England: Shakespeare's Views of the Sky”

Sophie Chiari
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Climatic issues pervade early modern English drama, and three main reasons may be adduced for this. First, while in the first half of the sixteenth century Renaissance natural philosophers still felt compelled to acknowledge the accidental nature of weather-related phenomena, in the second part of the century, new beliefs emerged and the dramatization of celestial events allowed for a more immediate access to the natural world. Second, then as now, Shakespeare's ‘sceptred isle’ (*Richard II*) was often exposed to the wind, the rain and the freezing air, and such characteristics were believed to have a lasting impact on the habits of the English nation. Third, people then had to struggle against the adverse weather conditions characterised by what is now referred to as the ‘Little Ice Age.’

As actor and playwright, Shakespeare saw the sky as a theatrical element. While his so-called ‘festive comedies’ appear far less festive if we pay attention to their climatic specificities, his tragedies offer interesting insights into the way the playwright associates heavens and humours on the one hand, climate and the planets on the other.

I thus argue that climate was for Shakespeare a framing device giving coherence to his playtexts and providing the audience with a natural, elemental, and cosmic background. His interest in the way weather conditions affect human behaviour prompted him to modify traditional points of view and, as a result, to foreground man's ominous capacity to trigger climatic disorders.

“A Phenomenology of the Early Modern Sky”

John Gillies
University of Essex

This paper attempts to consider the early modern idea of the sky from a phenomenological viewpoint. Unlike land or sea, the sky was never our domain. Whereas land (and to a lesser extent water) were humanly traversable by a body naturally or technologically fitted for that

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purpose, the sky was not. We neither approached nor possessed nor even located ourselves within it. We beheld it intransitively; apprehending but not comprehending. Effectively the sky was pure metaphor, the early modern hyperobject. I want to think through some implications of a phenomenological approach via early modern synonyms – welkin, firmament, vault, ceiling, element – as well as its early modern architecture.

“Early Modern Special Snowflakes”

Christine Hoffmann
West Virginia University

“Snowflake” has become a commonplace insult within the culture wars, wielded by the right and the left with equal enthusiasm. My essay won’t resolve the insult’s equivocality, but it will consider the rhetorical weight carried by this cold criticism by putting it into conversation with medieval and early modern texts that make use of the familiar trope of the frozen words. I begin with the chapters in Rabelais’s *Gargantua & Pantagruel*, in which characters encounter words hanging frozen in the sky, then turn to several humanoid embodiments of snowflakes, including the False Florimell of Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*, conjured into existence from “purest snow,” and the Snow Child of an 11th century fable, conceived as an imaginative lie by an adulterous wife.

Though the frozen word trope recalls the humanist tendency to record words and phrases as commonplaces, in fiction the words often prove obstacles in the flow of discourse rather than records of its smooth progression. Today’s “special snowflakes” are similarly accused of interrupting the free flow of ideas, but the insult suggests that more objectionable than their defective rhetorical position is their need to see their special perspective acknowledged and esteemed. Such is the crude irony of the snowflake label, which summons up the concept of a natural, by-design specialness only to lampoon it as one in a line of indistinguishable examples of identity politics run amok. Some self-described snowflakes advocate reframing themselves as avalanches-in-waiting; while I can’t support the ecophobic appropriation of nonhuman power in order to prevail in games of ideological oneupmanship, I agree that snowflakes can inspire revisions of common narratives of survivability. In their modern and pre-modern incarnations, snowflakes represent the fantasy of minimal impact; they model the disentanglement of specialness from self-preservation; and they invite readers to reckon more honestly with the human as threat and threatened, as the figure whose methods of preservation against erasure have proved profitable enough to inscribe erasure as obligatory.

**“Connecting the Past to the Present:
 What Lessons do Shakespeare’s Skies Hold for us Today?”**

William Lee
United States Air Force Academy

This paper will explore not just Shakespearean attitudes towards weather and climate but will examine those attitudes as they compare to our own. While understanding and depictions of weather phenomena and climate have changed over the centuries, attitudes have remained relatively static. Weather, at its extremes, is alternately a source of hardship and of comfort; of consternation and fear and of peace and joy. Ultimately, in both Shakespeare’s time and

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our own, human attitudes revolve around the issue of agency. To those suffering through the climatic chaos of the Little Ice Age as well as to those grappling with the uncertainties of climate change in the 21st century, attitudes all boil down to one central question—how much control do we really exercise over our meteorological environment? Shakespeare’s depictions of weather serve as an appropriate backdrop to examine our own modern sensibilities. By taking a close look at how Shakespeare treats the subject it becomes apparent that there’s a strikingly similar tone and tenor to the modern drama swirling around the subject of anthropogenic climate change. As Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr famously stated, “plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose” or “the more it changes, the more it’s the same thing.”

“Nature’s Above Art in that Respect’: Sky in *King Lear*, Act 4”

Marcia A. McDonald
Belmont University

This paper seeks to show that a localized reading of the Dover scenes in *King Lear* provides a hinge between the pagan, emblematic sky of Gloucester and the observable and naturalistic sky of Edgar. These scenes are a step in the broad movement in the play from the complexly symbolic skies of Act 3 to the ordinary, naturalistic sky backgrounding the events of Act 4, reflecting the broad shift from the fixed skies in a geocentric world to the changeable weather of a heliocentric world. This paper will conclude with a presentist reading of the scenes that situates them within the refugee experience of the English Channel, for which Dover, its cliffs, and the conditions of its weather are focal points.

“‘Stealing moulds from heaven’. Shakespeare’s Alternative Cosmogony in *Venus and Adonis*”

Anne-Marie Miller-Blaise
Université Sorbonne Nouvelle-Paris 3

My interest in the seminar on ‘Shakespearean Skies’ is double. As a specialist of early modern devotional poetry (or the spiritual), on the one hand, and the history of material culture (the material), on the other, questioning representations of the skies or heavens enables me to bring both of these threads together.

I intend to focus on Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis*, proposing to read his popular erotic narrative poem as a distinctive cosmogony that responds to prior models (Spenser, Du Bartas, Lucretius). I hope to derive insights in Shakespeare’s own understanding of the skies as a spiritual and material entity but also as a “mirror” for the process of creation. The aim of the paper will be to try to understand how evolving scientific approaches and discourses on the sky are narrowly intertwined with the ways in which Shakespeare redefines both his poetics and the process of inspiration and creation leading to it.

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“Up in the Air: Shakespeare and Atmospheric Phenomena”

Gerald Sousa
University of Kansas

In the early modern period, all meteorological phenomena were believed to occur within the region of Air, but as Francis Bacon concluded, “The Nature and Power of the air is unknown.” Earth and Water were believed to provide the raw material for the formation of “meteors”; whereas Fire influenced their formation or dissipation. I want to explore the in-between space associated with atmospheric phenomena, with which the characters come into contact and traverse to reach their destination. Hamlet’s Elsinore, the Weird Sister’s transvection in *Macbeth*, and Prospero’s island serve as a lab for the observation of and experimentation with meteorological phenomena. “Meteor,” derived from ancient Greek μετέωρα, signifies “raised,” “lofty,” or suspended in the air, a “region of celestial phenomena,” such as phenomena of vapors (clouds, rain, hail, snow, mist or fog, dew, and frost); phenomena of exhalations (thunder, lightning, fiery impressions, and winds); phenomena of reflection (rainbows); and other phenomena, including eclipses and apparitions in the sky. The plays underscore the interface between the natural and the unnatural, a region of atmospheric phenomena where the characters engage with the environment and one another. [An expanded version of this paper will deal also with *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*. I welcome suggestions on how to develop and expand this study.]

**“Meditating / On that celestial harmony”:
 Shakespeare, the Music of the Spheres, and String Theory”**

Kay Stanton
California State University, Fullerton

The ancient Greek philosopher Pythagoras used mathematics to develop music theory, by which he determined that there exists a “music of the spheres.” Shakespeare mentions both Pythagoras and such cosmic music, and contemporary string theory (a specialty area within quantum physics) credits Pythagoras as developing some of its foundational principles. This paper will demonstrate that Shakespeare’s works are in tune with the theoretical elements of string theory.

**“Reading the Cosmos:
 Sundials, Almanacs, and the Skies in Shakespeare's Comedies”**

Dorothy Todd
Texas A&M University

This paper attempts to query the relationship between experienced time and the increasingly absolute understanding of time that the study of the sky and cosmos produced in the early modern period. In Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *As You Like It*, the sky, as well as characters’ reading of the sky’s cosmology and meteorology, signals a disjunction of time that occurs in the green spaces beyond the city and court. In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the unseasonable weather and references to the moon suggest that “time is out of joint” as characters’ temporal experiences of seasons and lunar phases do not align with what

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early modern almanacs predict. In *As You Like It*, references to dials and clocks that take place in the play's Forest of Arden both establish the omnipresence of time measured via the sky in the early modern conscience and undermine this absolute measurement of time's ability to articulate the human experience of time, especially when removed from the city. Both the almanac and the horologe as scientific tools depended on observation of the sky and a keen understanding of the cosmos, yet in both of these comedies, it is the subjective human (and fairy) experience of time, rather than understandings of time that are rooted in observation of the sky and cosmos, that get the most playing time. This mismatch between references to tools and texts that helped early modern England begin to conceive of time as an absolute, objective truth, and the plays' continued emphasis on the experience of time traveling "in divers paces with divers persons" reveals that even as new and improved technologies to understand the sky came into circulation, the early modern English still found the sky's revelations often at odds with their own experiences.

"Crossing the Horizon in the Age of Shakespeare"

Tiffany Jo Werth
University of California, Davis

Bruno Latour argues that an originary impulse of modernity is the project of "partitioning:" Nature from Culture, an *avant-garde* future from a backwards past, and, this paper suggests, of the Heavens from Earth. Adopting a "cosmocritical stance" (Phelpstead 2018), I read backwards to find instances of creatures who refuse partitions and who inhabit hybrid geographies of earth and sky. I turn to Pacolet's flying horse and Spenser's Dragon as case studies to ask: how do the multiple, often seemingly impossible, domain crossings integral to the romance plot forge pathways that breach heaven and earth? I then take up Amitav Ghosh's provocative argument that recourse to the improbable and the fantastic might offer more than a naïve mode of story-telling and, in fact, forge a greater imaginative resilience to our moment of climate crisis in the Anthropocene.