

SAA 2020

Multiple Worlds: Early Modern Theater and Reformation Cosmology

Abstracts

Group I: Cognition and Experience

The Multiple Worlds of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Henry Turner, Rutgers University, New Brunswick

This paper focuses on Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a theatrical essay about the nature of poetic world-making, reading it in light of Sir Philip Sidney's arguments about the status of fiction and the poetic "image" in his *Defense of Poesy*. The paper compares Shakespeare's use of the "dream" as a way of disclosing ideas about "worlds" that are similar to those we find in today's ecological thinking and ecocriticism, in shamanic writings and anthropology, in myth, and in philosophy. In particular, the paper draws from the philosophies of experience that underpin theories of the "world" in American pragmatism, notably the radical empiricism of William James and the philosophy of art by John Dewey, who grounds his philosophy of art-as-experience in an ecology of nature and who identifies Shakespeare as a significant literary predecessor. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare uses theater to explore how individual knowledge, perception, belief, truth and action unfold within a larger domain of non-human forces. The paper suggests how the arts of theater and poetry might offer resources for bringing diverging human and non-human worlds into new re-alignments, in part by furnishing us with accounts of knowledge, truth, and collective action that differ from those of modern science.

“Creativity, Continuity, Causality; or Speculative Neoclassicism”

Benjamin Fuqua, Clemson University

Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* offers its audience a series of fragmentations in its phenomenological continuity, be they in the conceit of twinning, the barriers between festive and productive time, or Malvolio’s very Platonized confinement in the dark house. I will read these discontinuities as instances of microcosm in the greater microcosm of the drama, reading the again-redoubled play between phenomenon and observer in the language of early-modern multiple worlds.

Drawing on period-specific ontological anxiety over invention or creativity, quirks in Renaissance cosmogonic understanding, and New Material philosophy, this paper explores the metaphorical and more concrete ramifications of trying to navigate between multiple worlds, how the chaos of split dimensions refines itself into a lived experience. Additionally, the paper will reflect on the Neoplatonic syncretism that drove significant portions of continental medieval and renaissance theology before leaking into the separate world (!) of a newly Protestant England’s *weltanschauung*.

To limit my scope for the purposes of brevity in a workshop setting, I would like to concentrate my attention on uncertainty in performance of Malvolio’s confinement in the dark house. I will argue that once he enters, the choices that the performers make can be causally disruptive to the immanent, singular Malvolio—the character on stage, the actor portraying him, and the collective historical associations that comprise our understanding and expectations of *a* Malvolio. I will argue that the repeatability of drama creates this necessary ontological dilation, despite how we may or may not think of performance as auratic or phenomenologically atomized, where “we” includes historical subjects as well as present auditors, interpreters, commentators, *etc.*

“Awful Parenthesis: *Macbeth*’s Worlds of Attention”

Sam Fallon, SUNY Geneseo

“In order that a new world may step in, this world must for a time disappear.” So wrote Thomas de Quincey in his famous essay on the knock at the gate in *Macbeth*, observing the transfiguring force, the “awful parenthesis,” of the act of murder. De Quincey’s description enlists a metaphor of the stage—exit one world, enter another—to suggest a deep and unsettling kinship between the Macbeths’ experience and our own, between the “world” of obsession and that of aesthetic experience. If *world* here is more than a disposable metaphor, it is because one of the things the word names is a kind of attention: a way of looking at and focusing on a given reality, a grasped gestalt.

This paper takes the worlds conjured by *Macbeth* as structures of attention, and focuses on their curiously insistent quality. Attention’s insistence is what makes it hard to fathom, for attention is something we do (or rather, something we “pay”), but only until it slips our grasp and begins to control, to “absorb,” us. Our objects then acquire the quality of necessity, of givenness, that defines a world, and that keeps us from looking away. This might serve as a description either of Macbeth’s capture by the idea of murder or of ours by the play itself, and my suggestion is that *Macbeth* means for us to take this coincidence seriously. Macbeth’s attention is aesthetic, that is, because, like watching a play, it involves an act of looking that acquires the feeling of necessity. It is the aesthetic character of Macbeth’s experience of his transfigured world that brings us into unnerving alignment with him, and that renders the arresting power of attention both fascinating and alarming.

Group II: World Building/World Making

“‘The Strangeness of This Business’: Wonder and Worldmaking in *The Tempest*”

Daniel Lee, Stony Brook University

Characters in *The Tempest* repeatedly comment on their strange and unnatural island experience, much of which for much of the play is shaped, controlled, or otherwise manipulated by Prospero and his “art.” Many readers have been drawn to the possibility that Prospero acts as a metadramatic proxy for the playwright himself; others have noted that Prospero often resembles less a dramatist than an early modern experimentalist who manipulates the natural world in order to create artificial situations, observing his subjects closely to derive knowledge of their true natures. Portrayed as a character who evokes what Antonio Pérez-Ramos has identified as the artisanal “maker’s knowledge tradition,” Prospero is an artful maker of artificial worlds. Yet, as Roland Greene has suggested, the play’s insular world of encounters also reveals an “island logic” that speculates critically on the project of early modern worldmaking. Recent approaches to the play have further explored how Prospero’s cosmopoetic art dramatizes the historical transition from longstanding Aristotelian models of *scientiatio* to modern experimental science, upholding “art” as a central early modern knowledge practice. Shifting our focus from Prospero the unifying worldmaker to his manipulated subjects, we can also consider how characters such as Ariel, Miranda, and Caliban engage in what Debapriya Sarkar calls “speculative *poiesis*,” counterfactual modes of potential worldmaking that challenge the play’s organization of events and encounters. In dialogue with such critical approaches, my paper asks: how exactly do the artisanal and experimentalist qualities of the play’s various acts and imaginings of worldmaking work to produce knowledge in its characters and audiences? Furthermore, what might be the limits of reading Prospero as an experimentalist philosopher? What knowledges or worlds can the artificial, imaginative world of the stage produce that the experimental method of artificial manipulations of nature cannot?

“(Prison) World Building in *The Duchess of Malfi*”

Charlotte Thurston, Graduate Center, CUNY

Many scholars studying the early modern prison and prison writers in London have emphasized the porousness of prisons and their embeddedness in the city—how they are *part* of London’s social and economic world. In other plays, though, characters talk about the prison as its own kind of world, or a node between worlds. Richard II begins his prison soliloquy with, “I have been studying how I may compare/This prison where I live unto the world” (5.5.1-2), and Clarence of *Richard III*’s time in prison occasions a cryptic and disturbing dream about death and the afterlife: prison is both a place where characters can be removed from the world and their role in it, and a liminal space between life and death. In *The Duchess of Malfi*, the Duchess’ prison seems to contain multiple shifting worlds, as a prison, palace, and transport to the underworld: in the course of a few lines, The Duchess asks “to what prison” Bosola takes her, and when he says he is not taking her to her prison but “to her palace,” the Duchess muses on how Charon’s boat “serves to convey/All o’er the dismal lake, but brings none back again” (3.5.102-105). Her prison as these multiple overlapping worlds compresses her past, present, and future, and the multiple roles she plays as political figure, wife and mother. While I am interested in how prisons become this in-between and otherworldly space in multiple plays, I want to focus on how the Duchess’ prison is a world unto itself that allows her to wrestle with despair and anger but ultimately claim a “whole” version of herself, “Duchess of Malfi still,” subverting gender expectations by playing the role of stoic, Boethian, and tragic hero often associated with male characters.

“Cymbeline and the Mirror Universe”

Wendy Beth Hyman, Oberlin College

I am in the very preliminary stages of my next book project, “Shakespearean Romance and the Ingenious Machine,” which puts model worlds theory into conversation with the history of technology to investigate how romance “thinks.” By collapsing divergent modes of temporality, conflating “realistic” and mythological characters, and confusing the inside and outside of the literary work, the tragi-comic mode foregrounds the limits of mimesis to make Shakespearean theater itself a device of thought. I consider how its deliberate incongruities, specifically, render romance an ingenious machine: a technology for grappling with metaphysical questions and for thinking about thinking. My paper, part of an in-progress chapter on *Cymbeline*, investigates this peculiar play’s complex allusions to optics, especially the telescope, the camera obscura, and artificial perspective. Even as its characters dream of perfect sight (“I would have broke mine eye-strings”) they are thwarted by repeated experiences of distortion and illusion. Audiences, too, discover that it is difficult to discern what is inside and what is outside of the fictional play space. These incongruities dismantle any overconfident, singular, anthropocentric perspective on the world. Instead, the play cultivates the experience that, vis-à-vis dramatic fiction’s “reality,” it is *we* who are “somewhere else.” It invites us to take a Gods’ eye view—to apply a sense of cosmic scale—to our own lives.

Part III: Multiverse/Multiple Worlds

“Spenser’s Triumphant Beast:

Mutability, the Multi-Verse, and Early Modern Cosmology”

Alexander Lowe McAdams, Rice University

Proud Change (not pleas’d in mortall things,
beneathe the Moone, raigne),
Pretends, as well of Gods, as Men,
to be the Soueraine.
—*Faerie Queene*, proem to 7.6

At the outset of Edmund Spenser’s *Mutabilitie Cantos*, the introductory proem to book 7, canto 6 previews the action set to follow. The goddess Mutabilitie, “Proud Change,” ascends to “the Moone” to convince the classical Roman gods that she should “raigne” the universe over the lunar world “to be the Soueraine.” Throughout *Mutabilitie*, a fragment appended to the 1609 edition of *The Faerie Queene*, the Titan goddess “pretends,” or proclaims, her supremacy no longer belongs to the sublunary world. Rather, in spite of her “wrongfull[] from heauen exil’d,” Mutabilitie is determined to reclaim her rightful spot, much to Jove’s chagrin (7.6.26.9). In this theatrical showdown, Mutabilitie transforms the moon from Cynthia’s silver throne to a site of infinite possibility, both for literary imagination and cosmological speculation.

If Mutabilitie were to wrest the heavens from the gods, the poem suggests a chaotic breakdown of structural norms—law and reason, the very fabric of stability that governed European thought for well over a millennium. Spenser’s *Mutabilitie* thus considers the fallout that emerges from a decentralized cosmos: chaos, disorder, and challenges to authority in the mundane and celestial realms. As scholars have noted, Spenser’s *Mutabilitie Cantos* uncannily resembles the allegorical architecture of heterodox philosopher Giordano Bruno’s *Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*. Considered his most flagrant disregard for orthodox Christian theology, Bruno’s book has deep connections to early modern literary culture: It was printed in London in 1584 and dedicated to Bruno’s patron Sir Philip Sidney. Similar to Mutabilitie, Bruno’s narrator proclaims that Jove is himself subject to the vicissitudes of mutability, despite his status as supreme god of the universe: “Jove, the soul, and man incur finding themselves” in the universe’s natural flux. Mutabilitie similarly describes her powers “all that moueth, doth mutation loue: / Therefore both you [Nature] and them to me I subiect proue” (7.7.55.9)

This paper thus reads Spenser’s contemplations on Mutabilitie alongside Bruno’s *Triumphant Beast* via comparative analysis. I argue that Bruno’s principle of a destabilized universe prevails over the *Mutabilitie Cantos*, which in turn adds to the growing body of research that recapitulates Spenser’s knowledge of scientific and astronomical debates of his era. In doing so, this paper reimagines the theater of these cosmological literary spectacles in conversation with each other—not only in their endeavor to imagine alterative worlds, but also to negotiate the theological and philosophical consequences that such an astronomical possibility might suggest. This argument has lasting consequences for the future of Spenser studies, in the quest both to understand the imaginative possibilities of Spenser’s “clowdily enwrapped” allegory, and to decipher the speculative contingencies of “this wide great *Vniuerse*” (7.6.56.1).

**“Wormholes in the Oak and Wall:
Entering the Quantum Physics Parallel World of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*”**
Kay Stanton, California State University, Fullerton

A Midsummer Night’s Dream’s forest differs markedly from the other green comedic Shakespearean locales because of the fairies, who do not always manifest themselves there. What Titania calls “fairy land” is a dimension that can occupy variant specific locales. This paper presents a case that “fairy land” is a parallel world that the young court couples and laborers of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* enter through a wormhole.

As defined by quantum physicists, a wormhole is a tunnel through spacetime joining two black holes; a black hole is a region of spacetime bent around on itself by gravity so that nothing, not even light, can escape, unless (theoretically) into another black hole. Some quantum physicists have postulated that a black hole might be a gateway to another universe that tenuously attaches to ours only at the hole’s center. A black hole consists of concentric circles, and critics have argued that *Dream*’s structure is that of concentric circles, with Bottom’s experience with Titania at the center. The precise center of the play’s concentric circles, though, is the “Duke’s Oak.” The hawthorn (where Bottom “translates”) and the oak, both near Titania’s bower, are fairy trees, with the oak in lore identified as the center of the universe through which all travel to go from one realm to another. Encompassing these trees is the fairy ring, created by the fairies’ circle-dancing. Reality alters for mortals who transverse this ring, as it does for the young couples and Bottom, who confuses his fairy time with his dream about the play, connecting them as “‘Bottom’s Dream,’ because it hath no bottom,” parallel to a wormhole portal that remains open.

The wall in the *Pyramus and Thisby* play represents a seeming separation between ‘worlds’ that nonetheless contains a hole. Bottom’s dream becomes translated, through dramatic art, into a person self-containing a wormhole. Some quantum physicists suggest that both art and dreams are similar portals to parallel universes, and Puck’s epilogue may be making the same point.

Part IV: This and Other Worlds

“The Lost Horizons of *Antony and Cleopatra*: Possible, Counterfactual, and Counter-imperial Worlds”

Jane Hwang Degenhardt, University of Massachusetts Amherst

This discussion focuses on Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* and how it employs the concept of the horizon to explore the relationship between space and time as a measure of one’s orientation to and movement through the world. I first examine new understandings of the horizon that emerged in relation to innovations in oceanic navigation, cartography, and cosmology. I consider how the horizon opened up new possibilities for conceiving of multiple worlds by providing a structure for viewing the future unknown as a space of contingency. Turning to *Antony and Cleopatra*, I explore how the concept of the horizon might illuminate the play’s retelling of history as a reenactment of actions and communications that transpire across a vast geographical expanse between Rome and Egypt. Itself moving towards a horizon of an imperial history already determined, the play catches up to this history precisely by demonstrating its characters’ repeated inability to properly realize the futures they attempt to project across the horizon. The future remains inaccessible to human knowledge and attempts to control it fail, thwarted by time lags and the limitations of perspective. At the same time, for Cleopatra, the concept of the horizon provides an opportunity to fill the space of the unknown with wish fulfillments and with equivocation, always insisting upon the multiple future potentialities harbored in the present. By filling in the space of a time lag with the possibility of counterfactuals, Shakespeare cautions us against the notion of a singular, unified world, as well as reanimating the worlds that exist beyond the scope of imperial authority and its historical record. The play suggests that horizon is not simply a horizontal line demarcating the space of the present from that of the future, the known world from the soon to be known, but rather a dynamic contact zone that hovers between worlds, each suggestive of a wide range of possible futures.

**“Turbans, Magic Glasses, and Decapitated Heads:
Props for Worldmaking in *Pericles* and *The Travels of the Three English Brothers*”**
Alexander Paulsson Lash, Baruch College, CUNY

Enclosed inside the walls of early modern theaters, actors, audiences, and theater technicians imaginatively collaborated to create a variety of worlds: fictional scenes (courts, streets, ships, battlefields, forests, etc.), but also allegorical images of the world. Focusing on John Day, William Rowley, and George Wilkins’s 1607 *The Travels of the Three English Brothers*, as well as *Pericles*, which Wilkins co-wrote with Shakespeare, this paper argues that a variety of props served as tools for worldmaking on the early modern stage. These plays center on characters who travel across the eastern Mediterranean, raising the problem of how to capture and represent vast distances on stage. Through a variety of allegorically charged props, playwrights experimented with translating between spatial scales that could be religious, national, cosmological, or imperial.

“How Now, Moon-calf?”: Imagining Lunar Beings on the Jacobean Stage

Erin Webster, William & Mary

Shakespeare’s Caliban is given many labels by the shipwrecked Europeans who wash up on his island, including that of “moon-calf,” a term applied to him no less than five times by Trinculo and Stephano in the scene when they are first introduced. In modern editions of the play, this term is usually glossed as meaning simply monstrous or deformed, following the definition given to it by the editors of *The Oxford English Dictionary*. But, as Douglas Trevor has pointed out, the logic behind this gloss is frustratingly circular, as the *OED* cites *The Tempest* as the initiating instance of this very same definition. A more likely meaning, then, as Trevor suggests, seems rather to be one that combines the idea of monstrosity with the term’s more common meaning of “an animal imagined to inhabit the moon,” a definition that the *OED* dates to the seventeenth century but ascribes to John Wilkins’s 1638 tract, *The Discovery of a New World in the Moon*, rather than to Shakespeare’s play.

In this paper I will argue that the coinage of the term ‘moon-calf’ to refer to a monstrous creature with a distinctly lunar origin belongs more properly to the early seventeenth century, perhaps even to Shakespeare himself, and that its use in this way derives from Galileo’s ground-breaking astronomical text, *Sidereus Nuncius*. Published in 1610—and thus coincident with the timing of *The Tempest*’s composition—Galileo’s descriptions of an “earth-like” moon in this work inspired a wealth of speculative accounts of its imagined inhabitants, both serious and satirical. Reading *The Tempest* in connection with Galileo’s work, as well as with Jonson’s *Bartholomew Fair* (1614) and *News From the New World in the Moon* (1620), both of which also make use of the term, I show that all three writers are involved in a broader intellectual debate over the status of extraterrestrial “New Worlds” and their imagined inhabitants.