

SAA 2021 VIRTUAL CONFERENCE
SEMINAR 39: SHAKESPEARE AND THE ELEMENTS
FRIDAY, 2 APRIL, 1:00PM TO 3:00PM EST
ABSTRACTS

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Men of Earth: Spenser, Shakespeare, and the Georgic Politics of Non-Violence

In book 1, canto 10 of *The Faerie Queene*, the Redcrosse Knight learns that, having been raised by a ploughman, his true name is *Georgos* (Greek “farmer,” also the root of “George”), and he receives a new epithet befitting his rustic origins: “man of earth.” He is told, as well, to “wash [his] hands from guilt of bloody field: / For blood can nought but sin, and wars but sorrows yield” (I.x.60). The episode witnesses an intense clash of modes: virtues of the battlefield, befitting martial epic and Redcrosse’s identity heretofore, now compete with the virtues of georgic, wherein struggle against the earth, and on the earth’s behalf, is prized. What, this paper asks, does it mean to be a “man of earth”? What are the ideological and aesthetic lineages of this Spenserian concept, and how might that concept have shaped the agrarian politics of Shakespeare’s *Richard II* and *Henry V*? I would like to suggest that Spenser’s idea of Virgil’s *Georgics* was shaped by the pacifistic writings of three humanists (Erasmus, More, and Vives), and that, in turn, Shakespeare’s georgic interludes were shaped by interaction with Spenserian georgic. *Henry V* and *Richard II* register Shakespeare’s fascination with the Spenserian “man of earth” as both a convert to pacifism and a commentary on Elizabethan politics—specifically, on English campaigns against the Spanish in the early 1590s. Henry, like Redcrosse, is a warrior who turns husband(man), and Richard is a delinquent ruler precisely because he is *not* a “man of earth” and fails to adapt georgic principles to state governance. While recent studies on the *Georgics*’s reception have tended to focus on ecology (Hiltner, Bushnell) or morality (Scott, Gregerson), my hope is to recover the poem’s political function in the period, as seen in the

works of Shakespeare and Spenser, as an instruction manual for rebuilding society after war or avoiding it altogether.

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“Thou earth, thou, speak!”: Earthly Anxieties About Trust in *The Tempest*

My essay uses specific concepts drawn from modern trust theory while being sensitive to early modern contexts to focus on an absent presence of the earth (of the island) to which Caliban is the most connected, and Prospero the least, others land at varying points on the scale. The generally low ranking of earth among the elements is tied to figurative significance of the word in association with filth, ugliness, slime, disgust inducing imagery in which Caliban’s character is also configured. The perspectives of trust theory make the play’s design resemble a trust experiment, as if designed to test the limits of possibilities for rebuilding lost trust. To this drama the element of earth is more or less a mute witness, while other elements are transformed through magical or theatrical illusion into art and creation of a controlled reality in which what is construed as random, the ship wreck and its fallout, is a magic circle, where subjects who had betrayed are, supposedly, taught the value of trust. There are many ambiguities in this, as one would expect. The trust experiment is completed, the results are, for the most part, what was sought after. Yet, much remains unfinished and incomplete, and in that void the earth appears and disappears; yet, it is there, not fully accessible to imagination: but patient and enduring.

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The Matter of *Hamlet*: Holding Discourse with Air

After the final appearance of the ghost in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Gertrude, who has not seen the ghost, says to Hamlet: “you do bend your eye on vacancy, / And with th’incorporal air do hold discourse” (3.4.116-7). This paper emphasizes the double meaning of the preposition “with” in Gertrude’s statement: Hamlet speaks both *with* (or *to*) the bodiless air of the invisible ghost, but he also speaks *with* (or *by means of*) another bodiless air: language. Speech at Elsinore reveals itself to be a self-erasing thing: ephemeral, insubstantial, and immune to possession.

Understanding the airiness of *Hamlet*’s language reveals how readily speech can facilitate disavowal when it ought to function, as in an oath, as a binding agent. In following the play’s examination of the dubious materiality of both language and air, this paper draws on and departs from recent books by Rhodri Lewis and András Kiséry which foreground the (metaphorical) insubstantiality of words in *Hamlet*, and it also attempts to offer an alternative to a tendency in Shakespeare studies to over-materialize the more ephemeral aspects in early modern culture, such as the speech of dramatic performance. Through its continual association of language with air, *Hamlet* explores how one of the period’s definitions of “matter” (“The subject of a book,

speech, etc.; a theme, a topic, a subject of exposition”) can seem to contest another (“That which has mass and occupies space; physical substance as distinct from spirit”).

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“Be he the fire, I'll be the yielding water”: *Richard II* and the Elements of Kingship

In *Richard II*, Henry Bolingbroke casts the imminent confrontation between himself and Richard as the “thundering shock” (3.3.56) of converging elements: Richard will be rageful “fire” and Bolingbroke “yielding water” (3.3.58-60). Bolingbroke’s elemental analogy speaks to how he wants to characterize himself and Richard: they are primary opposites, where Richard is impulsive and destructive, and Bolingbroke is adaptable and fluid. Such elemental imagery proliferates in *Richard II*, and this essay considers how the play’s symbolic interplay between earth, air, water, and fire transforms Bolingbroke and Richard into elemental forces that act upon the English land. This elemental imagery embeds the human political conflict at the heart of the play in ancient natural powers, and the play uses this figurative language to imagine the consequences of such conflict for the English climate and earth. Reading the play alongside an archive of classical and early modern writings on the elements and their humoral, figurative, and conceptual associations, I argue that the play uses elemental theory to characterize Bolingbroke and Richard as political leaders (and as men) and stage their transfer of power. Just as any alchemical or natural transformation between the opposites of water and fire was understood to be mediated through a third element, the English earth itself serves as such a linking force in the play. The play positions kingship not only as a divine, sacramental power—the primary critical reading of the play—but as a natural, elemental force in which human systems of power are rewritten into natural ones. An elemental reading of *Richard II* contributes to a growing body of ecocritical scholarship that demonstrates how the early modern world collapsed differences between the anthropocentric and natural spheres.

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The Contagion and Cure of Evil in Shakespeare: *Macbeth* as Medical Treatise

The use of contagion discourse in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* triggers the anxiety of the time about the susceptibility to the internal (humoral imbalances) and external (various forms of bad air) factors that put individual bodies and the much larger body politic at risk for contracting disease. Contagion in *Macbeth* becomes metaphorical for how evil is spread through the air between characters and throughout the entire country of Scotland. The play begins with a tight focus on the internal susceptibility of Macbeth to the witches’ powerful prophetic suggestions of his potential evilness. The witches’ chants can be interpreted as small units of transmission— much like Richard Dawkins’ conception of “memes” that spread ideas through a society— derived

from Satan and spread through the air. *Macbeth* then broadens to concern Scotland's susceptibility to the evil that moves through the miasma. Environmental anxieties morph into moral anxieties for both the characters and the audience as the period's (geo)humoral theory guides the language and interpretation of evil's contagion. Like most plague narratives of the time, *Macbeth* structures itself around discussing the spread of evil, or its contraction, as well as the ridding of evil, or its cure. Taken in toto, *Macbeth* becomes a holistically useful and visual treatise that instructs its "readers" on the workings of the air in relation to contagious disease and contagious evil as the physical and moral bodies become conflated in the play.

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Speaking like the Sea: Elemental Voice in *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*

This essay will focus on the vitality of Marina's voice in *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*. By way of her voice, Marina manages to preserve her chastity in the midst of the brothel and manages to resurrect/beget her father in the midst of his despair. Drawing on the work of David Kleinberg-Levin (*Before the Voice of Reason*), I will show how the power of Marina's voice arises from its connection to the natural environment, especially the element of water. Marina, I argue, speaks like and for the sea, and the play's felicitous resolution depends on her elemental speech. By showing how this is so, I aim to bring together feminist and ecocritical readings of the play, producing an ecofeminist reading oriented around the voice.

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Some Empedoclean Resonances in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*

In this paper, I hope to show how Shakespeare's use of elemental imagery in *Antony and Cleopatra* may at times draw on specifically Empedoclean understandings of the four elements. Empedocles was the fifth-century BCE Pre-Socratic philosopher credited with naming the four elements and leaving behind a body of philosophical poetry that to today's readers appears to oscillate between concerns of matter and soul, science and religion (not that these epistemological divisions existed in Empedocles' day). Shakespeare takes poetic inspiration from the concepts of elemental mixture and effluence to ideate on the nature of generation and destruction, deepening a resonance that exists between the fiery, airy suicide of Cleopatra and the death of Empedocles, who was rumored to have leapt into the volcano atop Mount Etna after declaring himself a god. Shakespeare finds dramatic potential in Empedocles' cosmic system of the four elements governed by the competitive forces of Love and Strife. In this ontology, when the force of Love is dominant, the four elements fuse together into a mass of cohesion; when *Strife* rules in turn, fracture ensues, the elements differentiated once again. I suggest that Shakespeare likely encountered an elemental analogy of military strife and concord in the

description of Demetrius in Plutarch's *Lives*, a text which scholars have long identified as a major source for the play. Plutarch's analogy figures military generals as the Empedoclean elements, whose perpetual recombinations capture the complexities of military alignment and realignment. This is a particularly powerful metaphor in *Antony and Cleopatra*, a play in which military actors are divided by enormous expanses of sea and wind: analogous elemental generals riding dependent upon literal elemental bodies. In these ways, I reveal how in *Antony and Cleopatra* Shakespeare makes the four elements, and specifically Empedocles' four elements, into matters of earthly and immortal speculation.

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Cliff-Consciousness and the Nature of Whiteness in *Henry V*

This essay attends to the terrestrial forces at play in the opening and conclusion of Shakespeare's *Henry V* as the chalky cliffs of Dover and pale coast of Calais are figuratively transformed from abutting battlefronts to forcibly conjoined human bosoms. The essay argues for the racializing effects of an early modern mode of thinking that I characterize as "cliff-consciousness." Shared among dramatists, lexicographers, and antiquarians of the period, this counter-intuitive mode of thinking with and about the earth's precipices resists equating edges with endings, cliffs with borders, or promontories with limits. Instead, it sets the minds of early moderns to work on cultural, terrestrial, and racial conjunctions that underpin notions of embodied whiteness. Two hundred years before the founding of the Geological Society in England, "cliff-consciousness" lent a terra-somatic logic to construction of northern European whiteness.

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The Elemental Self in the Sonnets

Throughout his corpus, Shakespeare is fascinated by the way that animate life emerges from a dynamic blend of the four inert elements. He is singularly interested in the mysterious processes that allow what Sonnet 44 calls the "dull substance of my flesh" to become the medium of such ineffable phenomena as intellection, desire, aspiration, and melancholy. I would argue that a good place to explore Shakespeare's engagement with the elements is in the Sonnets. Sonnets 44 and 45 in particular deploy the conventional linkages between the four elements—the fundamental materials of the world—and the four humors—the fundamental fluids of mental and physical health. The poems do this in order to explore what happens to desire over space and time, when separated from those very things that in Donne's inimitable phrase "elemented it" ("A Valediction Forbidding Mourning"). I hope to show how these two interlocking poems explore what Sonnet 45 terms "life's composition"—the peculiar way that flesh hosts cognition and emotion. As the poems suggest, the unique recombinant possibilities of four simple elements

become the medium of individuality. Together, they exhibit the multiple ways that the elements can function as a vocabulary capable of at once indicating the medium of desire, recording physical obstacles to that desire, and expressing the emotional disposition that accompanies the frustration of desire. I hope to offer a close reading of these two sonnets in order to explore Shakespeare's ingenious deployment of a Renaissance commonplace. I want to suggest, furthermore, that these two poems about separation have assumed added resonance for those of us who have been confined for the most part to our houses in the last year, experiencing what Shakespeare calls in Sonnet 44 "injurious distance" in the forced separation from those we love and cherish.

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"The true Promethean fire": Fire as the Integral Element of Sensual Love in Shakespeare

When, in *Love's Labor's Lost*, after the King, Longaville, Dumaine, and Berowne have each been exposed as failing, through falling in love, to adhere to their oaths to maintain a three-year term of sensory deprivation for intellectual study and the first three call on Berowne for transgression-justification, he responds that "It is religion" for them "to be thus forsworn" against their vow to refrain from seeing ladies and being inspired with love, because it is "From women's eyes" "whence doth spring the true Promethean fire" (IV.iii.358, 297, 299). Lacking the enhancement of the senses that love and sensual desire provide, "nimble spirits in the arteries" may be "poison[ed] up" (IV.iii.301, 300). Without inspiration from love, men's brains, in "leaden contemplation," would be "barren practicers" (IV.iii.316, 320). However, since women's eyes "sparkle still the right Promethean fire," men there learn love, which "Lives not alone immured in the brain"; instead, "with the motion of all elements," it "gives to every power a double power, / Above their functions and their offices" (IV.iii.346, 323, 326-27). A female's eyes, though tempting a man's "sin / To break the vow" (IV.iii.175-76), can, through "pagan" devotion, inspire his true self-actualization and enlightenment to further spiritual and sensual heights. The references to Prometheus place the commentary in a mythic frame of reference, and twice elsewhere in his canon Shakespeare specifically links Prometheus by name with sensual operations and often otherwise hints at his involvement. This paper will explore Shakespeare's treatment of a dynamic progression of sensory awareness that initiates with the ancient Greek myth of Prometheus as thief and benefactor of fire, merges with the myths of Aphrodite/Venus and Eros/Cupid, blossoms in multi-sensual manifestations in creative art, and consummates in the erotic-"divine" sensations of love's fire.