

## SAA 2023 – Seminar 09: Dissolving Worlds in Early Modern Literature Abstracts

### 1. Ben Jeffery, Emory University

**Title:** “Prospero and the Veiled Subject”

**Abstract:** In this paper I want to reflect on the metaphysical argument that seems to be implicit in Prospero’s speech after the disappearance of the masque in *The Tempest*. As well as being a famous passage of poetry and a critical moment in the arc of a particular character, the speech makes – or certainly appears to make – a truth claim about the nature of reality. The substance of this claim seems to be there is no deep ontological difference between the “insubstantial pageant” of the masque and the “real” world surrounding it on the island, a claim which then reverberates out towards *The Tempest*’s audience. I propose to look at this moment through the lens of debates in contemporary scholastic philosophy about the nature prime substance, and in particular the notion that the deepest layer of reality is “veiled” from human knowledge in the sense of only being knowable (if knowable at all) through some kind of inferential action from the sensible/accidental qualities of the world. Can thinking about the passage in *The Tempest* from such a perspective help to cast light on the process of dissolution that Prospero evokes? Moreover, can it illuminate something more generally about the notoriously fluid sense of reality that seems to be at issue in *The Tempest*, and the types of emotional and/or intellectual problems that might be thought to be connected to it? It will be my argument that *The Tempest* provides reason for thinking that there is a meaningful link between these various topics, especially given the text’s conspicuous interest in unreliable forms of inferential knowledge throughout.

### 2. Jan Olesen, Red Deer College

**Title:** “Eschatological Environmentalism”

**Abstract:** In *Musaeum Regalis Societatis*, Nehemiah Grew’s stated purpose was to rectify the mistakes of such as are given us by other Hands,” but not to “Transcribe any; as is too commonly done.” Grew’s work with both ancient and contemporary textual authority was not designed to displace it but rather to repair it. He was interested in the complex relationship between myth or fiction and historical objective fact. In this he was not alone, and proceeds in a fashion that Claire Preston would describe as typical of the period: “Both antiquarians and naturalists were animated partly by a sense of intellectual disorder and ruin requiring learned ministrations and reparation.” In his reparative work, Grew cites authorities from scholars as historically distant as Pliny and Aristotle to more current natural philosophers and scholars like Linshoten and Worm. The goal of this reparative work had a complex contradiction of repair and eschatology. By ordering the book of nature, and aligning it with the sacred book of the bible, Grew’s restoration performed one of the intellectual practices that served to bring about the second coming of christ. In *Cosmologica Sacra*, Grew theorizes that something with parts cannot be infinite, and therefore time, and the natural world, must necessarily bear finite. I will argue how Grew’s attention to detail in describing the collection of the Royal Society,

while in part designed to bring about the end of the world, intriguingly encourages an affection for it and ethical relationship to it. Using elements of Grew's somewhat inscrutable theology, I will argue that the descriptions from *Museum Royal's*, in fact encourage an environmentalism that seeks to preserve the natural world.

### 3. Sim Ong, University of Toronto

**Title:** "The Dissolution of Worlds in Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World*, Part I"

**Abstract:** Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World* (1666) is often regarded as a paragon of early modern worldmaking. Not only does it offer a survey of Cavendish's satirical utopia, but its first part also features her fictional avatar dabbling in worldmaking herself, and its epilogue even invites readers to "create Worlds of their own." The authoress seems to relish in the act of worldmaking, priding herself on the fact that her act of creation was far less destructive and deadly "then the Conquests of the two famous Monarchs of the World, Alexander and Cæsar." Yet, the second part of the text opens with news of a war that breaks out across the Empress's native world, culminating in the Empress's decisive naval victory in the war and subsequent subjugation of the world. Clearly, the text is invested in both the creation of worlds and their destruction as well, though the Empress's fantasy-fulling global conquest in Part II jostles against the self-indulgent worldmaking of Part I. To circumvent this apparent contradiction, this paper will take up Liza Blake's proposal to regard Part I of *The Blazing World* a self-contained narrative, and Part II as its sequel. Doing so allows us to take seriously Cavendish's claim that she "take[s] more delight and glory" in the creation of worlds within her mind "then ever Alexander or Cæsar did in conquering this terrestrial world." This paper will examine the way in which the Duchess "mak[es] and dissolve[es] several worlds in her own mind" as thought experiments to evaluate the coherence of different philosophical systems in Part I. Reading Part I as a critique of colonialism, this paper will consider how the Duchess's "annihilat[ing]" and "dissolv[ing]" of worlds in her mind could be interpreted as a resistance of the colonial impulse towards voracious acquisition. Rather than seeing worlds as something to be possessed, she values them for the pleasure and liberatory potential that may be derived from their creation and destruction.

### 4. Meaghan Pachay, Ohio State University

**Title:** "Lucy Hutchinson's "Living Present" and Boundary Collapse in *Order and Disorder*"

**Abstract:** Lucy Hutchinson was one of the most accomplished scholars and writers of the seventeenth-century, composing in genres as diverse as memoir and biography, translation, theology, elegy, and epic. A devout and radical Puritan, she lived through the radical change of the 1620s and 30s, the Civil Wars, the Interregnum, the Protectorate, and the eventual restoration of Stuart monarchy. In the process, she experienced the near fulfillment of her understanding of God's plan, its closest apotheosis – only to be thwarted and ultimately destroyed with the return of royal rule. Left to pick up the pieces, and after the death of her beloved husband Regicide John Hutchinson, she turned to

poetry. Her Biblical epic *Order and Disorder* (partially printed in 1679 but likely composed in the early 1660s), meditates upon the opacity of God's works, gendered negotiations of power, and processes of creation and dissolution as it meanders through the first thirty books of Genesis. Though she disavows as sinful her prior translation of Lucretius in *Order and Disorder's* preface, the epic never quite escapes his shadow. Using the work of modern feminist materialists and posthumanists like Karen Barad and Rachel Loewen Walker, this paper examines how the residua of Lucretian materialism in *Order and Disorder* opens the door to novel (even queer) understandings of gender and embodiment in her depictions of the Biblical matriarchs and patriarchs. Her typological readings of the Old Testament dialogue with queer experiences of temporality, opening the door to multiple pasts and multiple futures. In a historical moment where it seemed the worst had come to pass, *Order and Disorder* sees Hutchinson pick up and try to make sense of the pieces, in the process imagining a "living present" that softens the boundaries between past and future as well as between an embodied self and the material world.

## 5. Tanya Pollard, Brooklyn College, CUNY

**Title:** "Actors and the Performance of Apocalypse in Early Modern London"

**Abstract:** The end of the world loomed large in early seventeenth-century London theaters. "Is this the promised end?" Kent wonders in the final moments of *King Lear* (c.1606). On seeing King Duncan's murdered corpse, Macduff calls out, "up, up, and see/ The great doom's image!" (*Macbeth*, c.1606). In *Timon of Athens* (c.1606), Timon uses his last words to announce, "Sun, hide thy beams! Timon hath done his reign." And when Antony dies in *Antony and Cleopatra* (c.1606), Cleopatra laments, "the death of Antony/ Is not a single doom; in the name lay/ A moiety of the world." Contrary to predictions, life continues in these plays, but in each one, the disappearance of a larger-than-life figure spurs self-conscious declarations of final catastrophe. All written in or around 1606, these plays share not only share a common playwright and playing company, but a repeating emphasis on the decline and death of an embittered central figure embodied by leading actor Richard Burbage. Why did this moment prompt such an outpouring of theatrical reflections on extinction? This paper examines the consequences of catastrophic plague bouts on actors' intimate domestic worlds in order to reflect on the relationship between lived experience and theatrical imagination.

## 6. Lauren Shohet, Villanova University

**Title:** "Typology and Worldly Dissolution"

**Abstract:** My paper explores the queerness of some very traditional Christian models of temporality and ontology, specifically of typology. Typology understands Old-Testament events as both history and signifier: they actually happened, *and* they figure forth other events that will unfold in New-Testament time and again at the end of time. Against binary understandings of life and death— in the 1990s, critics cited death as the one thing deconstruction could not make contingent or self-annihilating—we might pose Augustine, who writes that "the life of

mortals...is rather to be called death than life” (*City of God* 2.13.10). The portion of my argument I’ll offer to the seminar focuses the emergence of typological signification upon the fall of humanity in *Paradise Lost*. The dissolution of the prelapsarian world leaves residues that eddy, in queer temporalities, as the new Fallen models of time cohabit with the extra-temporal divine order.

7. **Deanna Smid, Brandon University**

**Title:** “A Whirlwind, a Hive of Bees, and the Way We Think About Climate”

**Abstract:** In *The Once and Future World*, J. B. MacKinnon writes baldly, “Nature is a confounding thing” (25). Indeed, the enormity, longevity, and complexity of nature is difficult to imagine, and a changing climate can be equally incomprehensible. MacKinnon credits the disappearing of wild bees in an apple-growing region of China in the late 1990s as providing a moment of clarity. To keep the apple harvest intact, growers hand-pollinated each apple blossom and “that image—human pollination crews teetering in the branches like scarecrows scattered by a windstorm—travelled around the world. It seemed to be an object lesson in the importance of maintaining the diversity of other species, and of how desperate life can become when natural systems collapse” (208-209).

From around 1300-1850, the world experienced the “little ice age,” with the coldest temperatures occurring from 1670 to 1710. The question that this paper will begin to address is this: how did English writers in the seventeenth century make sense of their changing climate? What metaphors/analogies/myths did they use to understand the dissolution of the weather as they knew it? My starting point will be a pamphlet published in 1660: “An Exact and true Relation, of the Wonderful Whirle-wind [...] as also taking away a Hive of *Bees* [...]” The pamphlet recounts the devastation caused by a whirlwind that occurred in Worthington on June 2, 1660. In the admittedly lengthy title, the unnamed author mentions a hive of bees that was displaced by the powerful wind. My paper will ask if—and how—bees may have served as a symbol for climate anomalies already in the seventeenth century, which would imply that bees have long served as a metaphor for nature and its dissolution.

8. **Kelly J. Stage, University of Nebraska, Lincoln**

**Title:** “Inviting The Storm”

**Abstract:** In the early 17th century, England, like much of Europe, was wracked by extreme storms and oscillations of warm and cold that we now associate with the effects of the Little Ice Age. While the science behind this period of climate oscillation and meteorological extremes is still not fully understood, the local and acute effects were notable for those living through them. Unsurprisingly, reports of wicked weather and unexpected climate events were described in terms of God’s wrath as well as superstitious causation (witchcraft being at the top of the list). *King Lear* and *The Tempest* place, front and center, seemingly apocalyptic climatological crises. Wind, rain, thunder, lightning, and fire occupy the skies and the whip the elements together, much to Lear’s giddy delight and as part of Prospero’s command. While these storms work in

both texts' problematization of providential narrative and human power, they also offer ways to trouble the very relationship of material things to each other, or consequently, to nothingness. Critics like Sophie Chiari and Steve Mentz (amongst others) have confronted these plays and their ecological interests, but I intend to draw the treatment of weather and disaster (or potential disaster) together with, on one hand, popular apocalypticism and on the other, a deep and worrisome deliberation on the nature of matter. The interplay of wind, water, and earth reveal a consideration of elemental and atomistic nature in both plays. In *Lear*, Shakespeare's tragic hero invites the storm to erode the boundaries of the material world; the embrace of degradation appears to break the Great Chain of Being and denies providentialism, reducing humanity to its basest parts—or "basest beggars." As the bounds of matter are blurred, the play imagines disorder seemingly as inevitable as tragedy. Yet, *The Tempest* replaces tragedy with tragicomedy, and twists the meteorological crisis into the power to master not just the weather but all of its elemental parts. *The Tempest* seems an antidote to *Lear*'s Lucretian tendencies; rather than leave the audience troubled by the eminent dissolution of matter and life, it puts back together all that it breaks. Or so it seems to want us to think—I will argue that the tragicomic resolution cannot fully dismiss its own "brave new world" of atomistic dangers.

9. **Sara Stamatiades, Cornell University**

**Title:** "Our World Shall be Subdu'd": The Metatheater of Discovery in Howard and Dryden's *The Indian Queen*"

**Abstract:** Howard and Dryden's *The Indian Queen*, which was first performed in 1664, follows the tragic, fictional wars between royal families in Peru and Mexico that result from a forbidden marriage. However, before the drama unfolds, the curtain first opens to "discover an Indian Boy and Girl sleeping under two Plantain-Trees." As they awake, the young boy states, "by ancient Prophecies we have been told / Our World shall be subdu'd by one more old." In other words, the nameless indigenous boy foresees the dissolution of his world through colonial violence. The young girl, Quevira, responds to this prophetic vision: "If these be they," directly referring to the audience, "we welcome then our Doom." The opening of this play, then, frames the act of so-called discovery as tragic, even apocalyptic. In this seminar paper, I examine discovery, which not only became a euphemistic term for the period's colonial exploits, but also a prominent theatrical device in Renaissance theater, as traced by Leslie Thomson. My examination of Howard and Dryden's *The Indian Queen* considers how the opening scene invites audience members to inhabit the role of discoverer, thereby creating the possibility for critical engagement. As I argue, this use of metatheater uncomfortably places the English audience in the position of discoverer – and more specifically, Spanish colonizers. This dissonant identification, then, could at once encourage resistance towards the period's colonial ideologies, while also shielding the English from the brunt of critique. Ultimately, this paper aims to complicate optimistic notions of early modern worldmaking by focusing on the sense of "Doom" that *The Indian Queen* seems to favor.

10. **Grace C. Tiffany, Western Michigan University**

**Title:** Shakespeare's Otherworlds

**Abstract:** References to the passing of an age appear in several Shakespearean contexts. Apocalyptic language in *King Lear*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Julius Caesar* bears both a religious and a historical meaning, gesturing toward the impending birth of Christ. In these plays, a superior future – the Elizabethan or Jacobean audience's Christian present – is heralded. Yet other Shakespeare plays, with varying degrees of irony, lament a lost world, thematizing England's falling-off from an "Edenic" era, when status was genealogically inherited and battlefield honor was tied to chivalry. Characters in these plays complain of the present fallen age, where upstarts wield influence, and honorable combat is diminished to trivial brawling. (Even *Othello*'s Iago, though no aristocrat, uses the language of lineal descent to complain of such modern changes, whereby "preferment goes by letter and affections, / And not by old gradation, where each second / Stood heir to the first.") Shakespeare – who himself benefited from the early-modern sale of titles, and the opportunities the theater industry afforded for economic and thus social elevation – registered all points of view, and added a third perspective, dramatizing how old age brings its own sense of apocalypse and the collapse of one's personal world. He harps on this last theme in *All's Well that Ends Well* and *Much Ado about Nothing*, where decaying gentlemen mourn that among the young, true gallantry has declined into frivolous compliment and wordplay, and men are no longer men.