

SAA 2023 Seminar 42
Winter's Tales: The Imagined North in Early Modern English Literature

Final List of Participants (15 Feb 2023)

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Owen Kane, Queen's University

Ice Geographies and the (In)hospitable North in relation to Shakespeare's Sonnet 5 and his Plays

Sources & key words

- Sources: *King Lear*, *Measure for Measure*, *Love's Labor's Lost*, English voyages to the Far North, Frobisher, Ellis, Davis & the Northwest Passage, Fletcher on Russia
- Themes: -Scythians, hell, witchcraft, tyranny, wandering
 - language, religion, commercial, diplomatic & colonial expansion
 - lethality, vulnerability, empathy, cold, Frost Fairs
 - contemplation, Northern landscapes, civility, nationhood

Shakespeare's Cold North: the "barbarous Scythians," Tartars, and Tyranny

Anne Cotterill, Missouri S & T

In the midst of the Little Ice Age in the early seventeenth century, England struggled against being thought a rude northern outlier of Europe. Though England's far northern, Arctic exploration had begun, the North still carried traditional associations with savage, ungovernable peoples, such as the ancient Scythians, semi-mythical warrior nomads who in early Greek and Roman eyes overran civilized Europe and came to epitomize in the West cultural barbarism. Medieval Christian sources located Satan's seat and a locus for witchcraft in the North; Iceland's volcano Hekla was rumored the fiery-cold entrance to hell from which one heard cries of tortured souls. Alongside Britain's beloved but fading founding myth featuring Trojan Brut, its historians from Bede to Holinshed acknowledged Scythians as probable ancestors, notably of the Irish and Scots. In Giles Fletcher the Elder's *Of the Russe Common Wealth* (1591), his chapter on the Tartars (a corruption of Tatars perhaps for the infernal hint of Tartarus) claims them as the "fearse" ancient Scythians, nomads using "walking houses" on wheels. This paper considers related thematics of cold, feeling, madness, and

hellish cruelty in Shakespeare's *King Lear* (1605/6) with reference to its ancient British setting as distinctly northern, Lear's wild claim to prefer the "barbarous Scythian" cannibal to his plain-speaking Cordelia (1.1.117-20), and the subplot of wandering, including Poor Tom "a-cold."

Suggested bibliographic items:

Shakespeare's *King Lear*

Fletcher, Giles, the Elder, *Of the Russe Common Wealth* (1591), chapter 19 on the Tartars (p. 65 of EEBO's text). This volume was soon recalled: the Muscovy Company feared Fletcher's references to the Russian state's barbarity and tyranny would endanger their trade. A redacted version appeared in vol. 1 of Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations* (1598), the chapter on the Tartars now chap. 13 (p. 486 of EEBO's text).

Chiari, Sophie, "The pelting of [a] pitiless storm': Thunder and Lightning in *King Lear*," in Chiari, *Shakespeare's Representation of Weather, Climate and Environment: The Early Modern 'Fated Sky'* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 150-175.

Hadfield, Andrew, "Briton and Scythian: Tudor Representations of Irish Origins," *Irish Historical Studies* 28 (112, November 1993): 390-408.

Anne Cotterill is associate professor emerita of English at Missouri University of Science and Technology, where she taught courses in Shakespeare, British literature, world literature ancient to Renaissance, and summer study in Iceland. Her publications include *Digressive Voices in Early Modern English Literature* (Oxford, 2004) and articles on Dryden, Marvell, and seventeenth-century memoirist Elizabeth Isham. She is currently completing *Cold and the Demonic North in Early Modern England* for Amsterdam University Press, which reflects her turn toward criticism that engages with the impress on writing of geography, weather, and climate history/change and her recent interest in ice humanities. Her book reads pamphlets and broadsides, Arctic narratives of overwintering, scientific writing, and dramatic and nondramatic literature of the period to consider the connotations of cold, human and nonhuman, during early modern Britain's Little Ice Age.

Northern Conversations: Testing English Faith in the Far North **Matthew Dimmock, University of Sussex**

My paper focuses closely on the often uneasy combination of religion and commercially-oriented exploration that developed in the cluster of English voyages to the Far North – by which I mean the Newfoundland and Labrador coasts, and especially the area around Baffin Island and Greenland – in the 1570s and 1580s. This group includes the claiming of Newfoundland by Humphrey Gilbert, and the two sets of three voyages associated with the search for the North-West Passage, the first led by Martin Frobisher and the second by John Davis. I intend to look closely at the language surrounding these voyages and through that begin to work my way towards the proposition that English successes and failures in this region and the writing it generated were central to the development and refinement of English ideas

concerning how commercial, diplomatic, and colonial expansionism might work in practice, and the part religion would necessarily play within it.

Relevant materials:

Christopher P. Heuer, *Into the White: The Renaissance Arctic and the End of the Image* (New York: Zone Books, 2019)

James McDermott, *Martin Frobisher: Elizabethan Privateer* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001)

William Sherman, *John Dee: The Politics of Reading and Writing in the Renaissance* (Amhurst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995)

Matthew Dimmock is Professor of Early Modern Studies and Associate Dean of Research in the School of Media, Arts, and Humanities at the University of Sussex. His books include *New Turkes* (2005), *Mythologies of the Prophet Muhammad* (2013), *Elizabethan Globalism* (2019), and the CUP Element *Writing Tudor Exploration* (2022). Amongst other things, he is also currently editor on the OUP Thomas Nashe and Richard Hakluyt projects and co-editor with Andrew Hadfield of the second edition of the anthology *Amazons, Savages, and Machiavels: Travel & Colonial Writing in English, 1550-1630* (2022).

Art Cold?

Lowell Duckert, University of Delaware

This paper unpacks Lear's question to Poor Tom in 3.2.68: "Art cold?" Opposing persistent tropes of numbness, stultification, and lethality, I will suggest that cold acts as an empathetic connector instead. On "[t]his cold night" (3.4.73), that is, care is cultivated through an awareness of shared vulnerability. I will then compare the play's northern "hovel" (3.1.61) to the polar streets of London ca. 1683-4. Similar questions were asked – and politically acted upon – by an "a-cold" (3.4.55) populace inhabiting what is now known as the Maunder Minimum, one of the chilliest periods of the Little Ice Age. In short, I am interested in how cold art like *Lear* can help reinvigorate contemporary discussions of climatic exposure, risk, and repair in (far-)northern places.

(A little context! I am currently completing my book under contract with the University of Minnesota Press called *Cold Doings: Early Modern Actions for Our Warmer World*. I intend to turn this draft into one of my "winterludes": short, meditative pieces between chapters that prepare the reader for what lies ahead. I want this specific discussion to segue into my chapter on the famous "frost fairs" that bookended the seventeenth century. Nearly a score of anonymous pamphlets, some of them published directly on the Thames, demonstrate cold's communalizing powers and an attendant, irrepressible desire to frolic. But not all fairgoers were equally entertained, and certain bonds were prone to break, especially when they transgressed class, gender, and sexual norms. Reviewing this playful literature is more instructive than nostalgic, I argue; they are a reminder that successful adaptation to a fluctuating climate requires asking who is *not* afforded the same luxury and *why*. Cold, once re-configured as an empathetic agent, may still inspire the doings of cryo-political action.)

Suggested reading:

Peter Davidson, *The Idea of North* (London: Reaktion, 2005)

Peter Fjågesund, *The Dream of the North: A Cultural History to 1920* (Amsterdam: Rodopi,

2014)

Dolly Jørgensen and Virginia Langum, eds., *Visions of North in Premodern Europe* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018)

Oisín Plumb, Alexandra Sanmark, and Donna Heddle, eds., *What Is North? Imagining the North from Ancient Times to the Present Day* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2020)

Lowell Duckert is associate professor of English at the University of Delaware. With Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, he is the editor of *Elemental Ecocriticism: Thinking with Earth, Air, Water, and Fire*; and *Veer Ecology: A Companion for Environmental Thinking* (nominated for the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment's Ecocriticism Book Award). His book *For All Waters: Finding Ourselves in Early Modern Wetscapes* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017) was short-listed for the Michelle Kendrick Memorial Book Prize from the Society for Literature, Science, and the Arts.

Ice Geographies and the (In)hospitable North in relation to Shakespeare's Sonnet 5 and his Plays

Owen Kane, Queen's University

I propose to consider how arctic imagery features in Shakespeare's poetic geography. Drawing on recent scholarship by Michael Bravo, Jen Rose Smith, Steve Mentz and others, I will show how Shakespeare and his contemporaries contribute to upending the north as a blank, contemplative space. My paper reads familiar literary tropes regarding winter, ice, and cold in Shakespeare's sonnet 5, Claudio's speech in *Measure for Measure* and the Queen's speech in *Love's Labor's Lost* together with emerging scientific thought drawn from accounts by George Best, Thomas Ellis, and others. I will engage how early modern writers developed a unique poetics of a cold climate that established grounds for the flourishing of English civility in an environment thought to be foreign and hostile to it. Shakespeare will be shown to engage these accounts in imaginative ways critical of the optimistic science guiding the English voyage narratives' project of circumscribing the North. Shakespeare's engagement with Arctic accounts circulating in London establishes the Arctic as a populated, abundant poetic geography in contrast to the fictional binary of empty landscape versus weather extremes. The paper ultimately seeks out what forms of civility and nationhood were seen to be possible in the early modern arctic, answering the question: how did Shakespeare and his contemporaries impose order on a landscape that resisted interpretive mapping because of its apparent lack of anything?

Essential Bibliographic Items:

Michael Bravo *North Pole: Nature and Culture*. London: Reaktion Books, 2019

Klauss Dodds and Jen Rose Smith "Against decline? The geographies and temporalities of the Arctic cryosphere." *The Geographical Journal*. Sept 29. 2002.

Steve Mentz "Ice/Water/Vapor," *The Cambridge Companion to the Environmental Humanities*. Jeffrey Cohen and Stefanie Foote eds. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2021. 185-198.

Sarah M. Nutt "The Arctic Voyages of William Barents in Probable Relations to Certain of Shakespeare's Plays," *Studies in Philology* 39.2 (Apr 1942). 240-264.

Owen Kane recently defended his PhD from Queen's University in Canada where he completed his dissertation on poetic hospitality, civility, and decorum in early modern literature. He previously worked with Prof Thomas H B Symons (lead, *Meta Incognita Project*) during his Masters in Canadian Literature and Culture at Trent University. His graduate work was supported by a Social Science and Humanities Council of Canada Graduate Research Fellowship and a Resident Junior Fellow at Massey College, University of Toronto. Owen has presented papers on Milton's Northern Geography at the MLA, the Canadian Society for Renaissance Studies, and the International Milton Seminar. Other conference presentations include papers given for the Renaissance Society of America and the Stratford Shakespeare Theatre Conference. His published and forthcoming writing can be found in the *Spenser Review* (2022) and *Spenser Studies* (2023). He is preparing a postdoctoral research project on seventeenth-century contact literature and civility in the Canadian and English Atlantic North. Outside of academic research, Owen has worked with Massey College and the Mississauagas of the Credit River First Nation in forging ongoing academic-community partnerships. He enjoys spending time hiking, cross-country skiing, biking, rock climbing, and trail running outdoors.

William Germano, Cooper Union
williamgermano@gmail.com