Seminar 09-01: Early Modern Cosmologies

The Sovereign Compass of Creation: Overton's *Mans Mortalitie* and Political Monism
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The Levellers were a London-based network of anti-monarchist writers and organizers with links to the New Model Army. Their *Agreement of the People* (1647) represents the first attempt at a written constitution in Britain. One of its authors, Richard Overton, separately developed a "Defensive principle of resistance" to authority, proceeding from the free motion of the human body. Bodily life had been central to *Mans Mortalitie* (1643), Overton's pre-Leveller theological tract arguing for mortalism, the application of materialist-monist philosophy and its distinct natural history to religious beliefs about death and resurrection. Soon, Overton and his fellow Levellers, like John Lilburne and William Walwyn, would mix religious and social demands in the revolutionary world of Civil War and Interregnum Britain. Holding that human life was a rational "compound" complete in itself, "contrary to that common distinction of Soule and Body," Overton was sought for heresy by the House of Commons in August 1644. He returned to mortalism with a largely rewritten version of the tract in 1655, entitled *Man wholly Mortal*, showing that it was a constant belief of Overton during his political writing career. Mortalism, monism, and materialism, and the consequent use of proto-scientific or "natural" reasoning alongside scriptural evidence, inflected Overton's political positions to an even greater degree than has been realized. Moreover, *Mans Mortalitie* encompasses a specific cosmology infused with the free human body and its parts, yet different from the traditional microcosm model in its use of rational knowledge as the support for a radically materialist view of life, death, and resurrection.

Comets and Chorography in *I Henry IV*
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This paper examines the influence of Renaissance cosmology and cometology on Shakespeare's *I Henry IV*. I argue that Shakespeare's English chorography of disparate earthly spheres is shaped in part by sixteenth-century cosmographical and astronomical texts like Thomas Digges' *A Perfit Description of the Cœlestiall Orbes* (1576) and Giordano Bruno's *De l'Infinito Universo et Mondi* (1584), which posited models of the universe that combined the immovable spheres with elements of infinitude which compromised coherence and unity. Likewise, the varied realms of the play - Henry's court, Eastcheap, Wales - are interconnected and yet distinct spheres that seem "homologall," to borrow John Dee's description of the elemental and celestial spheres. These elements form a complete whole and cannot be fully understood in isolation, but all comment on each other. Comets, irregular and ephemeral, likewise challenged the stability of the universe. They were long thought to be meteorological phenomena, until Tycho Brahe identified them as unique in their capacity to move between the spheres. But of course they were also starry messengers - divine portents whose meaning could only be fully understood in the fullness of time. Many characters in *I Henry IV* associate themselves with comets: Bardolph's facial "meteors" and "exhalations" and the "fiery shapes" and "burning cressets" that attend Glendwyr's birth, for example (2.4.331; 3.1.14-15). But it is Hal, who has "faulty wandered and

irregular," who traverses the play's disparate spheres and whose meaning develops both across spheres and diachronically, both within the play and beyond (3.2.29).

"At me hercle!": Disrupting Cosmological Epistemologies in *Love's Labour's Lost*

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Three is an odd number in Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost*. Throughout the play, it is used not to advocate for tidy computational formulae, but to enact eccentricity. At the play's start, three young men swear to their King to spend three years studying, fasting, and sleeping only three hours a night. Their aim is to abandon the "grosser manner of these world's delights" (1.1.29). This "gross world" invokes modes of cosmographical contemplation associated with the *theatrum mundi* (theatre of the world), which reminds one that mundane life is infinitesimal compared to the eternity of the afterlife. By resisting temptations in this world, the young men aim to earn fame and eternal reward in the next. But the play insistently disrupts the *theatrum mundi's* binaries and vertical hierarchies by multiplying them and offering third terms that undercut conventional cosmologies. This essay demonstrates how *Love's Labour's Lost* puts two primary source texts in conversation to query what constitutes cosmological order at the turn of the seventeenth century: Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Parliament of Fowls*, and Giordano Bruno's first dialogue from "The Ash Wednesday Supper." The thematic and metatheatrical triads throughout the play will be seen to enact questions about the shift from natural philosophy's qualitative, rhetorical epistemologies to the computational methods on offer from "new science." These allusions to competing cosmologies and epistemologies raise the question: How can one apprehend the interactions between a universal macrocosm and planetary microcosms across wildly different scales of relation?

Cosmological Affect in *Julius Caesar*

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What might it mean to think about affect at cosmological scale? At first glance this question might seem ridiculous, as passions and affects are human feelings, and even when they do extend beyond the individual, they don't reach up into the celestial realm or when they do, they dissolve into cosmic harmony. To which two responses. First, scholars have recently begun to discuss affect in ecological terms, in two senses: the passions as interactive and interrelational; and affects as transmitted amongst and felt by a variety of non-human actors. Second, while the cosmological is the highest scale in the early modern conception of the world, it contains and includes all the lower ones in--as Donne puts it--"Nature's nest of boxes." In this context, I read the affective cosmology of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* for the motions transmitted across scale, from the fire dropping down from heaven in portentous storm that opens Act Two, to the stones of Rome affectively disturbed by Caesar's death. I examine the linked movements, turbulences, and shakings that run through the body politic which the lone individuals of the play--Caesar with his constancy, Brutus with his honor, and Anthony and Cassius who stir others to munity--seek to control or exploit.

Wondering at the Workmanship in Milton's *Masque*
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From the Latin *fabrica,* the early modern word "fabric" referred to any "product of skilled workmanship," from an edifice to an engine to an animal body. Connecting God's hands to human ones, "fabric" had scalar affordances and could just as well describe the fine contexture of, say, the human eye when seen through a microscope as it could the "labyrinth" of creation, as Francis Bacon writes early in *The New Organon*. Although "fabric" does not become synonymous with woven cloth until sometime in the eighteenth century, the ground for this semantic shift is prepared by at least the middle of the seventeenth through the practical commitment to studying the natural world in artifactual terms. Sean Silver has suggested that, as the seventeenth-century empiricists appropriated craft knowledge into their experimental studies, an attention to "texture" indicated a paradigmatic shift toward a conception of the world as both "emergent" and "woven." Textile metaphors, I offer, also accommodate experiences of seventeenth-century failure and fragmentation—from collapsed improvement schemes to the many "partial" histories produced for the Royal Society—to be recuperated into cosmological thinking. Might we understand this scientific "paradigm shift" in light of another: toward a capitalist world-economy? This paper asks this question through a reading of John Milton's *A Masque Presented at Ludlow Castle* (1632), where I set the many textile allusions against what critics have deemed its "heterogeneous" cosmological imaginary. And I ask, finally, about the materialist ground of world-conceiving metaphors: How are we to know the difference between an ideological symptom and cosmo-poetic striving across scale?

History and/or Totality in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*
Andrew Griffin, University of California, Santa Barbara

This paper explores the representation of historical unfolding in *Julius Caesar*, arguing that the play's formal looseness — its curiously overdetermined plotting and its eponymous hero dead after act two — speaks to Shakespeare's metahistorical interest in the workings of historical time. The play's thematic concern in the agents of history and the character of historical time are clear: omens portend an inevitable future, ghosts return to sort a broken past, Caesar crosses the Rubicon in an irreversible historical rupture. I argue that the incommensurability of these temporalities produces a formally vexed play that makes sense as meditation on the poetics of eventality or the poetics of crisis.

The broader frame here thinks through Shakespeare's ultimately skeptical account of historiography in *Julius Caesar*, and speaks to a certain confusion around the question of totality that he shares — strangely and anachronistically — with Georg Lukaćs. When Lukaćs denounces his *Theory of the Novel* for being "romantic[ally] anti-capitalist" rather than meaningfully Marxist, he points to the struggle of imagining totality in a world where cosmology might be wildly overdetermined. These claims are part of a larger project in which I plan to argue for Shakespeare's "realism" as a matter of historical representation, drawing from sixteenth-century innovations in historiography.

Celestial Dance and the “New Philosophy” in Donne’s Epithalamia

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The image of courtly dance as an imitation of celestial movement filtered into Early-Modern English literature by way of Lucian and the pedagogies of 15th century Italian dance masters. The metaphor utilizes embodied cognition as an apparatus to comprehend or express planetary movement and consequently derives, both historically and cognitively, from an intuitive, Aristotelian cosmological model. The cosmic-dance metaphor was deeply ingrained in the late Elizabethan imagination and survived even the momentous relational shift between the earth and stars proposed by Copernicus and Galileo. Analysing changes in the applications of the cosmic-dance metaphor in the wake of a new heliocentric paradigm therefore reveals embodied responses to the protean intellectual landscape of the period.

Scholars have already investigated John Donne’s attempts to confront “the new philosophy” in his literary works. Likewise, the motif of celestial dance has been studied in works penned by several of Donne’s contemporaries. This paper synthesizes these approaches to examine how changing astronomical systems affect Donne’s employment of the metaphor of dance and the cosmos across his three Epithalamia. Indeed, while Donne’s applications of the dance/cosmos metaphor in his first epithalamium exhibits a partiality for an Aristotelian, intuitive, and embodied understanding of nature, his alterations to the structure of the metaphor thereafter gradually reveal a sense of loss for an embodied worldview.

Theorizing the Cosmology of Metadrama

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As Renaissance theorists of drama probed the old Aristotelian distinction between history and poetry, between what happened and what might happen, they similarly insisted that the playwright employ his subjective, synthesizing abilities to fashion an artificial order of fiction. They emphasized the playwright's particular perspective in creating an internal logic for the play that is removed from the demands of quotidian, linear and historical time. In other words, these theorists sought to make space for a plane of dramatic world-making removed from the world-making of the here and the now. I argue that roughly from the last decade of the sixteenth century to the middle of the seventeenth, metadrama is a privileged medium for exploring the philosophical, one might even say ontological, significance of such dramatic world-making. By virtue of their overt and covert reflexivities, some of the greatest works of metadrama in early modern Europe enabled their spectators to experience the relativity of reality and illusion, and to meditate on the practice of dramatic creation. The structure of the plays themselves yields the jarring realization that as in metadrama, there might be multiple levels of reality and illusion, acting and spectatorship, in the worlds we inhabit. The world may be a stage but one not to be seen from a distance. This stage is inhabited by simultaneous performances of subjectivity and intersubjectivity, of self and other, and of many orders of acting and spectatorship of worldly action.

Thinking with a Telluric Moon in Plutarch, Spenser, and Ariosto
Lynn Maxwell, Spelman College

In "Thinking with the Moon in Plutarch, Spenser, and Ariosto," I look at Plutarch's *De Orbe Facie,* Spenser's *Faerie Queene* and Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* to survey the variety of ways that the moon serves as a liminal or threshold space in early modern literatuere. Prior to Galileo's telescopic observations, his *Sidereus Nuncius* and the widespread acceptance of a telluric moon, these authors imagined the moon as earthlike in order to make it more useful metaphorically, allegorically, and mythically. For Plutarch, the moon serves as a waypoint for the dead, whose souls and minds depart from the body and dwell for a time on the moon before the mind leaves behind the soul and ascends to the sun, while the soul is absorbed in the moon. In *The Faerie Queene*, the moon represents the possibility of unseen worlds and offers a bridge between Earth and Faerieland. While in Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso,* it becomes a planet to be journeyed to and an allegorical space connected to memory, loss, fate and Christianity. These three very different works, all look to the moon as a space of inbetweeness where binaries such as that between life/death, remembering/forgetting, and myth/reality are problematized and negotiated. By presenting the moon as planet-like, and eschewing an Aristotelian vision of an incorruptible heaven, these texts emphasize the power of thinking with the moon and of using it to imagine and transgress the limits of human experience.

"As Loving Friends": The Relationship between the Earth and the Moon in John Wilkins's The Discovery of a World in the Moone (1638)
Sim Ong, University of Toronto

The prospect of space colonization feels more tangible for us today than ever before, much as it did for John Wilkins in 1640. In *The Discovery of a World in the Moone* (1638), which argues for the probability that the moon is a "habitable world," he cites but does not comment on Johannes Kepler's speculation that the invention of space flight will inevitably lead to the colonization of the moon, leaving it to "the fancie of the reader" (208). When he republishes the work under the new title *A Discourse Concerning a New World & Another Planet in 2 Bookes* (1640) a couple of years later, he adds a new chapter about the invention of space flight and concludes with an appeal to the reader to "consider the pleasure and profit, of those later discoveries in America, and wee must needs conclude [the voyage to the moon] to be inconceiveably beyond it" (242). While Wilkins's colonial ambitions are made explicit in his later *Discourse*, I posit that they are latent in his earlier *Discovery*. This paper will consider Wilkins's personification of the Earth and the Moon as "loving friends" to explain the reciprocal exchange of light between the Earth and the Moon alongside two of his sources, Galileo Galilei's *Sidereus Nuncius* (1610) and Kepler's *Dissertatio cum Nuncio Sidereo* (1610). Building on David Harris Sacks's work on ideas of friendship in theorizations of commercial trade and colonization, this paper will demonstrate how Wilkins's language of friendship inadvertently echoes that of colonial writings, and helps to establish the perspective of the moon as colonizable land.

“A World of Gold”: Traherne’s Quasi-Communist Cosmology
Goutam Piduri, Brown University

This paper will read the work of Anglican poet and clergyman Thomas Traherne to think through the relation between propositions of economic value and cosmological constructions. The paper follows the work of David Hawkes (2001) in exploring those texts of the seventeenth-century English canon that critique the nascent market economy not from the perspective of class struggle but from a moral aversion to economic value itself. The paper will also suggest, however, that Traherne’s critique of economic value in fact entails the conceptual reordering of *every* object, and thus forms a distinct religious cosmological principle. Focusing on the image of gold in Traherne’s *Centuries of Meditation* and *Poems of Felicity*, the paper will show how Traherne rejects economic measures of value by affirming every object’s intrinsic spiritual worth.

Traherne’s reordering of objects also entails an ethical prescription on how to measure the value of objects. It is in this regard that his cosmological principle complicates the trope of primitive peoples who are supposedly incapable of ascertaining the true value of objects. The “rude and barbarous Indian” for Traherne is both a figure to be emulated (exemplary of his cosmological principle), but also a symbol for the inability to measure the true value of objects (exemplary of the unethical path he sees his fellow Christians taking). In reading his use of such figures, the paper will consider whether Traherne’s alternative cosmology is a critique of the emergent association (as described by historian Jennifer Morgan, 2021) between economic rationality and racial heirarchy.

“As the Tongue speaketh to the Eare, so *Gesture* speaketh to the Eye”: Radical Deaf World-Building with Natural Signed Language from *Julius Caesar* to *Chirologia*
Mel Vipperman-Cohen, California State University, Fullerton

In 1605, Francis Bacon criticizes Aristotle for neglecting to include gesture in his treatise on rhetoric. Bacon argues that observing another’s motions leads to a greater understanding of their true intentions beyond what they spoke, likening movement to a supplemental rhetorical tool. Bacon does not go so far as to equate gesture with reason, however, nor to prioritize gesture over speech. His encouragement is predicated on the Aristotelian hierarchy of the senses in which sight and hearing were both required for reason. There were many deaf subjects in early modern England, yet natural philosophers, theologians, and physicians likened deafness to a physical and spiritual deformity. Some Protestant preachers adopted codified manual signs in their sermons to reach deaf congregants, though. Popular deaf and hard of hearing characters like Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar challenge the Aristotelian hierarchy when he uses his disability to centralize power.

In 1644, natural philosopher and physician John Bulwer takes up where Bacon left off. In his rhetorical treatise *Chirologia*, he proposes a radical re-ordering of early modern senses to prioritize sight and touch as the conduits for reason and rhetoric. He declares that deafness has no bearing on reason, even celebrating those born deaf and mute because their signed communication proves that gesture, not speech, is the most powerful universal language.

Bringing together Bulwer's cosmology and Shakespeare's Caesar illuminates reimaginings of deafness, communication, and power that create a potential world of radical accessibility for deaf and hard of hearing subjects.