

“Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark”

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“Come thick night,” bids Lady Macbeth,
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,
That my keen knife sees not the wound it makes,
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark
To cry, “Hold, hold.” (1.5.50–54)

Generations of Shakespeareans have puzzled over this metaphor, which remains without an adequate gloss in the current editions of the play. To begin with, it is not just a metaphor. The actor delivers these lines beneath the black drapery enveloping the stage in tragic performance, obscuring the painted “heavens” above; it is easy to imagine how these could then could literally “peep through” any imperfections—tears, loose seams—in this “blanket.” More importantly, however, the metaphor itself accurately describes night as widely understood in this period. Today, we look up at the dark night sky and know that we are looking at space: space as it always is, beyond our planet’s atmosphere. Equally, we know that the bright day sky is an optical effect caused by sunlight’s interaction with this atmosphere. To Shakespeare and his contemporaries, however, it was the other way round. Night was precisely “the blanket of the dark”: Earth’s shadow, temporarily obscuring the eternally bright “heaven” beyond. While other comparable transformations—from geocentrism to heliocentrism, or a bounded to an unbounded universe—have been extensively studied, the shift from bright to dark space remains nearly lost to history. Starting from this passage, the paper discusses this shift and its significance in the history of the cosmological imagination.

What’s the Matter with Happiness? The Imaginary Worlds of Cavendish and Hobbes

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This paper reads Margaret Cavendish’s imaginary world-making against and across Thomas Hobbes’s, in light of these two philosophers’ (very different) associations between positive emotions and the mobility of matter.

In the argumentative structure of Book I of Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, happiness is the logical linchpin between cognition—the fearful but also intriguing possibility that we may only be imaginatively inventing what we believe to be the case—and the social parlay that rescues the human community from the degradations of the state of nature. Foundation to *Leviathan*’s view of happiness as a cognitive-emotional state and as a societal foundation is Hobbes’s extreme version of mechanism: unlike Descartes and Gassendi, for example, Hobbes insisted that there were no exemptions—not human thought, not human will—from the universe as an assemblage in continuing motion. As Hobbes put it in *The Elements of Law*, “There can be no contentment but in proceeding.” Thus happiness is a (potential) state of imaginative minds in physical motion, encountering other, similar minds.

Both anticipating and reacting to Hobbes, Cavendish far more radically imagines matter itself as fundamentally capable of thought and perhaps even capable of happiness. In Cavendish’s vitalist, pan-psychic, anti-mechanistic material schema, the rational quality of matter enables it to impel

motion not in the manner of an object pressing against another object, but in the manner of a mind observing and encouraging sympathetic interests between itself and another mind. Motion is impossible, in other words, without the rational soul of matter's imagining a better, more satisfying state. In *The Blazing World*, the Empress and the Duchess themselves take pleasure in imagining new worlds via the rational soul activated by and in the matter of their own minds. But if imagining that new world makes its author happy, it is because matter itself has thought pleasure into being.

Cosmic Drives on the Shakespearean Stage

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This essay will unpack a powerful strand of cosmological thinking in Shakespeare's plays which draws on the insights of presocratic philosophers in describing the celestial spheres as propelled by powerful affective motions, especially the dyad of love or friendship and hate or strife, in an ongoing process of cosmic creation and destruction. Although borrowed from ancient thinkers like Pythagoras, Empedocles, and Heraclitus, these theories were powerfully reactivated in Shakespeare's moment by contemporary natural philosophers and capture a crucial feature of early-modern ecology: the idea that humans are pervaded by the affective motions of the world and cosmos.

In our own moment the new materialism has been credited with identifying the agency of material assemblages, insights that have built on the foundational ideas of the Dutch seventeenth-century philosopher Spinoza. But Shakespeare's drama paved the way for agentic materialism half a century earlier by construing humans as comprised of elemental matter and the affective dynamics that lent it form and movement. Notably, his plays draw on these ideas of cosmological dynamism at moments when human modes of sovereignty are eroded, to capture the most self-splitting, world-cancelling sensations his characters experience. Through these experiences of dissolution – whether of self, family, or political structure – Shakespeare identifies affect as the connective tissue that binds humans to the cosmos, recasting the exceptional human as instead a constellation of extra-human affective patterns.

Carnival Cosmologies: Theatrical World-Making on the Itinerant Stage

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The commercial theaters of early modern London worked to build elaborate self-enclosed worlds of dramatic fiction, from the Tudor playhouses to the scenic devices of the Restoration stage. However, when these stories left the controlled staging environment of the "company house," performers and audience would need to collaboratively improvise to create an imagined world. My paper begins with a provocation— how might cosmological thinking help us approach theater history in new ways, reevaluating the way that we envision the scene of performance? Itinerant performers were versatile in adapting to shifting audiences and staging conditions as they moved among a variety of distinct social spaces, indoors and outdoors, public and private. This porous boundary between intradiegetic and extradiegetic represented at once a problem and a potentiality, I argue— itinerant theater was highly absorptive and responsive to its environment

in ways that implicate its audience and broader social setting in a dynamic process of exchange, allowing for a reciprocal transfer between the world of the stage narrative and the world beyond. I am interested in the spatial, temporal, and material circulation of early modern itinerant theater, as objects, environments, and occasions were recycled and recontextualized in performance. How did the itinerant stage take in and opportunistically reimagine the stuff of its surroundings, envisioning new geographies onstage through the appropriation of mundane places and things? And how did the “estranging” effects of theater unsettle familiar ways of imagining and inhabiting the world, opening up new relations between the distant and the immediate?

The Extraordinary Exploding Worlds of Seventeenth-Century Poetry

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By the seventeenth century, the English use and understanding of the word “world” underwent a metamorphosis. No longer singular, and no longer descriptive of the space and time occupied and defined by human beings, “world” became plural, became “worlds” and the concept shifted its focus from human relationship to time, to one with space, from personal and bounded, to exterior and boundless. There had always been a concept of space beyond “the world”—this was where you might find the heavens and hell, the sun, the harmonious Ptolemaic spheres. But now, quite suddenly, you could imagine other worlds existing beyond or within your own world. For Roland Greene, by the late sixteenth century, the word-concept “world is a semantic engine” functioning much like a vital assemblage, whose imagined parts combine “to make new figures of the world.”

This new world view took root in English lyric poetry, most famously in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* where Satan, on his way to earth, considers life on other planets, but also in works by John Donne, Hester Pulter, and Margaret Cavendish. Yet as much as Cavendish, Pulter, and Donne consider and construct multiple alternative worlds, they are equally preoccupied with destroying them. Where Pulter’s own death and dispersal into dust recombines to create a new world, Cavendish’s world-in-an-earring poem ends with wholesale death and destruction: “But when the ring is broke, the world is done; Then lovers they into Elysium run” (47-8). It seems as if seventeenth-century English early modern poetic “world building” necessarily entails world-busting, as if each world’s creation predicated its Fall (or in the case of Pulter’s poem, the inverse). Donne builds up his tear-worlds seemingly in order to destroy them, when colliding with his mistress’s tears, they drown in a flood: “Till thy tears mix’d with mine do overflow / This world, by waters sent from thee, my heaven dissolved so” (17-18). This essay will examine the trope of dissolving and exploding worlds in seventeenth-century poetry and art alongside scientific experiments and developments, to argue that these works are not only a form of early science fiction, but that their fascination with planetary dissolution also demonstrates a profound and new awareness of the fragility of life on earth.

“Deserts of Vast Eternity”: Shakespeare, Marvell, and Cosmological Scale

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In the long scene of exposition in the opening act of *The Tempest*, Prospero marvels at Miranda's ability to see into the "dark backward and abysm of time" and remember anything from her first years of life. Together with Miranda's admission that what she can remember "'tis far off," Prospero's "abysm" figures the temporal past as an inscrutable spatial object. Similarly, though looking in a different direction, in "To His Coy Mistress, Marvell's speaker bemoans what lies ahead of mortal experience as "deserts of vast eternity," a bleak fate marshalled to convince his beloved to forgo coyness in favor of pleasure now. Just as Miranda's past, objectified, is "far off," Marvell's reified future "lie[s]" "yonder all before us." Likely an allusion to Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura*, the commonplace figure of death as an eternal desert functions to create a sense of time-space that operates on a cosmological scale. In both examples the descriptor for the desert or abysm is *vastness*. Beyond human comprehension, the vast stands in for scalar excess in the early modern lexicon—that which exceeds by virtue of its overcoming any potential for comparison. In my seminar contribution I will explore how the description of time through the figure of vast space evolves along with the cosmological thinking of the seventeenth century.

Cosmology and Cosmo-poetics in Philip Sidney's Thought

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This paper contextualizes Philip Sidney's *Defense of Poesie* within early modern debates about Biblical philology in order to show that it intentionally conflates two different types of cosmology: cosmology as speech reflecting the actual world and cosmology as speaking new worlds into existence. By examining especially Sidney's engagement with the Hebrew grammar of the Palatine humanist Franz Junius, I show that Sidney conceives as world-making not as the privileged domain of poetic speech but as an almost inevitable consequence of phrasing ideas in language. In this view, even purely descriptive cosmology must ultimately be categorized as speaking fantastical or utopian worlds into existence. These findings about Sidney's *Defense* are important for three related reasons. Firstly, they clarify how Sidney conceived of people's ability to use language to make the world, a perennial topic in the scholarship on Sidney, as also in Renaissance studies more broadly. Secondly, they connect Sidney's understanding of people's poetic capacity to a peculiar tradition of Christian thought that undermined Christian orthodoxy by conceiving of religion as a cultural artifact. Thirdly, they contribute to this seminar by distinguishing between different conceptions of cosmology circulating in Renaissance England.

Reading Shakespeare in Jewish Theological Frameworks: The "Flaming Amazement" of Ariel

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My project illuminates *Tempest* characters through the epiphany. I argue that Shakespeare's characters are driven towards the otherworldly even if they do not have mindboggling experiences within the limitations of the play. These epiphanies of the characters point to sensorial capabilities that seem beyond-human. They also point to human potential. Humans (I argue Shakespeare is saying) can break out of human- forged prisons and aspire to bring the otherworldly here and now. Through these epiphanies, Shakespeare points to a transformed societal paradigm that includes (yes) moral agency.

This paper focuses on Ariel and illuminates him through Jewish mysticism. In juxtaposing early modern Hebrew and Latin texts we can see the influence of Jewish and Islamic mysticism on early modern texts of astronomy. The commentary by the Saadia Gaon (a Muslim) on the mystical *Sefer Yetsirah* influenced Abraham ibn Ezra's mystical *Sefer HaOlam* (on astronomy) which itself shares terms, calculations, and images with *Tractatus de Sphaera* by Johannes de Sacrobosco. Whether or not Shakespeare accessed the available *Tractatus*, his character Ariel, I argue, is a figure of beyond-human mysticism and otherworldly potential.

Ultimately, Ariel reminds Prospero of the way to compassion, saying that Prospero's "affections would become tender" if he forgave his enemies (5.1.18-19). Ariel's epiphany occurs when he breaks away from forced silence and finds his otherworldly *moral voice*. It is this same epiphany that exemplifies beyond-human potential and sparks the inception of a whole new world – a transformed island – for the beings who remain.

What Makes a New World? Persistent Poesy and Other Futures in the Imaginary of Isabella Whitney

Courtney Naum Scuro

How does one create a world? Not just any world, how does one make a world in which one might go on *mattering*: a mortal sphere that promises essential values and identifications might continue on recognizable, *legible* in the altern places and times-to-come? Practices of imaginative worldmaking offer early moderns a way to understand and attempt to repair this sense of rupture. In this essay, I turn to Isabella Whitney in whose writing the sacredness of poetic-botanical co-creation empowers one to reach beyond the limits of this world and its injustices to imagine another ecosystem of intimate relations, one where what struggles to matter here-and-now might find revived relevance and animation. However, does Whitney's imaginary rise to the level of worldmaking, by our scholarly definitions? Is it relevant to critical efforts today to understand representations of that so-called *new world* flooding England's cultural imaginary by century's end? Female, former servant, writing about London, Isabella Whitney's worldview appears far removed from someone like Richard Hakluyt's. So, can imaginaries like hers have a place in our efforts to understand the discursive conditions by which an English understanding of a so-called new world arises? Ultimately, my essay aims to inspire skepticism about what sorts of texts, objects, and makers we scholars assume to be significant to English efforts to conceive of a *new world*--and England's lasting place within it--by arguing for the epistemological relevance of Whitney's efforts to make a world of persistent *mattering* through her poesy.

The Virtual Logic of Philip Sidney's Golden World

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Following his description of the poet's "golden world" in *The Defense of Poesy* (1578), Philip Sidney proclaims, "Neither let it be deemed too saucy a comparison to balance the highest point of man's wit with the efficacy of nature; but rather to give right honour to the heavenly Maker of that maker, who having made man to His own likeness, set him beyond and over all the works of

that second nature: which in nothing he showeth so much as poetry, when with the force of a divine breath be bringeth things forth surpassing her doings.” In this paper I examine Sidney’s theory of the poet’s divinely inspired imagination as that which makes possible forms of nature that overcome and substantially modify reality itself. I do so by considering the material effects of his paragon of poetic virtue, Cyrus. A historical figure transformed into poetic virtue through Xenophon’s *Cyropaedia*, Cyrus conquers history and enters the golden world in a glorious multiplicity of “many Cyruses.” These Cyruses are not mere figments of imagination; rather, they are understood to comprise a community of flesh-and-blood readers who have encountered and been moved to virtue through Xenophon’s example. Through his vision of the poet bringing forth this golden world, opposed to the “brazen” natural world wherein only one Cyrus may ever reign, Sidney exalts the counterfactual possibilities of poetic virtue. In this sense, I argue, Sidnean second nature constitutes a virtual community—indeed, a polity—that is itself subtended by virtuous principles. This paper will show that Sidney’s *Defense* articulates an early modern theory of virtuality that reveals an axiological underside often neglected in studies on the virtual.

“All the tuned spheres”: Cosmic Feeling in Shakespeare’s Public Theaters

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My paper will treat Shakespeare’s public theaters as microcosmic focal points for macrocosmic feeling, particularly proprioception—the sensation of the relative weight and motion in the body. My starting point will be the relationship between localized studies of this kind of feeling in the plays and what we know about how the bodies of actors and the audience adhered to—and departed from—their standard orbits within the fixed architecture of the theater.

Shakespeare frequently cast human bodies (and body parts) as celestial bodies, either in their proper spheres or out of them; and he returned often to his audience as coincident with the “globe” of the theater, in various states of disorder and inattention. The relative heft of the human body at rest or in motion in these orbits constituted (along with speech) something like the medium of performance as such, from gesture to stage business to the stiffening seated or standing bodies of the audience and their eruptions into collective actions like applause. As performances and audiences reinscribed their patterns of embodied motion and stasis, difference and repetition, how it felt to be one of these bodies in the theatrical cosmos emerged as a key metatheatrical concern.

I will trace a constellation of moments, across the plays, in which Shakespeare fosters an intimate exchange of cosmic kinesthesia between actors, characters, and audience members, attuning or untuning their motions to the “solid globe” of the theater around them.

Concordia Discors* in Jean Bodin’s Cosmology: Poetry in the *Colloquium heptaplomeres

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Discordant harmonies may well be key to the thought-world of Jean Bodin, especially as these are expressed in his *Colloquium of the Seven about Secrets of the Sublime*. The phrase,

concordia discors, is a cliché—a figure of speech—for describing, for example, a smoothly functioning universe composed of disparate parts or, in this case, a gathering of seven men of different faiths who, after airing their many disagreements about matters theological and philosophical, in the end agree to disagree. Yet, the more I spend time with Bodin’s heretical treatise, the more its contradictions appear difficult to finesse or reconcile. It’s all very well for Marion Leathers Kuntz to portray Bodin as a theorist of toleration, ahead of his time in his endorsement of pluralism—we all know him as a demonologist of the first order, a prosecutor of witches, and a theorist of sovereignty and political absolutism. Nor is it tenable to argue that what we’re seeing is his intellectual evolution as the pendulum of his thought swings from zeal to comprehension (to use the lexicon of the Restoration). The dating of his texts makes that difficult. Bodin was secretly working on the *Heptaplomeres* in the years before his death (perhaps from plague) in 1596, the same years that he was issuing editions and translations of his best-selling *Démonomanie* and his *Six Books of the Republic*. In this paper I approach his paradoxical cosmology by focusing on the intermediary entities present in the poems interspersed in the *Heptaplomeres*. Bodin comes by his intermediaries honestly—via Ramism and via Neoplatonic emanations, as well as via Hebrew angelology. But as Ann Blair points out, the “connections” among entities aren’t always linear or sequential—neither ladders nor forks (131-135). Bodin is a lateral thinker who braids different strands of thought opportunistically. The resulting cosmology, while made of recognizable threads, may be unique.