

## The Sports of Nature: Games and the Play of Science in Early Modernity

2025 Shakespeare Association of America Conference  
Seminar Abstracts

Co-organizers: Mary Thomas Crane and John Yargo

**Date:** Saturday, March 22, 2025

**Time:** 4:30-6:30 pm

**Location:** Commonwealth, Sheraton 3F, Boston, Massachusetts

**Participants:** Katherine Nicole Walker, Suparna Roychoudhury, Aaron Kitch, Ashley Howard, Erin Webster, Laura Williamson, Phebe Jensen, Shankar Raman, Jonathan Koch, Lara Bovilsky, Mary Erica Zimmer, Tanya Schmidt Morstein

### Seminar Description:

How does the playfulness of the natural world resist or enable scientific apprehension? While research on literature and science has focused on nature and the cosmos in the early modern period, scholars are increasingly attending to how play, playfulness, and games are woven through ideas about the natural world and methods for studying it. Paper topics might include: empirical observation as a form of play; “*lusus naturae*” or nature’s jokes; wonder cabinets; optical devices; educational games.

### *Textual Playscapes*

Respondent: Katherine Nicole Walker

### To Witta Woo!: Playing in Nature’s Soundscapes

Ashley Howard

This paper examines onomatopoeia as a playful mode of scientific inquiry, exploring how early modern texts engage nature through its richly varied soundscapes. I approach the term “play” somewhat capaciously—as a kind of role playing, wordplay, and experimental mode of reading. While the discussion focuses on bird sounds, it offers a framework for thinking about onomatopoeic representations of any agent in nature. The paper begins by briefly considering historical links between onomatopoeia and science with an emphasis on texts that fit more conventionally into the genre of natural philosophy. It then explores how onomatopoeic play encourages scientific inquiry in literary texts, proposing a close reading of a song in Thomas Nashe’s *Summer’s Last Will and Testament*. This case study outlines two different ways to read the bird sounds: first by pronouncing the words so they fit within the song’s predominantly iambic pentameter, and second by pronouncing the words as faithful imitations of their avian sources. The latter option embraces avian rhythms, prioritizing nonhuman perspectives and locating agency in the natural world. Ultimately, the paper advocates for a sonic epistemology—a way of attending to nature through careful listening.

**Playing Bo-Peep with Planets:  
The Function of Games and Game Playing in Hester Pulter's Astronomical Poems**

Erin Webster

This paper will consider the role of game playing in Hester Pulter's astronomical science by working through a recurring metaphor in her poetry: that of Mercury playing "bo-peep" (or hide-and-seek) with an Earth-based astronomical observer. Physically confined to bedrest due to illness and complications from her multiple pregnancies, Pulter plays many games with the stars and planets as she looks for a way to "free" her thoughts from the limited—and limiting—perspective of her bedroom. The bo-peep game she plays with Mercury is characteristic of these exercises, insofar as it serves both as an intellectual stimulant and as a means of expressing an astronomical fact: in this case, that the planets revolve around the sun. As Pulter's "fancy" runs after Mercury, "that sly thief" who "craftily" hides himself in the Sun's more powerful illumination, she finds her "wonder" at the structure of the universe "again renewed," leading her in turn to activate her "reason" and conclude that the Sun "the centre was of all the rest, / The planets all like bowls still trundling round / The vast circumference of his glorious mound." As imaginative stimulants and teaching tools, Pulter's intellectual games put her in her poetry in conversation with both the science and the scientific tactics of figures such as Galileo, Kepler, Donne, and Milton. By exploring one of these games in detail, this paper will also pose the question of how we might use her poetry to challenge and/or correct our assumptions about women and scientific innovation in the early modern period.

**Cartographic Play-grounds: Labyrinths as Embodied Epistemology**

Laura Williamson

This paper seeks to (re)animate the place of "play" in the early modern cartographic imaginary. In particular, I turn to the labyrinth—part spatial logic, part geographic location—as a mechanism for reading early modern travel. The concentric pathways of the labyrinth have both ancient and medieval precedents that highlight their connection to both mobility and imagined geographies, most notably in the floors of thirteenth-century cathedrals throughout Europe. In medieval and early modern England, however, labyrinths leave their mark in the natural landscape—hedge mazes, turf labyrinths, and gardens—and, most surprisingly, in an anonymous early seventeenth-century map of London. At stake, I hope to suggest, is an opportunity to explore the experiences of bounded play (in dance, sport, and pedestrian wandering, e.g.) as a way to rethink the relationship between mobility and mapping, between embodied knowing and quantitative measurement.

***Word Play***

Respondent: Suparna Roychoudhury

**"An vnmercifull and vnreasonable toyle":  
Endurance as Play in Running a Wild Goose Chase**

Jonathan Koch

This paper traces the figure of a "wild-goose chase" from its origins in horsemanship to its uses in describing movements and contests of nature, wit, polemic, and romance. Unlike other chases on horse (otter, fox, deer, hare), the wild goose chase imitates nature rather than pursuing it. Horses follow one another, "resembling the manner of the flight of Wilde-geese," in a contest that seeks no end than endurance itself. Deemed "vnmercifull and vnreasonable" in the world of horsemanship,

the wild-goose chase becomes an idiom for describing unnatural and irrational uses of language, which are, nonetheless, delightful. By following this idiom across the world of print, from its appearance in *Romeo and Juliet* (2.3), to the John Fletcher play that takes the phrase as its title, to the many polemics that figure animadversion as a “wild-goose chase,” this paper discovers endurance to be a form of play in the early modern world. Endurance sports, like the wild-goose chase, at once imitate and resist nature, making them an important case in the study of early modern science and language.

**Playing with Nature:  
Irresolution in Cavendish’s “Dialogue between an Oake, and a Man cutting him downe”**  
Tanya Schmidt Morstein

In “A Dialogue between an Oake, and a Man cutting him downe,” Margaret Cavendish invites her readers to expect an answer to the question that animates the speeches in her poem: in the end, will the Man finally fell the Oak or yield to his plea for life? In this witty dialogue in *Poems and Fancies* (1653, 1664, 1668), while the Oak defends his wish to remain a tree, the Man attempts to persuade him to want to be cut down. Inviting the Oak to expand his horizons, for example, the Man suggests that the tree could gain the knowledge of a ship or a house. Though the Man is named generically, I propose that Cavendish presents him in more specific terms—not as Francis Bacon himself, but as someone inspired by his Great Instauration. It seems like their discussion will build towards a resolution, but the outcome turns out to be ambiguous. Insisting on irresolution, Cavendish makes a meta-critique of claims competing for exclusive authority as the source of knowledge about nature. Largely read through political, ecocritical, or posthuman lenses, this poem also makes an intervention into the history of science, precisely through its dialogue form.

**“Games of Vision and Violence in Shakespeare’s Henry V”**  
Aaron Kitch

A surprising exchange of jokes occupies the space between the awkward wooing scene of Princess Katharine and the concluding articles of peace in the final moments of *Henry V*. The French Duke of Burgundy first makes veiled remarks about Katharine as a naked Cupid, to which Henry responds that the French should be lucky that a beautiful princess has blocked his view of other French cities he might have otherwise conquered. Katharine’s father, the King of France, joins the fun in noting that Henry sees his daughter and the French cities “perspectively,” meaning that “the cities turned into a maid; for they are all girdled with maiden walls that war hath never entered” (5.2.292-94). My essay examines this joke and its implications for understanding both vision and violence in a play that makes many allusions to games, including the famous tennis ball episode in the opening act. Drawing on scholarship on optics, game theory, and feminism, I argue that Shakespeare’s history play both invokes and distances itself from the arts of perspective in a way that turns the violence of war into an object of entertainment for paying customers. As the jokes at Katharine’s expense in the final scene make clear, however, this gamification of violence through the arts of perspective still produces ideologies of gendered violence, raising difficult questions about the nature of visual play in Shakespeare’s version of English history.

## **“A nausea in myself”: Games of Translation in Christopher Merrett’s 1662 *The Art of Glass***

Mary Erica Zimmer

In their 2019 analysis of discursive norms associated with, and influenced by, publications of the Royal Society, Alan James Hogarth and Michael Witmore trace the contours of a style they term “reflective witnessing”: a textual paradigm characterized by its “self-reflexive and temporally complex relationship with the process of inquiry.”<sup>1</sup> Yet while their corpus of 1979 texts contains several translations, one Royal Society text not found therein presents the opportunity to examine these quantitatively registered qualities as implicit “rules” of a publication “game” both variable in its generic stages and potentially exercising considerable force, especially upon those as yet marginal to the group. Attending to linguistic and paratextual choices of Christopher Merrett’s 1662 rendering of Antonio Neri’s 1612 *L’Arte Vetrariaa* work likewise marked by the 147 further pages of “observations” added to the main text—illuminates and complicates the work’s self-positioning in relation to emerging and evolving norms associated with the newly incorporated Society and its endeavors.

### ***Pursuing Recreation***

Respondent: Katherine Nicole Walker

## **“The Property of Man”: Laughter, Cruel Play, and Human Identity**

Lara Bovilsky

This essay describes how early modern writers used laughter to define humanness, even as they found this a morally troubling fact. Their belief that laughter was a unique “property” of humanity reveals that the early modern period nurtured a more heterogeneous, imaginative, and humble set of possibilities for human identity than we have recognized. The rise of English-language logic manuals beginning in 1551 offered new resources for broad cultural debate about the precise nature of humanness, particularly in the form of new English concepts such as “property.” In its strongest, kind-defining sense, “property” referred to a trait that all members of a kind – and no non-members – possessed. As the concept of property spread, English people became familiar with its most frequent deployment, in a formerly Latin truism that “laughter is the property of man.” Now unfamiliar, the once-universal belief that laughter identified humankind is worth pausing on, as laughter is a far less flattering ability than the capacity to speak or reason, traits most scholars have argued that early moderns focused on as the source of human uniqueness and importance. Laughter unsettles anthropocentrism in its moral dubiousness. For starters, early moderns believed that ridicule and contempt for other humans beings were the central goads of laughter. Moreover, laughter reflected a disturbingly explosive indulgence of bodily pleasure. Writers theorizing laughter, including Castiglione, Sidney, and More, find an unmistakable humanness in laughter’s complex juxtapositions of intersocial playfulness and cruelty.

## **Planets and the Play of Nature in William Fulke’s *Ouranomachia***

Phebe Jensen

William Fulke’s astrological board game, *Ouranomachia* (1571), is at once highly mathematical and playful. On the one hand the game requires arcane astrological knowledge, as players must assess the

relative strengths of the planets as they travel around the board battling, capturing, and plundering. Yet equally important to this game are the passions and characters of the planets, which are personified conventionally as Roman Gods, but also as figures from the Roman Empire: the Sun is the Emperor, the Moon the Empress, Saturn and Jupiter Consuls, Mars the Praetorian Prefect, and Venus and Mercury “the indiscriminate throng.” In these ways, the influences of the natural world are figured as at once scientific and historical/literary. Fulke’s authorship of this game brings his earlier work, *Antiprogностican* (1560), into focus as a targeted attack not exactly on astrology, but on the popular version of the art found in annual almanacs, especially those by the notorious Nostradamus. But *Ouranomachia* also provides a rich context with which to appreciate the play of nature in representations of the planets in literature, including the bad striking planets in Shakespeare’s works, and the squabbling planets of Robert Greene’s *Planetomachia* (1585).

**Hamlet’s Wager**  
Shankar Raman

(Abstract not available.)