

Elemental Shakespeare: Abstracts

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“The Twice-Burned Play: Ecstatic Vulnerability and Shakespeare’s Elemental Fire”

Shakespeare’s plays are full of fire: fire under cauldrons, in hearths, off-stage and summoned for guests, on-stage and proffered to visitors, on the tips of torches, at the top of reports, called for, longed for, witnessed, reported. People, palaces, and paper burn in the plays with a flame’s ebullient, unruly, casual ease. Yet this fire that flickers on the boards and in the text refuses to surrender its menace: the “fire from heaven” that destroys characters in *Pericles* is reported in news pamphlets to have killed people in Flanders (1609) and Southampton (1613); Elizabeth I and James I had both sent relief to towns ravaged by fire (including Stratford-upon-Avon, in 1614); dozens of pamphlets, broadsheets, and texts from the late 16th and early 17th century describe the sheer devastation left smoking in the wake of a fire that forgets its domestication. So when a Prologue seeks a “Muse of fire,” the play is longing for a force that destroys at scale and with speed; when a sprite promises that in a previous scene “I flame[d] distinctly,” the play is rewriting watery shipwreck as a dream of fire; and when crowds promise to burn Caesar’s body “And with the brands fire the traitors’ houses,” the play fantasizes about catastrophic blazes of the sort that eventually consume the Globe itself. What does it mean for Shakespeare’s plays to rehearse the idea of burning when those plays themselves—and their theater, and their actors, and their city—are themselves so susceptible to the conflagration? Is it possible to imagine a theory of drama as that which desires consummation? Focusing on *Pericles*, this essay offers an account of what I am calling the ecstatic vulnerability to fire in Shakespeare’s plays. Against an historical backdrop of fiery crisis and charcoal-scarred danger, Shakespeare constructs a theatrical pyrologic of radical longing: the stage demands the its end—the fire next time.

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“‘This earth shall have a feeling’: The King, The Land, and Reciprocal Nurturing in *Richard II*”

In the context of a major shift in agricultural practices which altered the human relationship to land, Shakespeare constructed the failed medieval king as a ruler whose own distorted relationship to land makes him a poor manager of the kingdom. Separating others from their lands, legally and literally, Richard creates a relationship to land which is focused on profit. Gaunt and Richard both figure the land of England as both nurse and soldier, nurturing its leaders as well as actively protecting them. Yet it is not until his throne is threatened that Richard comprehends this relationship as mutual, and the role of the earth as sustaining rather than enriching. This essay will grapple with how the play engages with the land/human relationship shift described in the Georgic Revolution in connection with the philosophy of the King’s Two Bodies, to explore how the play

considers the land and the people who make up the Body Politic and the king's relationship to them.

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“Begrimed: Colliers and Moors on the Renaissance Stage”

To most Shakespeareans, the word “collier” first brings to mind the reviled Victorian scholar John Payne Collier, whose forgeries of Elizabethan documents have blackened his name a darker hue than its occupational origin. That occupation, however, was a familiar one in Shakespeare’s day and enjoyed a certain notoriety on the early modern stage. Although the term would eventually be applied to laborers in coalmines, in sixteenth-century usage it designates a person who manufactured and sold charcoal, an energy source that facilitated both the industrial boom and corresponding deforestation of England. Although oddly neglected by scholars, colliers appear in a half-dozen Renaissance plays, from Ulpian Falwell’s *Like Will to Like Quoth the Devil to the Collier* (1568) to *Grimes the Collier of Croydon* (published 1662). Situating these works in their environmental context, this paper reveals that the mocking of colliers gives vent to a widespread resentment over the soaring cost of energy during the Little Ice Age. By pillorying the collier as a butt of public scorn, early modern dramatists turn the figure into an environmental scapegoat, deflecting the individual’s moral responsibility for pollution onto the supplier.

Inhabiting a haze of charcoal smoke, the collier was considered a pariah; his nature was thought to be, like the dyer’s hand, subdued to what in works in. This paper examines the surprising ways in which attitudes about the collier’s intimacy with fire were shaped by geohumoral theories regarding racial difference. Through close readings of a few passages from *Othello*, I will show how a proverbial association between colliers and devils rubbed off, so to speak, on Moors. Smearred with charcoal, the collier also performs a pejorative blackness that had a surprising impact on the representation of Africans on the early modern English stage. Drawing on popular resentment of the collier, Iago compels Othello to perceive his own blackness and desire for sexual contact with a white woman as a form of pollution.

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“EleMental Plasticity in *The Tempest*”

What are we to make of Shakespeare’s characterizations of (ele)mental plasticity in *The Tempest*? The play is loaded with references to the four root elements, but the boundaries between their forms don’t mean very much. More important is the *cause* (Prospero) that moves them as tools for making transformations, sea-changes. Rather cliché now, “sea-change” has never strictly signified the mutability of marine or earthy matter. It certainly is applicable to every elemental continuum, but it also signifies change of heart, change

in the soul and intellect – the outcome for which Prospero strives in his victims and largely achieves in himself. As fiery living constituents of *The Tempest's* natural world, human souls experience paradigm shifts, a violent cooling, so to speak, enduring forms of elemental assault and battery from thunder, lightning, wind, waves, pinches, pricks, and what have you. Prospero, who wields a wand over resurrected spirit-laborers that move the elements, is primarily interested in inflicting psychological trauma on living souls to change, perhaps cultivate righteous thinking. With this in mind and in consideration of the play's nearly constant imagery of elemental-spiritual plasticity, I explore Prospero's elemental exploits with an eye on Aristotle's notion that the soul is a form of all things. My paper considers ancient-early-modern inscriptions of ecology among souls and the elements, a connection that works two ways, each fashioning the other: Prospero over the elements / the elements over his subjects and himself. It also considers a modern predicament: the replacement of spirit-laborers with technology as movers of the elements.

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“Elemental Seductions: Cleopatra's Water Pageant in *Antony and Cleopatra*”

Long capturing the imagination of playgoers, film directors and scholars alike, Cleopatra's offstage water pageant in *Antony and Cleopatra* is one of William Shakespeare's great virtuoso revisions of an already fascinating historical event – Antony's first meeting with Cleopatra. In essentials, Enobarbus' description in Act 2 scene 2 of her sumptuous water pageant remains quite faithful to Plutarch's original account. Both versions support and embellish her mythos as the femme fatale that led two powerful Romans astray. But Shakespeare pushes the description to do more. As David Macauley notes, in Shakespeare's version not only does Cleopatra seduce the Romans, her beauty and her pageantry seduces the very elements of water, fire and air (344). The river she floats upon seems tamed to the hand of this sea foam-born goddess, and the very air ‘but for vacancy had gone to gaze upon Cleopatra too’ (2.2.205-224). Plutarch describes her as dressed like Venus; in Shakespeare's version she *is* Venus. Similarly, her attendants no longer represent water nymphs; they *are* ‘nereides’ and ‘mermaids.’ Of course I am playing fast and loose with metaphor here, but Shakespeare's collapsing of the Queen of the Nile first into the character that in Plutarch she merely imitates for the sake of spectacle, and second into the water element of which Venus was mistress, cannot be lightly dismissed as a mere finessing of an ancient report.

Water is the element I have been given to explore in this seminar, and it is Shakespeare's character Cleopatra's affinity with water and water pageantry that I propose to discuss in this paper. Focusing on the vivid image of the river pageant in *Antony and Cleopatra*, my paper will explore two principal questions. First, to what extent does the character Cleopatra and the river she floats upon become one and the same, blurring the boundaries between human and element? Second, to what extent is Cleopatra's elaborate pageant on the Cydnus overwritten by the elaborate water pageants on the Thames (often explicitly linked to the Nile, and Cleopatra, in the sixteenth century) staged for English queens such

as Elizabeth I, and her infamous mother, Anne Boleyn? Do the boundaries between classical past and Elizabethan present, exotic locale and prosaic hometown dissolve as effectively as the boundaries between Cleopatra's porous flesh and her riverine stage? My analysis will draw upon Daniel Brayton's *Shakespeare's Oceans* and Elizabeth Jane Bellamy's *Dire Straits* as I attempt to formulate the way Shakespeare articulates the element of water, and the way the element of water iterates Shakespeare as a dramatist. Ultimately, I would argue that it is her watery nature that gives Shakespeare's Cleopatra her endless capacity for spectacle, and her ageless, infinite variety.

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“The Philosopher's Sighs: Elemental Language in Shakespeare”

Shakespeare rarely alludes to natural philosophy in his plays. He does so explicitly in *As You Like It* when Touchstone calls Clorin a natural philosopher, and elsewhere a bit more obliquely, as when Lear imagines Tom O'Bedlam as a “philosopher” and puts to him deep questions about nature's ordering principles. For Lear, a philosopher is someone who is poised over and above nature, someone who studies her “privities” and reveals them to the world through the instrument of speech, even if but the broken English of a beggar like Tom. But if Shakespeare's overt references to philosophy are few and far between, his plays yet reveal a fascination with exploring man's place within the cosmos, even his status as an **effect** of the cosmos, a patchwork of its various elemental properties, what Hamlet describes as this “quintessence of dust” (2.2). Contra Lear's assumption that knowing nature requires extraction from it and verbal mastery over it, Shakespeare's plays can be seen to reveal a different dynamic. In *The Tempest*, which is the focus of my inquiry in this paper, Shakespeare dramatizes a relation between human and nonhuman world whereby knowledge of the world requires submersion in it. I attempt to trace such dynamics in the island's presiding natural philosopher, Prospero, whose language is figured as continuous with and an extension of the airs, winds, sounds, and voices that animate the island. If critics perceive Prospero's language as a dominating tool that stands opposed to nature – a kind of Baconian organon -- I will argue that Shakespeare underscores the material dynamics of Prospero's speech, the extent to which his words marshal the voices of the airy element, which pervade the island no less than Prospero, body and mind. As such, the play offers a view of nature as the origin of speech, art, and culture, as well as a view of the natural philosopher as an instrument upon whom nature sounds her voice.

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“Diving in the Earth: Unmaking Political Life in *Timon of Athens*”

In Shakespeare's and Middleton's *Timon of Athens*, the eponymous character, upon escaping the political community that betrayed him with its ingratitude, turns back to curse it: “O thou wall, / That girdlest in those wolves, dive in the earth, / And fence not

Athens!” (12.1-3). This paper suggests that Timon’s invective against the city walls (and the political world it encloses and supports) is emblematic of the play’s cultivations of antipolitical imaginaries; in imagining the earth – and its various manifestations (stones, gold, roots, and human bodies) – here and throughout the play as an instrument for unmaking and dissolving the city, the play also uses elemental earth to expose, dismantle, and reassemble the *polis*’s constitutive relationships and the assymetrical, exploitative circulations of earthly materials which sustain them.

To this end, I examine in particular Timon’s digging. As a prepolitical activity that partially domesticates the earth and inadvertently harvests its gold alongside its roots, Timon’s digging ostensibly anticipates the earth’s accommodation for reviving political and social affiliation, thereby investing it with an idea of its political potential and value. At the same time, in commanding the earth to “Dry up thy marrows, vines, and plough-torn leas” (14.194), he also sees it as the medium through which the political world might be dismantled and its reconstitution forestalled. That is, if earth and its cultivation conventionally subtend the founding and preservation of political communities and their institutional apparatuses, Timon inverts this process. In imagining that he might withdraw the earth from the various forms of circulation, both social and natural, which characterize the play’s various intersecting economies, Timon aims to subvert nature’s potential to support human life, to divest the earth of its political uses, but in so doing he also forecloses the possibilities of earthly matter’s exploitation. This paper, therefore, considers how the play strives to develop a means of challenging and dismantling available definitions of political order, and of imagining in their place alternative networks of obligations.

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“What ‘hangs in our air’? Shakespeare’s atmospheric pollution”

What is the quality of air in Shakespeare’s plays? My essay is concerned with Shakespeare’s dramatisation of “atmospheric” contamination that occurs within the manifold regions of the sky as the frontiers between the different spheres become increasingly blurred with circulation of certain scientific writings, like those of Thomas Digges. This study follows Shakespeare’s own examination of arguably the most elusive element, the air, in particular when this element is shown to contain other elemental bodies (either watery or terrestrial) as well as diseases (“Devouring pestilence hangs in our air”, so Gaunt tells his banished son, in *Richard II*, 1.3), ill humours and omens that taint by contact or association the diaphanous purity of the spheres. Shakespeare’s air is indeed polluted (that is, not only sullied or profaned but also profanatory) in as much as it carries with it the tell-tale signs and revealing stigmas, both ancient and modern, that disputes which strive to maintain the world in its immutable state leave behind. The captain is thinking outside the sphere in *Richard II* (2.4.) when he claims that the region of the fixed stars (traditionally contained in a crystalline sphere) is marked by the presence of a meteor. Should this surprise us, when Bolingbroke’s “crystal” sky, which by its attribute seems to look towards the aqueous, crystalline sphere (beyond the sidereal

heaven), is crossed by blots of “ugly” clouds, which should only be encountered in the airy heaven (*Richard II*, 1.1)? Such an “atmosphere” (from the Greek *atmos*, “humid vapour” and *sphaira* “celestial sphere”) has yet to receive this very denomination within the scientific world of the seventeenth century; nonetheless the Shakespearean text proves to be intrigued by such semiotic, metaphorical and conceptual combinations and stretches. I first look at his increasingly slippery taxonomy when denoting areal regions (the sky, the sphere(s), the firmament, the orbs, the air, the heavens, and their accompanying attributes). This then leads me to study his staging of the manifold combinatory connections between extreme celestial regions (as between the sphere of the primo mobile and the sublunary sky, for instance) that vitiate the heavens while painting a subliminal vision of the sublunary skies. My aim is to demonstrate that these reveal not only the profound challenges the agency of the air poses; they also incite the audience to reconsider the complex prevailing visions of the agency of the air and the celestial world in both the “arts” and the “sciences” of medieval and early modern England.

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“Exit Drone: Sound, Space, Swarm, and Stage in the Henriad”

The buzzing, hissing, singing, swarming figure of the bee gives us a presence that vibrates, quite literally, between air and substance—or, more accurately, that reveals the very fallacy of delimiting a border between these two forms at all. This essay reads the practice of beekeeping in the early modern era as a radical engagement with this mode of material destabilization. Specifically, I aim to rethink of bees as *performers*, not in the sense of being fixed “actors,” but instead as forces that make legible the traces of the always-present connections between air, sound, and solidity. The paper stages a conversation between the beekeeping literature, on the one hand, and the more allegorically charged emergence of bees in Shakespeare’s *Henriad*, on the other. My hope is that we can recover the bee from the prison of rhetorical trope and view it as an invitation to reconsider the aerial ecologies that structure Shakespeare’s plays—and by extension reconsider the very notion of performance within the play’s narrative and in its execution as staged event. Rather than think of actors acting *for* someone or something across ‘space’ and ‘absence,’ I propose we take a cue from the bees—and the humans who coexisted in close kinship with them—and remember that air does not separate actor from audience, but is itself always animate, always beckoning, always ‘performing.’ The essay concludes by hazarding a more experimental turn. In light of my reading of Shakespeare’s plays, I take up the uncanny return of early modern bee imagery in our contemporary discussion of the ‘drone’—a term originally employed to denote a form of bee—as a nonhuman perpetrator of military action. How might an early modern and Shakespearean understanding of our connection to today’s drone, as an echo of the problematic blurring of human and material borders, complicate our fundamental alienation from these ‘unmanned’ flying creations?

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“‘Preaching to Stones’: Shakespeare, Stones, and Structuration”

When Macbeth implores the “sure and firm-set earth” to “Hear not my steps... for fear / The very stones prate of my whereabouts, (2.1.56-58),” he attributes a dual nature to the ground, as both the passive structure upon which he walks and the active witness to his treachery. Shakespeare exploits this seemingly contradictory nature of stone by contrasting his characters’ missteps to his stones’ anticipated compliance to the same cultural principles, beliefs, and values. He allows stones into the same social system that his characters occupy and subjects them fleetingly to the same tension between agency and structure. All the more powerfully is the ethical system reproduced if even the stones obey. However, to assert the primacy of structure over agency, as social theories that are traditionally strong in early modern studies would encourage (for example, of Marx and of Foucault), threatens the agency of stone that recent work in medieval and early modern studies has so confidently recovered. I suggest middle-ground thinkers on the structure-versus-agency issue—Pierre Bourdieu, Michel de Certeau, and Anthony Giddens—provide the most promising models for understanding how Shakespeare’s stones can operate within the same structures as Shakespeare’s characters without losing their agency. Examining Shakespeare’s active stones, I offer, deepens our renewed appreciation for the agency of earthly matter by beginning to show how our categories for analyzing social systems can further our understanding of how agency was perceived in the early modern world. Ultimately, I suggest, a character like Macbeth is less different than we might initially think from the stones he worries might announce his misdeeds.

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“‘Books in Running Brooks’: Water as Satirical Vehicle in *As You Like It*”

In the melancholy discourse of Jaques and elsewhere in *As You Like It*, water is a vehicle of disenchantment and satire, through its ability to consume, dilute, and render superfluous—satire flows like water rather than burning like fire. Jaques undercuts the celebration of romance and social/political restoration in the wedding scene by suggesting that the general coupling before him is, ultimately, nothing more than a strategy of survival, a hedge against catastrophe, in the form of flood. This satirical potential in the (anti-) substance of water is evident in Heraclitus’ famous paradox: “it is impossible to step twice into the same river.” Duke Senior’s claim that he and his exiled company will find “books in running brooks” seems to allude to this ancient conception of nature as flux and trace. The phrase suggests either a natural theology like that of Raymond Sebond or an empirically-based science like that of Francis Bacon. However, we could just as easily interpret the books as (cast or lost) in running brooks: knowledge or culture consumed and destroyed by sublime forces of nature. The satirical function of water is even more evident in the play’s reflections on tears, that specially humanized state of water. In Duke Senior and Orlando’s discourse on “gentleness,” they recognize in tears a purgation of suffering and a social bond solidified between sufferers and

sympathetic witnesses of suffering. For the wounded deer that provides the material for Jaques' similes, however, tears do not counteract suffering but rather repeat it; his tears "augment" the surfeit of the brook, with no hope of relief or exchange.