

Apocalypse and Form
Shakespeare Association of America Seminar, 2015
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Abstracts

Seminar Description

Is the apocalypse a form or the end of forms? Is form always a mediating screen ultimately annihilated by the face-to-face immediacy of revelation? This seminar invites papers that explore Shakespeare's lyric, narrative, and dramatic depictions of apocalyptic or messianic events and his use of formal innovation (masque elements in the romances or alterations to the sonnet sequence, for example) to connote revelatory change. In sum, it asks whether and how Shakespeare imagines apocalyptic or messianic change as a present possibility inside of literary forms.

Greg Foran
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SAA 2015
“Apocalypse and Form” seminar paper abstract

Miracles and Millennium in Bacon’s *New Atlantis*

Like many of his contemporaries, Francis Bacon understood God’s power to work miracles as analogous to the king’s prerogative to act outside the ordinary legal order for the good of the kingdom. Bacon seems to have counted himself a monarchist—and therefore a believer in jurisprudential miracles—at least in part because he felt that his proposed overhaul of natural philosophy would depend upon the centralizing authority of the king. Yet as a reformer of science, Bacon understood that systematic inquiry into nature’s second causes requires limiting the sphere of the miraculous as much as possible. Bacon’s ambivalence about miracles is nowhere more prominent than in his utopian fable *New Atlantis*, which describes the scientific wonders of the imaginary island of Bensalem. With an account of the miracle that brought Christianity to Bensalem at its center, *New Atlantis* otherwise takes pains to domesticate the miraculous, cataloguing all the ways that Bensalemite natural philosophy makes the impossible possible. This effort at demystification, I argue, is related to how monarchy and politics are marginalized in *New Atlantis*, and thus to the fable’s generic oddity. Against the usual expectations for utopian fiction, Bacon’s text ends abruptly, having scarcely addressed the political organization of the island. *New Atlantis*’s paucity of references to Bensalem’s king has given readers the impression of a text moving towards liberal modernity. But Bacon’s subordination of kings might be equally well understood as a function of his millennialism. The narrator’s brief digression about the Jewish belief that Bensalem’s king will sit at the Messiah’s feet might be the key to the whole text: to the extent that Bacon sees the advancement of learning as a millennial harbinger, he could also be expected to foretell the humbling of earthly sovereignty. Bacon has been seen as a secularizer, using the form of apocalypse while emptying it of its divine content, but I want to suggest that his project is paradoxically faithful to an understanding of Christianity as a self-consuming political theology.

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Arrested Development: King Lear's Promised Ends

The orthodox reading of Apocalypse available to early seventeenth century audiences of *King Lear* is readily established, and has been well documented by such scholars as Joseph Wittreich in his *Image of that Horror* (1984). Protestant readers of the 1560 Geneva Bible, or keen consumers of Book I of Spenser's *Faerie Queene* (1590) knew perfectly well how to allegorise a dragon or historicise a sequence of sounding trumpets. Shakespeare makes baffling play with this symbolic economy in the later phases of *King Lear* but strands us as we try to make sense of its end. Are we to share the characters' rhetoric of bafflement? How should we read the last act of the play?

I will suggest that a thwarted form of apocalypse is presented in these famous scenes, accessible if we read across range of possible sources, eschewing the dogmatism Book 1 of *The Faerie Queene* invites. These sources would include biblical prophecy; orthodox interpretations of Daniel and Revelation available to Shakespeare and his audience; the prior play *The True Chronicle History of King Leir*; and Holinshed's and Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Chronicles of ancient Britain*. Ends are held out to us but their consummation is arrested.

Neal Klomp

Apocalyptic Revelations: The MAD of Early Modern Plague Threats
in *Timon of Athens* and *Henry V*

John von Neuman's Mutually Assured Destruction (the defining military policy of the Cold War superpowers) has long been understood as rooted in the emergence of a new kind of warfare in the late 19th and early 20th century. The tactics of decimating obediently charging soldiers led to the diseased trenches of WWI that culminated in the total war/destruction at the core of early long-range artillery and night and high altitude bombing were the strategic harbingers of Global Thermonuclear War's planned death of all human life.

However MAD exists in a longer historical tradition that can be found in brutal conquests from the 19th century Belgian Congo to the total destruction of the ancient Assyrians. In the early modern period, few events match the decimation and destruction of the early Spanish conquests in the New World. However, the English scorched earth policy circa 1580 in Ireland along with the savagery of men like Walter Raleigh and his step-brother Humphrey Gilbert may come close. In both the Spanish and English colonial enterprises, the conquest was exacerbated/aided (depending upon one's perspective) by disease – Hernan Cortés's greatest weapon against the Aztec's may well have been smallpox. In Ireland, plague accompanied war and famine, and the early modern triumvirate of destruction and death likewise left Munster decimated and ripe for a new wave of English colonists that included Edmund Spenser in the mid-1580s.

Following the Greek roots of "apocalypse," this essay will push through the use of the contagious plague as a threat to uncover the deeper politics of the early modern disease. Timon's desperate wish to "send them back the plague, / Could I but catch it for them" counts on the power of the plague to threaten all. Of course, if carried out his threat would ensure his own death at the expense of enacting his revenge. Operating upon a similarly apocalyptic logic, Henry V's warning given to Montjoy that his already sick soldiers' rotting corpses will "breed a plague in France" that will cause "a second course of mischief, / Killing in relapse of mortality" takes away the possibility of a French victory as even in defeat the English will win the war. Thanatopolitically, the death of the English will still serve the health of Henry's state by infecting the French.

As in the MAD strategy, victory and defeat are merged into one as total death becomes necessary for victory. What do these apocalyptic strategies of mutually assured destruction expose about the early modern politicization of an ecological crisis like bubonic plague? Further, how is this plague-threat a part of the tragic catharsis on the one hand and of a historic national triumph on the other? The different functions of the plague as a threat in each genre offers important insights about the early modern English attempts to come to terms with and perhaps in some way appropriate this microbe that has been perhaps humanity's greatest nemesis.

Michael Neill

‘Broken Apocalypse’: Ending in *King Lear*

The ways in which Shakespeare’s greatest tragedy draws upon the book of Revelation have been extensively documented – notably by Joseph Wittreich in his study of *History, Prophecy and Apocalypse in ‘King Lear’*. But the relation between the two works is an uneasy one. In *The Sense of an Ending*, Frank Kermode famously described the play as a ‘broken apocalypse’. He had in mind the way in which *King Lear* refuses the ‘promised end’ of Judgement and the End of Time to which its action repeatedly points. In this paper I seek to explore the way in which *Lear* responds to another aspect of St John’s Apocalypse – the way in which the prophetic work repeatedly defers or refuses the complete ‘opening’, ‘unveiling’, or ‘discovery’ promised by its title. *King Lear* too moves towards a revelation that does not occur. The play’s final scene becomes a travesty of apocalyptic vision: in the mock *pietà* of Lear cradling the dead Cordelia, Kent and Edgar glimpse an ‘image’ of ‘the promised end’; but its ‘horror’ turns out to be a kind of *horror vacui*. Turning its back both on traditional moralisations of ending, and on the consolations of memorial artifice, the play – especially in its Folio version – confronts death as mere blankness, the silence of unbeing.

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Not a Wrack Behind: Baroque Dissolution in Shakespeare's *Tempest*

Abstract: In a reading of *The Tempest*, I anatomize how this remarkably prescient text forecasts not just the “brave new world” that divorces politics from theology – church from state and self (described by such scholars as Victoria Kahn, Jürgen Habermas, and Julia Reinhard Lupton), but also charts a curious anxiety and dismay at a cosmos grown disenchanted: a play that stages a farewell not just to the stage, but to a worldview – radically transforming Renaissance materials into a rich, strange artefact of the new Baroque age.

The Tempest is from its first lines about a world ending. Its opening question – “where is the master?” – and the subsequent confusion amidst the storm regarding divine mandate and the capacity for aristocracy to compel, stages (writ small but with tremendous dramatic density) the crisis of sovereignty occasioned by Europe’s first tentative argosies towards a new, secularized polis and its resulting spiritual/political cataclysm; with the authorizing, stabilizing *nomos* of kingship endangered by this sea voyage, the play enacts a series of collapses in master/servant distinction, culminating in Prospero’s hymeneal masque of gods and spirits compelled by art to bless – only to dissolve into “strange, hollow, and confused noise”, and precipitating from an unsettled magician a startling radical secular manifesto, eulogizing an end to the pageantry of kingship and the jouissance of faith.

This paper thus attempts to illuminate the unusual aesthetic features of this cosmic breakdown, and claims them for a category that has become neglected and marginalized in the study of English literature and Shakespeare in particular: that of the Baroque. Staging but then placing under negation the pageant, the revelry, of his absolutist phantasmagoria, Prospero finally imagines the liquefaction of the elegant courtly life that has depended on them: in this new, spiritless world, tower, palace, and temple will crumble and fall, replaced by a democratizing, millennial vision of universal global inheritance. Prospero, in this magnificent, extravagant apocalypse in silver, recognizes that the destructive energies of sovereign fiat he has released upon his island will turn the world that authored them to dust – leaving “not a wrack behind” (4.1.156).

Ryan Singh Paul
SAA 2015
Apocalypse & Form Seminar

The Time of Sovereignty: Revelation and *The Tempest*

My project for this seminar involves examining the problematic temporality of sovereign power. Through an intertextual reading of the Book of Revelation and *The Tempest*, I will trace the contours of a paradox seemingly inherent to sovereignty in which its authority (and authoritative station) must be confirmed retroactively. Or to put it another way, sovereignty is always belated, arriving late in order to demonstrate its priority. My reading draws on the work of Giorgio Agamben and Carl Schmitt on the exceptional decision as the root of sovereignty. While Agamben relies upon a spatial metaphor to describe the sovereign's relation to the juridical order – it is both inside and outside – I seek to read the sovereign decision in temporal terms: the sovereign is both before and after the decision.

I begin with Revelation, reading it as a theological-political theory of divine rulership. Historically speaking, it is a strangely anti-imperialist promotion of empire, a liberationist jeremiad against the Roman Empire that prophesies the coming of a foretold Christian empire. The text is also structurally odd as it attempts to express a divine, supra-temporal perspective in human, chronological time, a dilemma that often manifests in John of Patmos' experience of sensory and narrative disruptions. Taken together, these disjunctions seem to me to capture the impossible ontology of sovereignty. I turn to early modern theories of sovereignty, particularly as expressed by Jean Bodin (and probably Thomas Hobbes as well, among others), which I find to be structured around a similar paradoxical understanding of the sovereign's history. It is this paradox that, I argue, Shakespeare explores in *The Tempest* through the various contests over power: both the figurative contests over memory, such as those staged between Prospero, Miranda, and Caliban, and their literal counterparts in the violent and potentially violent battles over power involving again the three residents of the island as well as the four would-be usurpers among the shipwrecked Neopolitans – Sebastian, Alonso, Stefano, and Trinculo – who comically enact the problem of sovereign time through their failed machinations.

How to get into the end of the world: inventing apocalypse in Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*

Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* presents two main, albeit embedded, storylines with two distinct ambitions: the first is the emancipation of a ghost in limbo (Don Andrea); the second is the redemption of a murdered son (Hieronimo's Horatio). Significantly, both men are judges. Don Andrea is a judiciary within the primary play world whose function is to civilize the humans of another play world. Hieronimo is a judiciary within that secondary play world whose function is to prophesy, or create the future. The source of both worlds—and their simultaneous vision—is the idea of art, and specifically the theatre, as the only thing that can transform “both nature and human nature into the same form” (Northrop Frye). I take Frye's lead in associating this “controlling idea of art” with apocalypse: “And just as the controlling idea of civilization is the humanizing of nature, and the controlling idea of prophecy the emancipation of man, so the controlling idea of art, the source of them both, must be the simultaneous vision of both. This is apocalypse, the complete transformation of both nature and human nature into the same form.” I think of *The Spanish Tragedy* as a complexly-orchestrated meditation on the failure of justice to adequately create a new earth. Justice only produces eternal iterations: Pluto's court is England's court, and to die is simply to be re-ordered. The desirable shape, the formal cause of the work of justice is, for both our judges, vengeance. Revenge reveals and ends both men's dreams, taking them home to a world that is the exact same form as their desires. As one of the first revenge tragedies of its theologically-conflicted era, Kyd's play situates art, and the theatre specifically, as the truly final—and perhaps only—revelation of the human.

Tina Romanelli

Eschatology, Prophecy, and Perception in *Macbeth* and *The Comedy of Errors*

William Shakespeare considers apocalyptic possibilities in several of his tragedies, and while the end of the world is often considered tragic, many narratives explore the more humorous aspects of the dramatic images associated with the end times. In the Christian tradition dominant in Shakespeare's England, the end of the world exists as a prophetic text full of signs that must be read rightly in order to prepare for the Last Judgment. For example, Shakespeare's *Macbeth* famously deals with prophecies brought to fruition through the titular characters' interpretation of the witches' signs. Macbeth's arrogance and ambition suggest that the apocalyptic circumstances at the end of the play are the result of serious errors in his interpretations of prophecies. Though tragedies are more obvious candidates for apocalyptic readings, comedies often portray similarly discordant circumstances while managing to reunify the fragmented society by the end of the play. In *The Comedy of Errors*, Shakespeare plays with the idea of constant misinterpretation of evidence. Antipholus of Syracuse notes that "nimble jugglers that deceive the eye, / Dark-working sorcerers that change the mind, / Soul-killing witches that deform the body, / Disguised cheaters, prating mountebanks, / And many such-like liberties of sin" abound in Ephesus and may be responsible for the recognition errors between the twins and their servant twins. In my paper for SAA, I compare instances of misrecognition in these plays to instances of doubling in *Revelation* in order to explore the comedic possibilities of the apocalypse.

McKenna Rose
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Seminar: Apocalypse and Form

Shakespeare's Trashy Romances: The Pathetic Fallacy at the End of the World

I take up the figure of the pathetic fallacy and the form of the apocalypse in *Cymbeline* and *The Tempest* to show how both plays unfold after an ideal natural world has fallen into ruin. In their respective post-apocalyptic landscapes, each play stages instances in which discarded, non-human objects take on agency, arrest human action, and contend with human actors for priority. For instance, the candle in Imogen's bedchamber vies with Iachimo for position as he composes the inventory that has the potential to bring about the end of civilization. Similarly, when Prospero threatens to bury his staff and drown his book, the inanimate objects reveal a certain liveliness: the book and staff must be alive prior to Prospero's threat so that they may be abjured. Though textual and environmental critics of Shakespeare's drama disdain the attribution of human qualities to nonhuman objects, the moments in the romances in which things seem to move and act expose the notion of unfettered human agency as unsustainable. The pathetic fallacy has a bad reputation because it exposes ways in which the objects on which humans rely also compromise them. Despite the figure's bad reputation, it also shows ways to think annihilation while remaining open to a concept of life without nature. That is to say, the taper in Imogen's bedroom, as well as Prospero's lively book and staff, offer a way to think the trace of the author in the object, as well as the ways in which inanimate objects survive cataclysm to predict events in the world to come. It is on these grounds that I will argue detritus on the early modern stage has a great deal to teach us about life, and life after life, on this, our dying planet.