

**2018 Seminar: Old and New Materialisms 1**  
**Leaders: Liza Blake, University of Toronto**  
**Jacques Lezra, University of California Riverside**

**Seminar Description**

In literary studies, philosophy, the history of science and other disciplines, the last ten years have seen a turn to what is being called “new materialism.” In this seminar we are interested in exploring how “new” the contemporary discussions of new materialism really are. Our intuition is that scholars of early modern literature will be able to enrich current approaches to materialism by exploring older materialisms, including works of ancient and early modern philosophy, poetry, and drama. The modern and contemporary new materialists turn largely to contemporary philosophy and science; Karen Barad’s *Meeting the Universe Halfway* partakes of contemporary physics, for example, and Jane Bennett’s *Vital Matter* draws on twentieth-century ideas of vitalism. But what does it do to our discussions of new materialisms to fold in older philosophies of matter and materialisms as well?

We welcome essays that bring early modern texts into these exciting materialist conversations. Papers might examine the early modern reception of Lucretius’s poem *De Rerum Natura*; philosophies of matter in Shakespeare’s plays; atom poems by Margaret Cavendish; or aleatory materialism and philosophies of chance. They might revisit the political and revolutionary claims of John Rogers’ 1996 *The Matter of Revolution*, or of Kelly Robertson’s more recent “Medieval Materialism Manifesto”; they might seek out in early modern literary or other works versions of, or alternatives to, what Quentin Meillassoux has called “correlationism;” they might puzzle out what sense the notion of “object” has well before Graham Harman and others take it up (in so-called object-oriented-ontologies); or they might attempt to tease apart the relationship between these new materialists speculating about the nature of matter, on the one hand, and the (ancient and modern) philosophical tradition of materialism on the other.

**Erika Boeckler, Northeastern University**

**“A Louers Complaint” and the Early Modern Material Imaginary**

This paper uses Shakespeare’s narrative poem “A Louers Complaint” to argue for the centrality of poetics and the poetic imaginary to early modern engagement with materialist discourse. Present contemporary materialist inquiry emerging from other disciplines routinely overlook this aspect, despite an obvious reliance on storytelling and poetically vivid vocabulary. The inheritance of Lucretian poetics draws attention to the materiality of language as it is foregrounded through word and letter play and audio features, the reworking of images to observe and imagine objects from various perspectives, the exploration of symbolic weight as objects are invested and divested of semiotic potential, and the intertwined poetic and narrative imaginary that allows for a distended reworking of a subject.

I have chosen to focus on “A Lover’s Complaint” for a variety of reasons. It is a narrative poem, like (and unlike) Lucretius’, but in the complaint genre that concludes Shakespeare’s and other early modern poets’ sonnet sequences. Markedly set off from lyric yet connected to it, the “Complaint” is invested in the work that narrative poetry performs opposed to and in conversation with lyric. It is a poem deeply engaged with emotionally charged and symbolically fraught lovers’ gifts, which move between people and geographies accumulating emotional,

**2018 Seminar: Old and New Materialisms 2**  
**Leaders: Liza Blake, University of Toronto**  
**Jacques Lezra, University of California Riverside**

symbolic, and verbal energy. It serves as a way to consider material writing, as it treats objects like rings and embroidered (with poesy) handkerchiefs the same as paper or parchment sonnets, including sonnets that meditate on the materiality of the rings' gemstones. It is invested in materialist questions about how these objects move and manipulate humans, both physically and emotionally. Lastly, as the final piece in Shakespeare's (and others') sonnet sequence, it serves as the precursor to readers' engagements with the book as physical object before they move to close it.

**Lee Emrich, University of California, Davis**

**Encountering Margaret Cavendish through her "Material" Poetics**

Even in her earliest work, *Poems and Fancies* (1653), Cavendish presents her views on the workings of matter and Nature—an investigation that she would continue throughout her treatises, works of fiction, and poetry. As a natural philosopher, Cavendish continues to gain place in scholarship as an early modern materialist, but a solid, unwavering philosophical opinion is nearly impossible to capture from her oeuvre. Numerous studies that read Cavendish's poetry and prose for her views on matter work to explicate her materialism, and many studies have looked specifically at *Poems and Fancies*, which, after its famous prefatory materials, begins with a lengthy section of poetry on the workings of atoms and their motion and Nature's power. I, too, look to this first book by Cavendish, but rather than read her poetry for what it says about her materialism, I think about how her views on materialism influence her views on poetry. Cavendish's literary prowess has had a varied reception, but as I hope to show, an unstable welcome about which an author must speculate and readers' speculations of the author's imagination is part what defines poetry for Cavendish. To promote this instability, Cavendish relies on what I call "material" metaphors, metaphors of cloth, cloth-making, clothes, and getting dressed, to describe how poetry is both created and received. By relying on material metaphors, she draws from the complex social work of clothing, which in early modern England was both praised for its ability to constitute a subject and feared for its performative power, to suggest not just a poetics of materialism, but a "material" poetics—one that is inherently social and speculative; her reliance of speculation and encounter as essential poetry suggests that Cavendish may deserve a place in discussions of new materialist philosophy as well.

A key term for both her poetics and her materialism is "fancy" or imagination, which for the Cavendish of *Poems and Fancies*, comes from the brain and is therefore a part of the material substance of the world. In her poetics, "Fancy is the Soul in Poetrie" but Cavendish's material metaphors suggest that it requires an apparel of language before it can be sent out into the world to be encountered by other readers. Cavendish's "fancies" are fully material, but that materiality is extended into the "material" words which clothe the fancies, which then intertwine with the fancies of her readers. And like all clothed bodies, poetry, or clothed fancy, and its author become open to judgment and speculation. For Cavendish, then, poetry does not exist outside the realm of its reception—poetry is a series of different encounters, between a poet and their imagination, between imagination and words, between words and the page, between page and reader—and writer and reader mingle at a material level anywhere along this spectrum of encounters. The continued materiality along this spectrum creates slippages between bodies and

**2018 Seminar: Old and New Materialisms 3**  
**Leaders: Liza Blake, University of Toronto**  
**Jacques Lezra, University of California Riverside**

thoughts, recalling Ian Bogost's notion that "something is always something else, too: a gear in another mechanism, a relation in another assembly, a part in another whole" (*Alien Phenomenology* 26). In Bogost's new materialist philosophy, "unit operation entails deductions in the light of impossible verification—units never take one another as they are but only as a kind of burlesque" (30). While scholars have and continue to explore Cavendish's wonderfully diverse "fancy," I argue that attending specifically to how Cavendish uses clothing to describe the work and reception of poetry importantly highlights how, for Cavendish, poetry is completed by its incompleteness and crafted in part by speculation. The fact that Cavendish's materialism keeps conceptually shifting in her own work and in scholarship accomplishes her poetic goals—her work is never complete because our work, as scholars, is never complete.

**Jessie Hock, Vanderbilt University**

**Lucretian Poetics and the New Materialisms**

This paper examines the place of poetry—and particularly Lucretian poetry—in the new materialisms. Our seminar leaders have asked us to consider what the "new" materialisms find in older philosophies of matter. I question those very terms: instead searching for what new materialists find in Lucretius's philosophy of matter, I ask what they find in Lucretian poetics. This builds on an ongoing book project in which I consider the impact of Lucretian poetics on early modern poetry and poetics. There I argue that Lucretius's theorization in *De rerum natura* of the imagination and poetic persuasion had a profound impact on early modern poetic theory and practice, initiating an atomist genealogy at the heart of the lyric tradition. In the context of this paper, I hope that my orientation towards the legacy of Lucretian poetics (rather than better-appreciated aspects of Lucretian thought such as Epicurean morality or atomist physics) will open up novel approaches to the new materialisms, which I argue are indebted not only to conventional understandings of atomism as mechanistic materialism but also to the sort of imaginative Lucretianism that so attracted early modern poets. I am interested in how those Lucretian theorizations of poetic language that fired the imaginations of early modern readers and writers have proven equally potent for contemporary critical theorists. Given that the new materialisms in all their variety are consistently understood as being unified primarily in their opposition to the late twentieth century linguistic turn, this turn to poetic language is both perplexing and noteworthy.

**Jason Hogue, University of Texas-Arlington**

**Intra-corporeal Arborealities:  
Trees, Pain, and Punishment in *The Tempest***

Ecocritic Simon Estok laments, "Scant attention has been focused within ecocritical circles on theorizing of pain as constitutive of our ontological and material boundaries and realities," the "our" referring exclusively to a human experience of pain as a definitive factor in delineating material boundedness. Critical animal and plant studies, however, often highlight the limits of exceptionalist human biases. Accordingly, this paper seeks to extend theories of physical pain beyond notions of human pain to a broader sense: pain expressed in, on, through, and across all

**2018 Seminar: Old and New Materialisms 4**  
**Leaders: Liza Blake, University of Toronto**  
**Jacques Lezra, University of California Riverside**

living bodies, in particular those of vegetal beings like trees and other plants. Analyzing pain in the context of dramatic representations of early modern punishment, I consider moments of possible shared pain at sites of punishment, where hewn arboreal bodies cut and cross into the bodies of humans. In this paper, I lay out a rationalization for embracing this notion of shared corporeality, applying my theoretical vantage point in the specific context of Ariel's arboreal confinement and the way in which he does (vegetal) time. In applying this ethical framework within materialist paradigms, I build on theories by Karen Barad and Stacy Alaimo to imagine an intra-corporeality of agential bodies that transverse not only species but also kingdom lines, re-interpreting the "body politic" to include a more expansive and diverse register of "subjects." This new materialist approach offers readings of Shakespearean drama that appreciate "old" materialist paradigms of power dynamics and class struggle but also seek to understand struggle more broadly, identifying points of pain emanating from bodies human and beyond, enmeshed in a co-constitutive, shared vulnerability.

**Rayna Kalas, Cornell University**

**Conceited Things and the Matter of Touch**

Though the sonnet tradition can easily be taken as the inaugural form of the modern subject-object distinction, in this paper I focus some poetic conceits that collapse the subject-object distinction by converting animate to inanimate, being to non-being, and identity to non-identity (and back again). I see these conceits (in this paper drawn from Sidney) not simply as oscillations between subject and object position, or as the subject's attempt to imagine or inhabit the position of the object, but as a way that lyric poetry effects touch between things and thought. Following upon Daniel Tiffany's call (in *Toy Medium*) that we attend more closely to "lyric substance," and that we allow for uncertainty in the "distinction between corporal and incorporeal phenomena," I ask what kinds of bodies are constituted by these conceits and what kind of touch they allow us to experience. For a reader to apprehend the transfiguration of persons and things in a poetic conceit generally requires more sense than reason. And from this vantage, the conceit is differently "metaphysical" than we have supposed it. By drawing out Sidney's attention to "touch" in *Astrophil and Stella*, I show that conceits are often more invested in what can be wrought through a "touch" than through a concept.

**Alexander Lowe McAdams, Rice University**

**Esoteric Alchemy and the Secretive *Individuum* in *Paradise Lost*"**

It is no secret that barrels of ink have been spilled over Milton, science, and intellectual history. More discrete, however, is the unexplored link between secret knowledge, the pursuit of liberty, and the materialist composition of the *Paradise Lost* universe. While scholars have attempted to piece apart Milton's science, understanding it as an amalgamation of monist materialism, vitalism, and chymistry, a more thorough investigation of Milton's engagement with esoteric alchemy is necessary to understand the "anxious cares" (book 8, line 185) in the garden that God, and by proxy Raphael, seek to suppress in Adam and Eve. In the attempt to associate Milton with the intellectually acceptable Thomas Hobbes and Robert Boyle, scholars have turned a blind eye

**2018 Seminar: Old and New Materialisms 5**  
**Leaders: Liza Blake, University of Toronto**  
**Jacques Lezra, University of California Riverside**

to the more radical aspects of Milton's philosophy and theodicy, especially those on display in *Paradise Lost* and his theological prose work *De Doctrina Christiana*, which places emphasis on the *individuum* (atomic individual) and its material relationship with liberty and individuality.

This essay argues that ambivalence over including alchemy's rightful place in the history of science—including its political and religious status during the 1660s—has led scholars to disassociate Milton from the occult-leaning materialist philosophies his epic consciously espouses. Because Milton's *Paradise Lost* is a mash-up of alchemical philosophies, Epicurean philosophy, and divined illumination, this essay, through original English-to-Latin translation, examines the poet's exceedingly complex relationship with liberty, individualism, and alchemical practices. This essay uncovers these long-held secrets of the epic, while also laying bare the political ramifications of Milton simultaneously including tinctures of atheist atomic theory and radical Puritan theology in the same work. Arguing that the atomic *individuum* lies central to *Paradise Lost*'s principal controversy, this essay seeks to reconcile the material and philosophic contributions in the text that on first encounter appear irresolvable.

**Jess R. Pfeffer, Tufts University**

**Spectral Materiality:  
Or, Is This a Dagger Which I See Before Me?**

The New Materialisms and Object-Oriented Ontology have often been grouped together regardless of their admittedly oppositional relationship to materiality (Harman, as the spokesperson for OOO, calls his position “anti-materialist” and “immaterialist”). Despite the seemingly diametrical perspective on materiality, both theoretical positions view the material as a self-evident marker of presence, one that is opposed to perception or interaction and instead demonstrates the self-coherence of objects. Whether for or against materialism, these philosophical trends claim that matter, as a distinctly known, identifiable material reality, is inherently “real” and present, and therefore opposed to the abstraction of philosophy and discourse. Their reductive understanding of “materiality,” as a counterpoint to a clearly distinguishable “immateriality” and correspondent with a coherent sense of reality, is what this paper hopes to address.

By pointing to the contingent division between materiality and immateriality, between “matter” and “concept,” I argue that any formulation of a coherent material reality is bound up with a desire for coherence that “the material” can never confirm. Instead, I propose a theory of “spectral materiality.” This theory is attentive to the figurative in addition to the literal, thus moving past the assumption that materiality can only identify predetermined physical properties. “Spectral materiality” captures the simultaneous excess of materiality and evacuation of the “material” by spotlighting the interplay of hallucination, haunting, and materiality. Moreover, it centralizes the role of perception in the construction of materiality by acknowledging the way that desire actively shapes the contours of objects.

My paper bases this theory in a reading of the dagger scene from *Macbeth* with a focus on the play's interrogation of the boundaries of materiality. I argue that this monologue, and the play

**2018 Seminar: Old and New Materialisms 6**  
**Leaders: Liza Blake, University of Toronto**  
**Jacques Lezra, University of California Riverside**

more broadly, rejects a binary understanding of fantasy and reality by calling attention to how the materiality of objects always threatens to be exposed as hallucinations, thus evidencing the “spectral materiality” of objects. By pairing the spectral with the material, *Macbeth* demonstrates that the material is always bound up with our conceptualization of and fidelity to the objects’ relationship to imagination and desire. I argue that *Macbeth* sees the interplay between hallucinations, desires, and objects as evidencing the very constructedness of the material rather than pointing to a coherent notion of materiality that is clearly distinct from immateriality.

**Adam Rzepka, Montclair State University**

**Virtual knowledge in *Hamlet***

When Hamlet considers "what a piece of work" a man is, he starts with "reason" and ends with "dust," traversing the full sweep of humanist ontology from elevated abstraction to abject materiality. Neither extreme, however, isolates what is most "express and admirable" about the human figure: that emerges in the dynamic ground between the poles, where "motion," angelic "action," and godlike "apprehension" catch him on the wing. The process of becoming human happens in the quick coil of doing and grasping, with the measured stateliness of rational thought and the inert stuff of being left as static end points on either side.

My paper will take this sketch of human potentiality as a cue for reading cognition in *Hamlet* as a process of coming-to-know that refuses firm grounding in either abstraction or materiality. Specifically, I will ask whether what has been understood as doubt or hesitation in the play—its famous failures of conviction—can be usefully considered as incipient, potential, or "virtual" knowledge. I will pursue this line of inquiry in close conversation with the ways in which will and understanding (the two faculties of the uniquely human soul) were described as dynamic mechanisms in the *scientia de anima* tradition with which Hamlet is at least passingly familiar. That tradition explored understanding, for instance, not as a totality but as a sequence, running, in Robert Burton's formulation, through “apprehension, composition, division, discoursing...and judgment.” In such partial, transitory stages of knowing as Aquinas's "*aestimativa*" and Melancthon's "passive understanding," early modern anatomies of the soul rediscovered within an apparently static structure of distinct parts its original Aristotelian force as a flux of potentialities.

This approach suggests a route around the conflicted investment that the new materialism has had in materializing cognition, sometimes even as it announces the project of dematerializing it. The insistent methodological drive to rediscover that thought is anything but inward and abstract has led studies of early modern cognition into an almost unnavigable delta of distributed objects: as Evelyn Tribble has argued recently, "We might begin by defining cognition simply as ‘thinking,’ but only if we bear in mind that ‘thinking’ is not detached from embodiment, affect, and the environment" (where "the environment" encompasses the full range of material and social interactions traditionally addressed by the new historicism). Tribble's own attempt, with John Sutton, to counter "critical suspicion of 'the mind'...as inevitably ahistorical" and redress the "widespread neglect of the psychological realm" has led directly to materially distributed bases. My paper will argue that attention to the way "the mind" was theorized in faculty psychology,

**2018 Seminar: Old and New Materialisms 7**  
**Leaders: Liza Blake, University of Toronto**  
**Jacques Lezra, University of California Riverside**

like the uses to which it is put in *Hamlet*, demonstrates that it can be historicized without being materialized, and also without being subsumed in a retrograde projection of inward unity. As early modern thought takes shape between reason and dust, it escapes reduction to either.

**Steven Swarbrick, Baruch College, CUNY**

**“In ev’ry figure equal man”:  
Architectural Anthropologies in Marvell’s *Upon Appleton House***

In this paper, I examine the country-house poem and its architectural motifs in connection with Marvell’s poetic vitalism. I argue that the theme of architecture in Marvell’s *Upon Appleton House* (1651) departs from the country-house poem’s generic presumption that subjectivity and dwelling, being and building, exists in a relation of utility or complementarity. Whereas Ben Jonson’s *To Penshurst* (1616) lays out the importance of algorithmic proportion, contrasting “Those proud, ambitious heaps” of foreign form to the modest yet harmonious proportions of Penshurst, where, it is said, the human body not only lives but “dwells” within the architectural frame, Marvell and Lanyer see dwelling as something other than the containment or expression of human form. Drawing on the architectural theory of Leon Battista Alberti’s *De re aedificatoria* (1452), Henry Wotton’s *The Elements of Architecture* (1624), and radical theorists Gilles Deleuze and Alain Badiou, I show that the primary artistic impulse of these poems is not the human body but geometrical form. This roots architecture not in the creativity of mankind but in the geometrical patterns—the lines, planes, and bodies—that Spinoza calls *Deus sive Natura*, “God or Nature.” From Marvell’s “*holy Mathematicks*,” which embeds divine form in the architectural forms of nature (“The beasts are by their dens expressed: / And birds contrive an equal nest”), to the involutory interiors of Aemilia Lanyer’s sacred and erotic spaces, this paper explores the fold between matter and mathematical figures in the organization of human and nonhuman spaces.

**Dyani Johns Taff, Ithaca College**

**Violent Matter:  
“Womb/Tomb,” “Wave/Grave,” and Sea Sovereignty in Early Modern Romance**

In 1591, the Earl of Hereford ordered his servants to create a lake on his Elvetham estate on which to stage an elaborate naumachia—or sea battle—as entertainment for Elizabeth I on her progress of that year. With music and poetry presented by water nymphs and punctuated with cannon fire, Hereford’s entertainments transferred naval conflict from the terrifying sea—a vividly present scene to those following the Anglo-Spanish war—to an inviting, tame, man-made lake. The violence is displaced: cannons and fireships are no longer killing sailors and winds are no longer destroying Spanish galleons; rather, excavation and river redirection radically reshape the land into a microcosm of the globe in celebration of what John Dee had referred to in 1577 as Elizabeth I’s (potential) sea “Souereignty” and rulership over the “Brytish Impire.”<sup>1</sup> Yet, as

---

<sup>1</sup> John Dee, *General and Rare Memorials Pertayning to the Perfect Arte of Navigation* (London: John Daye, 1577), Biiv; Aiiir.

**2018 Seminar: Old and New Materialisms 8**  
**Leaders: Liza Blake, University of Toronto**  
**Jacques Lezra, University of California Riverside**

terrifying as the sea certainly is, early modern writers often class watery matter—and the ocean in particular—as fundamental to creation, understanding violence and destructive force as integral to material generation; writers such as the Elvetham poet, Edmund Spenser, John Milton, and Aphra Behn undoubtedly worked from both classical and biblical precedents as they explored this concept. While an important strand of this is tradition genders watery matter female, and posits the necessity of a masculine force—the Christian God, or other male principal—to form the matter into the world we now see and inhabit, the writers I examine in this paper take a resolutely ambiguous view of the gender of violent matter. I argue that oceans, floods, fountains, and rivers, because of water’s unruly violence, often incite an authorial move to discipline violent often feminized matter, and to displace or contain violence in order to confirm the power of the self over the body, of humans over the environment, of monarch over peoples and territories. I show also that writers just as often resist the urge to tame chaotic, destructive water, embracing the productivity of violent matter and yet also inviting readerly skepticism of traditions that describe material encounters in the language of warfare.

**Benjamin Duncan VanWagoner, Columbia University**

**Shipwreck Risk**

In “Shipwreck Risk,” I explore the effect of the shipwreck sequence in Jonson, Marston and Chapman’s *Eastward Ho*, examining how a spectator *within* the play is made spectator to a wreck on the Thames as a flawed model for audiences *of* the play. Staging a perspective on this wreck, I argue, inspires a mirrored form of maritime uncertainty which is shared by both onstage observers and the theater audience. Alongside *Eastward Ho*, this paper looks at early modern English interpretations of the proem to Book II of Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura*, which meditates on the experience of shipwreck for its participants as well as observers. I argue that these materials reimagine the ruin of prose and dramatic shipwreck accounts as a form of spectatorial uncertainty, encouraging disparate, indeterminate experiences of the same risky events.