The Scale of Catastrophe
Ecology and Transition, Medieval to Early Modern

Medieval and early modern texts imagined the world as intercatastrophic: precariously flourishing between a Flood that only Noah and his family had survived and a fiery apocalypse to come, twin purgings of the mortal world. Although the Deluge was in the distant past, divinely promised never again to arrive, medieval and early modern writers share a vocabulary for transition in which both fire and flood are invoked to mark historical breaks and anxious moments of transition. This seminar will pair medieval texts fascinated by survival in the face of cataclysm with early modern texts that carry the stories they offer into new realms. Participants will investigate how the scale of catastrophe is narrated, where scale is size (local, global, cosmic) and structure, a ladder [scala] that sorts nature into hierarchy. We will consider the gender of catastrophe, mapping whether women tell different stories against and within catastrophe from men, and contemplate the frequent linking of disaster narratives to stories of race, origin, and colonization. The schedule of readings frequently pairs medieval texts with early modern ones that reinterpret them. Participants are expected to bring their own research to discussion and assist in the creation of a course archive. The seminar meets Thursdays 1-4:30 p.m., 29 January through 23 April 2015, excluding 12 March, 2 April, and 9 April. Participants are asked to attend the GW MEMSI symposium “Transition, Scale and Catastrophe” on Friday March 20 in lieu of the Thursday March 19 seminar meeting.
SCHEDULE OF READINGS

Books in green should be purchased. Hyperlinked items should be downloaded. Items in black are from the Folger archive or available in the seminar Dropbox.

January 29
Promise/Threat
Genesis chapters 1-25 in the Douay-Rheims or King James translation (both if you have the time; the Latin Vulgate as well if you have the skill)

http://www.latinvulgate.com/

Holinshed’s Chronicles: Britain and the Flood (“Of Noah & his three sonnes”):

http://www.english.ox.ac.uk/holinshed/texts.php?text1=1587_0127

Laurie Shannon, *Accommodated Animal* chapter 1 (“The Law’s First Subjects”)

February 5
Fire/Water
*Beowulf* (in Old English if you can; otherwise read Seamus Heaney’s postcolonial Irish translation, including his foreword; Norton critical edition is best)

“The Londoners Lamentation” (on the Great Fire)

http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/ballad/31925/xml

Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (concentrate on “Apocalypse”)


February 12
Between Deluge and Deluge

Chester play of *Noah’s Flood*

Chaucer, “Miller’s Tale”

“True report of certaine wonderfull overflowings of waters, now lately in Summersetshire, Norfolke, and other places of England” (disaster pamphlet from the Folger archives [STC 22915], also on EEBO)

Albrecht Dürer, “Dream Vision” [of deluge]. May be accessed here (click on the image for a higher res version of painting with German text):

http://www.wga.hu/html_m/d/durer/2/16/2/12dream.html

Lisa Kiser, “The Animals in Chester’s *Noah’s Flood*”

http://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/eth/article/view/15238


February 19
Foundation Apocalypse

Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. Michael Faletra (Broadview), plus Latin version if you can (Boydell Press 2007)


Suggested: Sharon O’Dair, “Slow Shakespeare: An Eco-Critique of ‘Method’”
February 26
Sustain Collapse
http://www.philological.bham.ac.uk/cambrit/contents.html
William Shakespeare, *Cymbeline*
From the “ecological PMLA” [PMLA 127.3 (2012)]:
• Eleanor Johnson, “The Poetics of Waste: Medieval English Ecocriticism,”
• Tobias Menely, ‘The Present Obfuscation’: Cowper’s *Task* and the Time of Climate Change”
• “Sustainability” cluster short essays by Stacy Alaimo, Dan Brayton, Stephanie LeMenager and Stephanie Foote, Steve Mentz

March 5
Rough Seas / Bookwreck
William Shakespeare, *King Lear*
Lear story and its aftermath in Holinshed
• http://www.english.ox.ac.uk/holinshed/texts.php?text1=1587_0134
• http://www.english.ox.ac.uk/holinshed/texts.php?text1=1587_0135
Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea* chapter 8 (environmental history without catastrophe)
Steve Mentz, *At the Bottom of Shakespeare’s Ocean*

Friday March 20
Symposium on "Transition, Scale and Catastrophe" @ GW

March 26
Material Worlds / Elseheres
April 16
To Weather
Thomas Dekker, The Wonderful Year (http://pages.uoregon.edu/rbear/yeare.html)
Walter Ralegh, Discovery of Guyana, ed. Benjamin Schmidt (Bedford 2007)
Lowell Duckert, “When It Rains” (Material Ecocriticism) and “Walter Ralegh’s Liquid Narrative” (Literary and Visual Ralegh, ed. Christopher Armitage)

April 23
Retrospect. Prospect.
Timothy Morton, Hyperobjects

Typical seminar structure:

1-3  lively discussion of assigned readings
3-3.30  tea break
3.30-4.30  participant presentations (see schedule)

This syllabus is a work in progress rather than an inscription upon stone. The course is open to collapse, emergence, reconfiguring, and intercatastrophic inhabitance.