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978-1-107-00835-9 - Supernatural Environments in Shakespeare's England: Spaces of Demonism, Divinity, and Drama

Kristen Poole

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Prologue: Setting – and unsettling – the stage*

GUILDENSTERN: The scientific approach to the examination of phenomena is a defence against the pure emotion of fear.

Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*¹

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have come to visit. In a moment that is as raw for the emotions expressed as for the witness of false friendship, Hamlet attempts to describe his melancholy:

... indeed, it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame the earth seems to me a sterile promontory, this most excellent canopy the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire, why it appeareth nothing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours.
(*Hamlet* 2.2.263–9²)

The scene is familiar. It is not quite as iconic as the moment when Hamlet gazes into the hollowed eyes of Yorick's skull, but the sentiment is the same. That which is great and wondrous becomes, for the tortured prince, base and decayed. Man, the paragon of animals, is also the "quintessence of dust" (2.2.274). The majestic seems foul. It is a paradox that is encapsulated in the play's insistent use of the word "rank" – that which is noble; that which rots.³

As he tries to convey the source of his torment to his erstwhile friends, Hamlet finds this juxtaposition of beauty and putrefaction in the very space he occupies; heaven seems to him indistinguishable from the vapors that rise from hell. He uses the theater as a visual aid: "[L]ook you," he says, the imperative seemingly addressed to the audience as well as to his immediate companions, "this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire." The gesture is towards the actual heavens, the contemporary name given to the canopy which covered the thrust Elizabethan stage. It is a rare Shakespearean instance of architectural self-consciousness (a dynamic almost, but not quite exactly, metatheatrical), akin to the famous reference to the "wooden O" in the

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prologue to *King Henry V*.⁴ It is a moment in which the Globe seems to gloat. And yet, it appears “nothing . . . but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours.” Heaven intermingles with hell; materiality is indistinguishable from the mist; the reality of solid architecture is compromised by the specter of a mysterious void. At this moment, the wooden O – the Globe itself – presents its own inherent paradox. Not only Hamlet’s punning language, but the very setting in which he stands, becomes a site of interpretive and cognitive instability.

“Quintessence of dust”: just as heaven merges with hell, so too this verbal oxymoron suggests a profound spatial disturbance. Audiences today are likely to understand “quintessence” as “[t]he most typical example of a category or class; the most perfect embodiment of a certain type of person or thing” (*Oxford English Dictionary* [www.oed.com.proxy.nss.udel.edu], def. 3.b), and take Hamlet’s line to mean “man is the ultimate form of dirt.” His original audience, however, probably would have comprehended “quintessence” as the “fifth essence existing in addition to the four elements, supposed to be the substance of which the celestial bodies were composed” (*OED*, def. 1.a), a definition popularized through alchemy. Man (to use Hamlet’s word choice) is thus a mixture of the celestial and the terrestrial. The oxymoron here does not simply present the condition of humanity as an ontological paradox, but crashes a familiar Aristotelian cosmology. The spatial confusion that began on the stage spreads outwards to those in the Globe, encompassing the groundlings with their feet firmly planted in the dust.

We are perhaps attuned to the inflections of medieval philosophy and Christian humanism in Hamlet’s speech.⁵ It is more surprising to discover the resonance of cartography. As John Gillies has strikingly shown, this speech has strong verbal affinities with the text of Mercator’s *Atlas*.⁶ Then again, perhaps this should not be surprising, given the geographic context of Shakespeare’s theater. To name a theater “The Globe” – or, more accurately, to re-name “The Theatre” the “Globe,” as happened once the timbers of the original building were dismantled, floated across the river, and reassembled – is an act which deliberately locates the edifice within the sixteenth-century impulse to map.⁷ This was the age of the great cartographers, of Ortelius and his *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* (1570; translated into English in 1606) and of Mercator and his *Atlas* (1595; translated into English 1636). These are the foundational texts of modern cartography, although they contain still-vibrant residues of an older spatial consciousness. As Gillies states: “What has been called ‘the Shakespearean moment’ . . . was also the moment of the new geography’s most

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monumental statements. By the same token, it also represented the last flowering of the old 'cosmography', because both Ortelius and Mercator conceived of geography in cosmographic terms."⁸ The Mercatorial overtones of Hamlet's speech thus knit together the implications of his theatrical, global, and cosmic settings, and bring together residual and emergent spatial epistemologies.⁹

The cartographic and cosmographic significance of Hamlet's speech probably would not have been lost on his audience. Many of those gathered inside the Globe would have been aware of the maps that increasingly defined their space – not only the magnificent world atlases, but, closer to home, the English decorative county atlases commissioned by Queen Elizabeth and even the practical property maps increasingly necessary for calculating taxes. These are the maps which have provided such fertile ground for recent scholarship, as critics have unpacked their ideological function in the emergence of nationalism and "New World" exploration.

Hamlet's audience would also have been keenly aware of another of the Globe's geographies. This is a geography that is often lost on modern scholars, even though Hamlet points to it.¹⁰ It is the geography of the supernatural and the afterlife, the geography of heaven and hell. Theater historians are, of course, aware that heaven and hell are part of the architectural structure of the Globe. William J. Lawrence discusses the theatrical use of the heavens – presumably painted with signs of the zodiac – as the place from which deities descend to the stage in a number of early modern plays.¹¹ The convergence of stage architecture and a cartographic sensibility is beautifully illustrated in a quote Lawrence takes from Heywood's *An Apology for Actors* (1612) describing the Roman theater: "The covering of the stage, which we call the heavens (where upon any occasion the gods descended) was geometrically supported by giant-like [A]tlas," the mythological figure whose name, in the wake of Mercator, became synonymous with a collection of maps.¹² Andrew Gurr directs our theatrical vision from above to below, writing that "[t]he painted heavens covering the stage in the amphitheatres provided an automatic visual signal for one stage locality, of course. The trap provided another, its position under the stage surface offering a hell for Marlowe's Barabbas and Faustus to sink into, for devils to spring from, and for the ghost of Hamlet's father to descend into before he speaks from his purgatorial grave under the earth of the stage floor."¹³

For scholars of the period, however, this architectural geography of the theater has remained largely a detail of performance studies, germane only

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to the comings and goings of characters on stage. The ramifications (ideological, theological, and theatrical) for an audience watching *Hamlet* – and many other early modern plays concerned with the supernatural – performed in a space mapping an eschatological cosmology have not been studied in depth (“eschatology” here referring to matters of the afterlife¹⁴). And yet, this might well have been the map that most concerned Shakespeare’s audience. Surely emergent nationalism and curiosity about the New World affected the political and imaginative lives of Londoners in 1600, but that “undiscovered country” (3.1.78) of death and the afterlife was arguably a more immediate and pressing concern.

The wooden fixity of the Globe gives an illusion of geographical and eschatological certitude. But in fact during this period both natural and supernatural geographies were in a process of rapid transformation. The terrestrial globe itself was in the process of becoming unmoored. In 1600, very probably the date of the composition of *Hamlet*, Johannes Kepler signed a contract making him a junior partner of Tycho Brahe.¹⁵ These mathematical geniuses, like others, were struggling to accommodate Copernicus’s “discovery” of a heliocentric solar system with what they knew of the cosmos, of God, and of mathematics and the new instruments that gave them measurements of historically unprecedented accuracy. The new information sent heads and planets spinning. The changing cosmic landscape, and even the increasing precision used in surveying the fields beyond London’s bounds, would profoundly transform not only terrestrial and planetary order, but eschatological geography as well. When earth was the center of the cosmos, heaven was up above the ether and hell and purgatory were below the ground. When the cosmos was rearranged, and mapping became a scientific undertaking, this spatial-theological organization was undermined as well. The present book is a study of such eschatological destabilization – of how a shifting supernatural geography was produced, experienced, and portrayed.

Hamlet’s propensity for paradox, then, becomes a means of registering his own eschatological disorientation. Like lilies that fester – the paradoxical symbolic merger of bodily resurrection and corporeal decay – for Hamlet heaven and hell coexist in an impossible relationship. He clearly sees and describes the heavens, and yet they are clouded by foul vapors. His visual perception is in keeping with his muddled and contradictory attitudes towards the afterlife, his questions and doubts about heaven, hell, and purgatory. Indeed, Hamlet frets about fire for most of the play. He is caught between the medieval belief in purgatory and the Reformation denial of this space’s existence.

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The theater allows for the spatial representation and performance of this theological dilemma.¹⁶ On stage, an actor stands below the heavens and above hell – the visual map is simple. But Hamlet's words disrupt the picture: what we see is not what he sees; what we thought was self-evident is not; what we thought we believed becomes clouded. This is not only a crisis of faith, or a contest of Catholic and Protestant theologies: it is, in very real ways, a crisis of cosmic geography.

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[More information](#)*Introduction: The space of the supernatural*

By all means, they seem to say . . . [l]et us not mix up heaven and earth, the global stage and the local scene, the human and the nonhuman. "But these imbroglis do the mixing," you'll say, "they weave our world together!" "Act as if they didn't exist," the analysts reply.

Bruno Latour¹

MIXING UP HEAVEN AND EARTH

The turn of the seventeenth century was marked by a sense of cosmic disorientation. Transformations in religious belief brought about by the Protestant Reformation and transformations in modes of conceptualizing space brought about by the popularization of geometry profoundly affected understandings of the relationship between chthonic and supernatural geographies. As a centuries-old structure of cosmic and divine order pressed up against new cartographies and new theologies, the realities of earth, heaven, and hell warped. The confluence of multiple, often contradictory, spatial and theological epistemologies resulted in unsteady beliefs about the universe. This book sets out to explore some of the expressions of this destabilization. Specifically, it examines how the coexistence of often incompatible spatial understandings affected beliefs about, and the experience of, the supernatural.

In Western thought, conceptions about the nature of the supernatural have long been connected to ideas about the structure of space. Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, for instance, begins with a moment of spatial and spiritual vertigo. The text is addressed to God through an insistent and intimate second-person pronoun, but before Augustine can settle into a comfortable use of "you" he must find his divine audience. In his attempt to locate God in space, Augustine seems bewildered, perhaps even frantic:

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Where *to* can I, already in you, call you to come? And where *from* would you be coming? Where *to* could I retire, outside heaven and earth, for God to come there to me, my God who has said, "I fill heaven and earth"? Since, then, you fill heaven and earth, do they contain you? Or do you fill them, with a surplus of you left over, beyond their containing? Then where, once heaven and earth are filled, does the overflow of you go? Do you, who contain all things, need no container because what you fill is filled by your containing *it*? Any receptacle containing you cannot confine you – were it broken, you would not spill out of it.²

Augustine's opening gambit acknowledges a desire to comprehend the world through containment – through shape and dimensions. A clear sense of a cosmic container would seem to ensure a clear sense of emplacement of the self, and thus would define that self's relationship to the divine. Such a sense of clarity, however, is revealed as contrary to God's nature. Augustine must move away from a quest to understand God's spatiality to a radical acceptance of his numinous existence: "Then what are you, God – what, I inquire, but simply God the Lord?" (p. 4). Once he is able to rest in this realization, Augustine can turn to a more inward and for the most part a calmer meditation.

The idea of a spatial God is, naturally, very old. In Acts 17:28, we read that "in [God] we live, and move, and have our being."³ This notion – that the divine is spatial, and that humanity inhabits this god-space – itself reaches back to Plato. In the *Timaeus*, Plato established an ontological coherence of the universe through his claims that the demiurge had created a spherical cosmos in his own likeness. In explaining "the construction of the world," Plato describes how the creator decided "[a] suitable shape for a living being that was to contain within itself all living beings would be a figure that contains all possible figures within itself. Therefore he turned it into a rounded spherical shape, with the extremes equidistant in all directions from the centre, a figure that has the greatest degree of completeness and uniformity, as he judged uniformity to be incalculably superior to its opposite."⁴ Geometry was thus both a sign and a function of divine perfection. This idea was to persist for millennia (and arguably still does, as recent rhapsodic claims of string theory's "elegance" carry neo-Platonic overtones⁵). When Augustine breaks the "receptacle" of God, when he refutes the notion of God and space as container, he thus also breaks away from a Platonic tradition of geometricizing space.

While the relationship of God and space is a topic with an ancient pedigree, the sixteenth century – a century in which both Augustine and Plato assumed intellectual pride of place – brought a new urgency to the conversation. The period is one of both religious and spatial upheavals.

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It is marked by the convulsive shifts resulting from the Reformation and the exploration of the Americas. These two phenomena incited an imaginative and cartographic fervor that radically reconceived the place of the individual in earthly and eschatological geographies. In the mid sixteenth century, the cosmos was understood very much as it had been in medieval theology and ancient astronomy: humanity existed in a geocentric universe; hell and purgatory were in the center of the earth, heaven was beyond the outmost celestial sphere; earthly space was not yet widely perceived in terms of cartographic measurement; God and Satan interacted with mortals through the material conditions of their environment. By the mid seventeenth century, this vision of the cosmos had been radically altered: humanity was now spinning on a planet that orbited the sun; the location of hell, even its existence as a physical place, was in question, and purgatory had been largely abandoned; earthly space was deeply geometric and mathematical; the clockwork universe was leading into a conception of a distant clock-maker God, and a Satan who worked through witches and the physical world was becoming outmoded.

All of this required a transformation in how people conceptualized the cosmic “container.” To an extent unprecedented in Western history, space was newly and widely imagined in geometric terms. From cheap surveying books designed to be taken into the field by small property owners to gorgeous ornamental atlases meant for display in the grand halls of the wealthy, from the geometric primers that popularized Euclid to the college lectures on mathematics delivered in the vernacular for a popular audience, geometric texts (including the mathematic, cartographic, cosmographic, and geodetic) proliferated. This phenomenon created a new geometric sensibility – a geometric epistemology – that influenced how people perceived and understood the world around them. In the mid sixteenth century, pioneering books of popular geometry needed to define the term “triangle” for an audience that was presumed to be geometrically illiterate; by the late seventeenth century, Isaac Newton was writing the *Principia* in a new language of formulae and geometric constructions. Newton’s primary aim was to explain the laws of motion, and for this dynamic geometry he needed the inert backdrop of absolute space (a space itself conceptually organized through the three dimensions of the Cartesian coordinates). “Absolute space,” as Newton defines it, “in its own nature, without regard to anything external, remains always similar and immovable.”⁶ Or, as Neil Smith and Cindi Katz have more recently put it, absolute space is the “conception of space as a field, container, a coordinate system of discrete and mutually exclusive locations.”⁷

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Absolute space is rigorously geometric. It is linear, quadratic, cubic. It does not bend or curve or allow for aberrations. It contains. It is therefore not the space of an earlier understanding of God and Satan, of angels and demons. Before the idea of the “supernatural” was extracted from the idea of the “natural,” the hand of God and the footprint of devils could be seen in the space that people inhabited. Miracles and witchcraft were possible, even prevalent. Such events could involve a distortion of perceived space, and thus space itself must be labile, fluid, and plastic. Geometric, mathematical space, by contrast, would not so easily allow for such supernatural involvement. The fact that the “geometric turn” in early modern England (to borrow Henry Turner’s phrase⁸) coincided with the craze for hunting witches is not, as it were, coincidental. The gradual geometricization of space corresponds with a flourishing interest in how that space – and natural laws more widely – can be violated by the demonic. In order to learn more about the construction of the material world, the operations of demonic creatures were subject to intense scrutiny. As Stuart Clark has argued, demonology was not an obscure or marginal field of inquiry, but a central part of early modern natural philosophy.⁹ And early modern natural philosophy was in many ways concerned with understanding the container that is the cosmos.

Theology – and its less abstract realization in lived religious experience – was also in many ways environmental. Catholicism and Protestantism, to paint with an admittedly broad brush, required different understandings of the environment. The Catholic emphasis on intercession necessitated an environment that could accommodate ongoing interaction between the material world and the supernatural: long-dead saints could perform miracles, and be accessed through relics and special geographical sites such as holy wells; there were well-known portals to purgatory; angels participated in the mass; devils were present at the deathbed. But the Protestant emphasis on an unmediated relationship between God and the individual made such interactions unnecessary and even unbelievable. This is not to suggest that Protestantism was the religious equivalent of the Cartesian split between mind and environment, but that the Protestant sense of space was less dependent upon a network of material objects and places that signified mediation between the human and the divine.¹⁰

The often bitter parochial struggles over church interiors are indicative of the degree to which Reformation debates were in part about one’s direct spatial environment; arguments, even the blows, which could attend the placement of the surface used to prepare the Eucharistic sacrament (known as the altar for Catholics, and the communion table

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for Protestants) give us a glimpse into how, on a very quotidian and local level, the spatial arrangement of the church indicated the congregants' relationship to God, and what was understood as "real" presence. The church building itself, a deeply and richly symbolic text, could signify the order of the universe. Traditionally, churches were oriented (that is, architecturally constructed so that priests and laity were facing east during the Mass); the very experience of the liturgy thus coordinated with earthly geography. But as Peter Harrison observes, citing and responding to Miri Rubin: "in the Middle Ages the language of religion provided a language of social relation and of a cosmic order; it described and explained the interweaving of natural and supernatural with human action . . .' By the end of the sixteenth century this world was in chaos, and its once potent vision of the cosmic order, of the deeper meanings of the material realm, of the interpenetration of natural and supernatural, was in irrevocable decline."¹¹ In Harrison's view, this decline was a result of Protestant modes of biblical exegesis, as a new literalism replaced an allegorical hermeneutics dating back to Origen. "Protestant literalism . . . evacuated the spatial world of its symbolic significance"; "[i]n the new scheme of things, objects were related mathematically, mechanically, causally."¹²

The construction of space was thus of central import to early modern theology and religious belief. And yet we find within the period diametrically opposed notions of space: an understanding of space as mathematical and geometric, and an understanding of space as metamorphic and fluid. An environment that was understood as divinely constructed and ordered through geometry was not one that easily permitted the spatial fluctuations associated with supernatural actions. One of the great social paradoxes of the period was the simultaneity of a heightened geometrical awareness and a widespread fascination with supernatural, especially demonic, behavior that refuted a fixed sense of space. This simultaneity of what are in many ways oppositional epistemologies led to the anomalies and inconsistencies that are the subject of this book.

THE HUMAN AND THE NON-HUMAN

The tension between more fluid and more geometric understandings of space finds a homology in early modern understandings of the body. At the turn of the seventeenth century, we find two dominant somatic paradigms.