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The politics of weather in early modern England

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ABSTRACT

An exercise in a cultural history of early modern weather that focuses on contemporary understanding of the meaning of weather events, this article seeks to extend how historians can read the 'political' in early modern England. Since talking about the weather was an everyday activity, it argues that weather talk was a political resource open to all and anyone could offer an opinion about the meaning of unseasonal or extreme weather events. This could give rise to an everyday politics, participation in which required neither literacy nor print. Weather talk troubled successive early modern English monarchs. That God spoke through the weather made weather talk political. Post-Reformation, the confessionalization of responses to the weather meant that competing providential explanations for the weather – catholic, protestant, puritan – could be used to assert or attack the legitimacy of the regime in church and state.

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From the Dissolution of the Monasteries to the Revolution of 1688 there was scarcely any important public event which educated men did not believe to have been presaged by some occurrence in the natural world.

Keith Thomas, *Religion And The Decline Of Magic* (1971)¹

Historians have long understood that the impact of bad weather, especially in its social and economic effects, could have political consequences.² But in early modern society the concern with the *meaning* of such events meant that talking about the weather could also be political. The impact of the 'little Ice Age' in the period – triggering a rapid cooling in the second half of the sixteenth century and bringing unusual weather patterns in more severe storms, hard winters and cool wet summers – gave ample scope for political conflicts over the meaning of such unseasonable weather events. Weather talk offered another form of political engagement with state and church. That God spoke through the weather, good or bad, made weather talk political. Post-Reformation, the confessionalisation of responses to the weather meant that competing providential explanations for the weather could be mobilised to assert or attack the legitimacy of church or state.

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¹Thomas, *Religion and the Decline Of Magic*, 105.

²For a study of the interrelationships between the weather and economic, social and political crisis in the early modern world see Parker, *Global Crisis*.

Weather talk troubled successive early modern English monarchs. Drawing on a cultural history of early modern weather, this article seeks to extend how historians can read the ‘political’ in early modern England.³

In early modern England, the harvest was the ‘heartbeat’ of early modern society.⁴ It also served as a proxy for the weather. In what has been called England’s ‘weatherland’, contemporaries gave attention, sometimes obsessive attention, to the weather.⁵ Diarists and letter writers noted everyday weather,⁶ keepers of parish registers and recorders of ‘annals’ memorable past weather,⁷ and almanac makers made their living predicting future weather. Governments had to worry about its impact, and poets and dramatists played with its effect on the emotions.⁸ Individuals varied in the attention they paid to the weather, but most exhibited a particular sensitivity to episodes of unseasonal or extreme weather, and all might grumble about it. In recording such occurrences – whose severity was often registered in variants in the lexicon of ‘never before known in the memory of living man’ – contemporaries shared a concern to understand the *meaning* of such events.

The phrase the harvest’s heartbeat was coined by W. G. Hoskins to describe the weather’s impact on the early modern economy, but contemporaries’ sensitivities stretched well beyond this to include in contemporary medical humoural theory the relationship between climate and the micro-climate of the body. Given the multiple vulnerabilities to the weather, both predicting and explaining the weather was of central importance in early modern society. An inheritance from the classical world of what has been called ‘astro-meteorology’ offered one powerful school of thought, identifying the cause of climactic patterns in the movements of the planets.⁹ This was a way of thinking about the weather that was available to both ‘learned’ astrologers and to popular consumers of one of the commonest forms of cheap print, the annual almanacs for which predicting next year’s weather was their *raison d’être*.¹⁰ Astrology overlapped with other forms of predicting the weather that reflected its central importance in the material culture of early modern England. Day lore, in which it was believed that events on days of particular significance in the annual calendar could predict future weather, in turn

³On the cultural turn in the history of weather, see Miglietti and Morgan, ‘Ruling “climates” in the early modern world’, in Miglietti and Morgan, *Governing the environment*, 1–27.

⁴Hoskins, ‘Harvest fluctuations’, 40.

⁵Harris, *Weatherland*.

⁶For examples of diarists who paid close and regular attention to the weather, see Durham University Library, Add. MS 866 (Diary of Thomas Chaytor, May 1612–December 1617); MacFarlane, ed., *Diary of Ralph Josselin*, on which see Macadam, ‘English weather’; Heywood, ed., *Diary Henry Newcome*; Morehouse, ed., *Extracts Diary Robert Meeke*.

⁷Veale, Bowen, and Endfield, ‘Weather history through English parish registers’, 119–42; Cox, *Parish Registers*, 192–56. For the attention annalist paid to weather events, see Bliss Burbridge, *Old Coventry*; ‘A London Provisioner’s Chronicle, 1550–1563 by Henry Machyn’; R. Clark, ‘The Derby “Town Chronicle”’; [Thomas Ruggie], *MERCURIUS POLITICUS REDIVIVUS*; Blagg & Train, ‘Extract from the Paper Book’; Dorset History Centre, ‘(A Private Chronology of Denis Bond Esquire of Lutton in the Isle of Purbeck Made A.D. 1636 & 1640)’, D531.

⁸Capp, *Astrology*; Chiara, *Shakespeare’s Representation of Weather*.

⁹Geneva, *Astrology*, 78–83, at 78; Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 335–414; Heninger, *Handbook of Renaissance Meteorology*, part 1.

¹⁰Capp, *Astrology*, Chapters 2 and 6. For the continuing popularity of astrological prediction of the weather, see the frequent reprinting of Dygges, *A Prognostication*.

shaded into a close observation of the natural world and the predictive power of the natural (and unnatural) behaviour of flora and fauna.¹¹

Despite the persistence of astrology and the popularity of almanacs, it was religion that offered the dominant explanation for weather patterns and events. Hostile to astrological prognostication, the church held that as creator of the universe, God was the *primum mobile* in the natural world. As a 1612 catechism declared, 'Wherefore in that hee is the Creator of heauen and earth: It is hee that by his goodnesse, power, and wisdom, doth gouerne the whole order of nature. It is hee that sendetth raines and drought, haile, tempest, and fayre weather'.¹² A heightened belief in providence underwrote the powerful doctrine of judgements that held that bad weather was one of God's arrows by which he sought to punish sin and moral failings. Extraordinary episodes, like the floods or earthquakes whose providential meanings were the perennial subjects of pamphleteers and preachers, were therefore to be understood as expressions of God's anger.¹³ As Henry Arthington declared, 'all windes and ill weather proceede directly from the justice of God'.¹⁴

A belief in divine providence meant that the natural world was a moralized world, made sensitive to the actions of men and women by a God – 'our heavenly school-master' – who could use un/natural events to communicate with the human world.¹⁵ This gave a central role to the church as the interpreter of God's messages. Extraordinary weather events were 'visible sermons' which called for reformation and repentance of sins.¹⁶ Before the Reformation, the Catholic church offered protection through special masses, prayer and public procession.¹⁷ After the Reformation, England's Protestant church was critical of the 'vulgar errors' promising automatic protection against the weather that had grown up around the Catholic church's teaching. Processions appear to have died out shortly after the mid-century, although the parish procession at Rogationtide to protect the crops against unseasonable weather long continued thereafter.¹⁸ From 1549 on, the Book of Common Prayer included prayers 'for Rain (if the time require)' and 'for faire weather'.¹⁹ The essayist (and later bishop of Salisbury), John Earle might satirise 'a plaine Country Fellow' who was 'capable onely of two Praiers, for raine and faire weather', but the popularity and utility of the church's prayer for seasonable weather was reflected in its frequent reprinting in other collections of prayers.²⁰ In the face of weather that threatened the harvest, the church called for days of collective worship, involving sermons, fasting and humiliation, to seek God's mercy, issuing special prayers for seasonable weather.²¹ With the harvest threatened by excessive rain, the inhabitants in godly towns like Rye in Sussex in 1572 or as at Shrewsbury in 1594

¹¹Ibid., 284; Thomas, *Man And Natural World*, 75–6; Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 284–5; Denham, *Collection of Proverbs*; Inwards, *Weather Lore*; Wilson, *Oxford Dictionary English Proverbs*.

¹²Davis, *A Catechisme*.

¹³Walter and Wrightson, 'Dearth and the social order', 28–9; Shaaber, *Some Forerunners of the Newspaper*, 144–65, 210.

¹⁴Arthington, *Provision for the Poore*, sig. C1v.

¹⁵Kitching, "'Prayers Fit For The Time'", 241–2; Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 105–6.

¹⁶Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 90–136. The classic study here is Walsham, *Providence*, at 116.

¹⁷Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 28, 32–35, 37, 45, 55, 133–78; Mears et al., *National Prayers*, i, 11, 43; 'London Provisioner's Chronicle, 1550–1563', ff. 49–50.

¹⁸See e.g. Becon, *Reliques of Rome*; Borlik, *Ecocriticism*, 107–8.

¹⁹Ketley, ed., *Two Liturgies*, 96, 237; Cummings, ed., *Book of Common Prayer*, 122, 265, 269, 726–7, 733, 761.

²⁰Earle, *Micro-cosmographie*, F5r; *Certayne Godly exercises*; Bull, *Christian praiers*.

²¹Raffe, 'Nature's scourges', 237–59; Mears, et al., *National Prayers*, i; Williamson, et al., *National Prayers*, ii.

gathered from early in the morning until later in the afternoon ‘to pray and call upon God to send seasonable weather to bringe in theyre corne.’²²

A providentialist reading of the weather informed the responses of the early modern state, church and society.²³ As Keith Thomas has suggested, in a society so dependent on the weather and with few defences against its extremes, ‘it was not possible for a weather forecast to remain simply a forecast. Inexorably, it carried with it a chain of far-reaching consequences of a social and political character.’²⁴ Post-Reformation, the confessionalisation of responses to the meaning of the weather between catholics and protestants (and later between protestants and puritans) made the doctrine of providential judgements central to the politics of weather in early modern England.

II

It was a commonplace of early modern political thought that a primary duty of the prince was to ensure the feeding of their people.²⁵ When in *Richard II*, written and performed in the severe dearths of the mid-1590s, Shakespeare has Richard threaten,

We’ll make foul weather with despised tears;
Our sighs and they shall lodge the summer corn
And make a dearth. (III.3.161–163)

such beliefs ensured that audiences would have seen in this confirmation of Richard’s tyrannical rule.²⁶ Publicly acknowledged, not least in royal proclamations read out and publicly posted in years of dearth and famine, the monarch’s self-proclaimed responsibility for their people established a close relationship between the politics of subsistence and the politics of weather. The church was mobilised to denounce profiteering, to promote charitable giving, and to itemise the sins thought to provoke God to withhold good weather.²⁷ From at least the early sixteenth century, royal government had developed a programme to protect and police the grain supply. Reinforced by statute and codified in the printed Books of Orders issued in the crises of the later sixteenth and early seventeenth century, this set out policies to be implemented by local magistrates in towns and counties, whose purpose was to prevent hoarding, the illegal export of grain, and the manipulation of the markets by middlemen and merchants.

By contemporary European standards, this was a remarkably effective system of relief. However, the twin problems of a rapidly growing population and the climatic shocks of the Little Ice Age saw an acceleration in recurring episodes of threatened famine from the 1580s on. Acknowledging and publicising the prince’s responsibility to ensure the subsistence of the people produced an expectation that government policy was not always able to satisfy. Denunciation from the pulpit and in proclamations helped to further politicise years of harvest failure, prompting popular hostility towards farmers,

²²Strype, *Ecclesiastical Memorials*, iii.i. 79; *True Relation of the Most Remarkable Dearths, K²-K^{2v}*; Mayhew, *Tudor Rye*, 201; Leighton, ed., *Early Chronicles*, 33.

²³Fulton, ‘Acts of God’, 54–74.

²⁴Thomas, *Religion and the Decline Of Magic*, 396.

²⁵Tilly, ‘Food supply and public order’, 380–455.

²⁶Johanson, ‘In the Mean Season’, 57–78.

²⁷Slack, ‘Books of Orders’; Hindle, ‘Dearth, fasting and almsgiving’, 44–86.

merchants and middlemen in tussles in the market place, in the public posting of anonymous threatening letters and, if less frequently, in the seizure of grain by angry crowds.

While royal proclamations might acknowledge the role of bad weather in exacerbating dearth, in systematically advancing hoarding, profiteering or inactivity and connivance by local officials as the 'real' causes the government encouraged a belief that if its policies were properly administered there would be sufficient grain at affordable prices. For example, in the dearth of 1597 the government acknowledged the 'late unseasonable and unfruitfull yeares', but claimed that God had blessed the Queen's care for her people by 'this prosperous and plentiful harvest'. Dearth was not a sign of divine displeasure. It was only 'evill disposed persons unthankfull to God and without pittie towards poore men' who 'will make want amidst plentifulnes[s]'. This was a favoured explanation in a public dialogue between the government and people, and one that was immediately repeated in the midst of the following year's harvest.²⁸

The government's response to bad weather persistently politicized years of harvest failure. The responsibility of the monarch for ensuring the feeding of the people meant that the weather and harvest could become the focus for a politics of subsistence in which critical ideas about the role of the monarch, church, charity and moral economy were discussed. Since the doctrine of judgements held that bad or unseasonal weather was God intervening directly to punish human failings, bad weather might be seized upon to *reinforce* obedience to authority and to promote campaigns for moral reformation. But within the politics of subsistence citing the causes of bad weather could also challenge the social and political order, offering support to popular demands for the reformation of abuses and criticising the wealthy and powerful. Despite prescribing patience in the face of shortage, in endorsing popular beliefs about the *real* causes of dearth and in so doing underwriting the moral economy of the crowd, early modern governments unwittingly offered legitimation for collective protests in the politics of subsistence.

III

Post-Reformation, there was a larger politics to grumbling about the weather that had consequences for how the government handled dearth (and which has not been recognised by early modern social and economic historians of harvest failure, myself included). The threat that in years of harvest failure popular discontent about rising prices might lead to criticism of authority, and ultimately the monarch, might have been thought an encouragement to the government to have acknowledged and stressed the role of bad weather in its public pronouncements. However, in a world of confessional conflict, in which both protestants and catholics shared a belief in God as the ultimate determinant of the weather, publicly to acknowledge bad weather could be problematic. After the Reformation, the politics of weather therefore became an important terrain over which the confessional strife triggered by the Reformation could be fought out in disputes over the meaning of weather events.

From the outset, 'reading' the weather was among the resources mobilised by the Henrician government to advance acceptance of the Reformation. 'So fair weather with

²⁸ *Acts of the Privy Counsel, xxviii, 1597–1598, 29–31.*

great plenty of corn and cattle' was important enough to have been offered as one of the proofs of God's approval of Henry's divorce and subsequent marriage to Ann Boleyn in the 1533 *Articles*, published 'to enfourme his lovyng subiectis of the trouthe'.²⁹ As the imperial ambassador reported in 1535, Henry and 'his concubine' had 'caused it to be preached that God showed his approval of their Government by sending a good season'.³⁰ Unfortunately, the weather turned. The chronicler at the Augustinian priory of Butley in Suffolk recorded recurring thunder, lightning and gales and he attributed persistently unseasonable weather to schism and false beliefs.³¹ By June 1535, the imperial ambassador could report that 'many begin already to show discontent', believing that since Henry's executions of his opponents among the clergy and religious orders, 'it has never ceased raining in England, and that it is God's revenge'.³² At a critical point in both the harvest and Reformation, the government was informed of an eighty-year old Worcestershire man, Edmund Brocke who was reported to have said that 'there was never good "wedringes" [weather] since the King began this business.' With rain falling and in the midst of what he called 'heavy and grievous weather', Edmund had broadcast that, 'it is long of the King that this weather is so troublous or unstable, and I wene we shall never have better weather whilst the King reigneth, and therefore it maketh no matter if he were knocked or patted on the head'.³³

Concern over the poor weather had even surfaced at the Court. John Heywood's 1532/3 interlude, *The Play of the Weather*, which some scholars have seen as a critical political intervention over the nature of Henry's kingship, contained the promise 'ye shall se[e] how the wether wyll amende/By saynt Anne, he go[e]th to work even boldely'.³⁴ Preachers were now instructed to preach that adversity also demonstrated God's love. By November 1535, however, the imperial ambassador was reporting, 'there is a great likelihood of famine, which will help towards setting matters right. The people murmur'.³⁵ In 1541, it was the 'great Tudor drought' that led Henry VIII to order Cranmer to organise national prayers and processions in response, from which date, it has been suggested, began the church's appointment of prayers for special observances.³⁶

Confessional conflict ensured that appeals to the weather as a proxy for God's approval or disapproval remained part of a debate between protestants and catholics that continued through the sixteenth century and which was carried into print.³⁷ Critics of the Reformation continued to cite the weather as evidence of divine disapproval. The conservative scribe of the Worcester chronicle after recording the removal of the images of saints in 1538 went on to note, 'And all that tyme God sent suche lightening and thunder that all therabouts thought the churche would fall on them.'

Battles over the meaning of bad weather continued into the reign of Mary I. Supporters of the restoration of catholicism under Mary had to combat the ideological consequences of a run of bad weather and poor harvests that lasted from 1555 to 1558.

²⁹Pocock, ed., *Records of the Reformation*, ii. 530.

³⁰*Letters and Papers, Henry VIII*, ix. 250–1.

³¹Dickens, ed., *Register or Chronicle of Butley*, 67.

³²*Calendar of State Papers, Spain 1534–5*, pt. 1, 506.

³³Elton, *Policy and People*, 123–4; The National Archive, SP 1/95, fo. 76 r (*Letters and Papers, Henry VIII*, ix, 74).

³⁴King, 'John Heywood, *The Play of the Weather*', 219; Walker, *Writing Under Tyranny*, 105–12; Walker, *Heywood: Comedy and Survival*, 121–29.

³⁵*Letters and Papers, Henry VIII*, ix, 251.

³⁶Raffe, "'Nature's Scourge'", 237.

³⁷See e.g. Knell, *A Declaration*; Becon, *Displaying of the Popish Masse*, 307.

Preachers were ordered to attribute disaster to the 'faithlessness of the people'. Predictably however, protestants saw in this evidence of divine disapproval of Mary's catholic regime and its 'idolatry'.³⁸ As James Pilkington, bishop of Durham under Elizabeth I, delighted in pointing out, when popery had been restored under Mary England had been afflicted by 'unseasonable weather both in wet and drought' and 'all your Latin processions and singing of gospels under bushes nor singing of *Ora pro nobis* could get you God's blessings, but rather increased his anger'. As Pilkington pointedly asked, when 'were ye compelled to eat acorns for bread, but in your popery and falling from God?'³⁹ While acknowledging that England had many 'great droughts and dearths both in the time of popery and the gospel', Pilkington argued that 'in dearths under the gospel' it was not for want of things, but (repeating the dominant message of royal proclamations) hoarding and the illegal export of grain that now brought scarcity.

At the accession of Elizabeth, the Worcester catholic scribe, reporting the removal of Mary's bishops and the alteration of the church service at midsummer 1559, had noted that 'the summer was drye and scant of grasse'.⁴⁰ Protestants, however, claimed better weather as God's endorsement of the Elizabethan regime. As Bishop Jewel succinctly declared: 'We are now with God; and all things go well with us', citing among their blessings store of victuals.⁴¹ 1588 brought stunning confirmation with the protestant wind that finished off the Spanish Armada. As the victory medal declared: 'God blew and they were scattered'.⁴²

Nevertheless, protestants remained sensitive to the dangers offered by episodes of bad weather, especially since these increased in frequency and intensity as the Little Ice Age worsened into the later sixteenth century. Harvest failures saw protestant preachers having to combat the 'old objection' that 'sithence this new religion . . . came up, there was never such plenty, neither was it euer so merrie with vs'.⁴³ A more careful reading of the Elizabethan government's public pronouncements in years of threatened dearth reveals a sensitivity therefore to the threat that bad weather and harvest failure might allow its catholic critics, either domestic or international, to cite the weather as evidence of God's disavowal of the protestant regime. As the special prayer in the 1586 service for a time of dearth proclaimed, God's 'fatherly care and goodnesse . . . never appeared more abundantly toward any nation, then of late yeeres it hath done toward this Realme of England'.⁴⁴ Thus, the proclamation of January, 1587, while accepting that the present dearth had 'first grown by visitation of Almighty God in the alteration of seasonable weather', again chose to emphasise 'covetousness and uncharitable greediness' as the real cause of scarcity. It quickly went on to assert God's mercy 'in a more favourable measure towards her country and her people than to other foreign parts adjoining' so that 'it hath not been so extreme as in many other countries adjoining, where the dearth is by many occasions manifestly known to be far greater than is in this realm'.⁴⁵

³⁸Loades, *Reign of Mary Tudor*, 315, 376.

³⁹Scholefield, ed., *Works of John Pilkington*, 85–6.

⁴⁰MacCulloch and Hudson, 'A bailiff's list and chronicle from Worcester', 244, 248.

⁴¹Strype, *Annals of Reformation*, i, pt. 2, 307.

⁴²Anderson, 'Climatic change, sea-power', 16; Israel & Parker, 'Of Providence and Protestant weather', 335; Scully, "'In Confident Hope of A Miracle'", 643–70.

⁴³Stoughton, *General Treatise Against Poperie*, 138, 140.

⁴⁴Mears et al, *National Prayers*, i, 160–66, at 164.

⁴⁵Hughes and Larkin, *Tudor Royal Proclamations*, ii, 532–3; *Tudor Royal Proclamations*, iii, 193–5.

Into the seventeenth century, the effects of the Ice Age were still being felt in further harvest failures. But continuing conflict between Catholics and Protestants, seems to have focused somewhat less on conflicts over the meaning of the weather and more on providentialist readings of prodigious events in the political, rather than natural, world. It was conflict between the Church and its Puritan critics that was now registered in the politics of weather. In years of crisis the church had circulated special prayers to be made nationally in days of fasting and humiliation.⁴⁶ These included one for 'seasonable weather'. But in the 1630s fasting and the weather became a hotly contested topic between the Godly and the Laudian church.⁴⁷ Collective fasting was a practice performed with particular enthusiasm by Puritans, whose belief in its efficacy in altering the weather was preached in sermons and recorded in their letters and diaries. As Walter Yonge confided to his diary, after recording that fair weather immediately put an end to weeks of excessive rain after a fast in the summer of 1626 — 'Note it.'⁴⁸ Puritan critics claimed in print and in sermons that the Laudian bishops in their revision of the fast book had omitted — 'purged' — the prayer for seasonable weather and that this was the cause of the 'tempestuous unseasonable weather' that England had been suffering.⁴⁹ When Burton, Bastwick and Prynne were prosecuted in Star Chamber, Laud sought to pour scorn on their accusation. But it is worth noting that he thought the accusation about the weather important enough to merit prosecution. In the light of this criticism, Laud's intervention in an earlier Star Chamber prosecution against corn hoarders, where he had cited approvingly a judge's opinion that the 1631 'famin[e] was made by man, and not by God' should not perhaps be read solely as an endorsement of the government's favoured explanation of dearth.⁵⁰

IV

Readings of the meaning of weather events were particularly marked at moments of political crisis. In 1552, for example, the London diarist, Henry Machyn recorded a 'sudden rumbling' at the execution of the Duke of Somerset and that 'a thousand fell to the ground for fear'. Predictably, bad weather was offered as evidence of divine disapproval but of what might remain contentious, as the fate of Oliver Cromwell's body suggests. The storm that preceded Cromwell's death — 'ye fiercest winde yt was ever knowne in ye memory of ye olde people' — was greeted in letters, print and poetry as evidence of God's condemnation of the rule of 'the Usurper'.⁵¹ In 1661 the terrible winds that lasted a whole week after Cromwell's body was exhumed and hung on the gallows at Tyburn on the anniversary of the execution of Charles I was met with a less favourable interpretation. Some cited the stormy wind that later blew down the heads of the

⁴⁶Mears *et al*, *National Prayers*, i, 43, 49–50, 156–9, 160–6, 266–9, 623, 649–50, 650; Overall, ed., *Accounts of the Churchwardens of St Michael, Cornhill*, 175; Cambridge University Library, MS Mm. 01. 29, f. 48 v.

⁴⁷Ryrie, 'Fall and rise of fasting', 102–3.

⁴⁸Marshall, *Meroz Cursed*, 41; William Whiteway *Of Dorchester: His Diary*, 83; George Roberts, ed., *Diary of Walter Yonge*, 94; Macfarlane, *Diary of Ralph Josselin*, 87; Heywood, ed., *Diary of Rev. Henry Newcome*, 46; Bagshawe, *Bagshawes of Ford*, 30–31.

⁴⁹Prynne, *News from Ipswich*, A2v; Burton, *For God and the King*, 143.

⁵⁰A *Speech Delivered in Star Chamber*, 15; Cobbett's *Complete Collection of State Trials*, iii, 729–733; Gardiner, ed., *Reports of Cases in Star Chamber*, 46.

⁵¹*Exact and True Relation*, 2; Aylett, *Letters; Waller, Upon The Late Storm*.

regicides, put on poles and publicly displayed, as evidence of God's disapproval of the Restoration.

In the seventeenth century, the Stuart monarchy was dogged by critical readings of the meaning of unusual weather events that demonstrated the threat these might pose to authority. Though James I's coronation took place in pouring rain and seems not to have attracted adverse comment, in the debate over his possibly suspicious death, it was noted that there had been 'strange varieties of stormy weather' in the month he died, which the poet James Shirley had to work to transmute into 'cosmic mourning'.⁵²

Charles I was to prove particularly vulnerable to weather auguries. The godly wood-turner Nehemiah Wallington was among those who noted the cluster of weather mishaps that had occurred in 1623 while Charles was in Spain in pursuit of an unpopular catholic marriage. A midsummer storm had blown down a weathercock atop St James Palace rumoured to bear Charles' arms, while a week previously, on 'as fair a sunshine day as any hath been', a clap of thunder had struck down the king's flag from the main mast of a ship waiting to sail to collect Charles from Spain.⁵³ The following year excessively stormy weather at London had whipped up the Thames and stirred up much comment. A diarist recorded that everybody took it as a judgement against Charles' favourite, the Duke of Buckingham, noting its coincidence with the decision of Charles and Buckingham to break up the Parliament.⁵⁴ Although England shared with early modern Europe (and Scotland) the belief that the Devil and witches could meddle with the weather, in practice they seem seldom to have been accused of doing so in England.⁵⁵ However, in the case of the 1626 Thames water spout the association of Buckingham and his 'creature' the astrologer Dr Lambe with such forces helped to seal their fate: Lambe was the victim of crowd violence and Buckingham was later assassinated.⁵⁶ When after Buckingham's death, it was observed that fair weather had replaced the bad weather from which the country had suffered, 'the country people' were reported to have said that they wished he had been killed a month earlier. By contrast, as Sir John Oglander noted, there was not one fair day for a long time after the execution of Buckingham's assassin.⁵⁷

In London in 1638, wet and windy weather was called 'Q[ueen] Mother weather' and attributed to the arrival of Charles' unpopular, catholic mother-in-law, Marie de Medici.⁵⁸ A fusion of anti-popery with early modern misogyny, the episode was an example of how common politicized weather talk could be on the capital's streets.⁵⁹ In conversation and in print, some contemporaries came to link bad weather with the policies of Charles' Personal Rule in church and state.⁶⁰ George Southcombe has shown how the death and destruction wrought by lightning at the Devon church of Widecombe-in-the-Moor in 1639 could be seized on by Charles' puritan critics and represented as a providential judgement on Laudian changes in the Church. According to

⁵²Bellany, 'Writing the king's death', 45; W. Jones, *Crowns and Coronations*, 311; Houston, *James I*, 26.

⁵³Webb, ed., *Historical Notices*, i, 5; Walsham, *Providence*, 127. For a demonstration of using historical sources to reconstruct weather patterns during Charles' reign, see Cressy, *Charles I*, 54–64.

⁵⁴Bellany and Cogswell, *Murder of King James I*, 60, 306–9.

⁵⁵Behringer, *Cultural History of Climate*, 128–32; Normand and Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland*; Sharpe, *Instruments of Darkness*, 65.

⁵⁶Bellany, 'Murder of John Lambe', 46–63.

⁵⁷Bamford, ed., *Royalist's Notebook*, 121–22.

⁵⁸Bliss, ed., *Works of William Laud*, iii, 231.

⁵⁹Cressy, *Charles I*, 17.

⁶⁰Elmer, *Witchcraft*, 87.

Nehemiah Wallington, who recorded this and other episodes in which lightning and thunder had torn and spoiled churches, it was ‘as if God would show unto us, by his judgments on our churches, that he is angry with them and us for our idolatry and superstitious worshipping of Him.’ For the parliamentary propagandist John Vicars, they were, ‘immediate demonstrations and fore-runners of Gods high indignation for the great sins and provocations of our Clergy and Prelaticall Church-government.’⁶¹ The next year, the king’s ill-fated military campaign against the Scots was marked by an eclipse of the sun. As one of those on the campaign reported, ‘there wanted not those who construed this eclipse as an ominous presage of bad success to the king’s affairs’.⁶² Worse still, when in 1642 Charles raised the royal standard at Nottingham at the start of his war against Parliament it was blown down by ‘a very strong and unruly wind’ and, it was said, could not be restored until the wind blew over

In the civil war each side turned to the weather to claim God’s blessing on their military endeavours and to attribute bad weather as a sign of God’s condemnation of their opponents.⁶³ When the New Model Army marched into London in 1648, a storm of thunder, hail and rain descended on the City, though it had till then been ‘a very faire sun-shiny day’ and it remained so just four miles away. According to enemies of the army, the storm represented ‘the height of God’s displeasure against the Armies disobedience to the Parliament.’⁶⁴ The next year, Sir Thomas Herbert read the heavy fall of snow that turned the velvet pall cloth from black to white at the king’s funeral as a sign of his innocence; this was a reading of the political significance of snow that had been attributed to the blizzard that marked Henry V’s crowning as a repudiation of claims that the bad weather signalled Henry was not the rightful king.⁶⁵ With the temporary collapse of print censorship, continuing political instability in the 1640s and 1650s saw providentially-politicised readings of the weather multiply, along with more spectacular reports of comets and ‘prodigious Apparitions in the Heavens’.⁶⁶

Tussles over the meaning of the weather were important enough for Parliament in the midst of civil war to assume responsibility for protecting the nation. The 1644 *Directory for the Public Worship of God* that was meant to replace the Prayer Book included prayers for ‘seasonable weather and fruitfull seasons’. In the winter of 1646 its drafters, the Westminster Assembly, appointed a day of humiliation for removing the ‘great Judgement of immoderate Rain and Waters upon this Kingdom’, and they ordered a further fast in the rainy summer of 1648.⁶⁷ Cromwell too recognised the political importance of the weather. So did his critics. In the summer of 1654 he issued a declaration of thanksgiving for peace with the Dutch and for the ‘late seasonable rain’. Bristling

⁶¹George Southcombe, ‘The Storm in Widcombe-in-the-Moor, 1638, or the Environmental and Global Context of the English Civil War’, *Britain in Revolution* seminar, University of Oxford, February 27, 2023 (I am grateful to George Southcombe for allowing me to read his unpublished paper); Webb, ed., *Historical Notices*, i, 41–8, at 41; Vicars, *Prodigies and Apparitions*, 38–44, at 42

⁶²Hodgson, ed., *North Country Diaries*, 12.

⁶³Geneva, *Astrology*, 80–3; Rushe, ‘Merlini Anglici’, 323–33. For examples, see *History of Preston in Lancashire*, 53; Raymond Gillespie, ‘Temple’s Fate’, 322.

⁶⁴Pope, *Heare, Heare*, 12; Clarendon, *History of the Rebellion*, i, 291.

⁶⁵Herbert, *Memoirs*, 205–6; Wylie, *Reign of Henry V*, i, 8–9; Earle, *Life and Times of Henry V*, 90.

⁶⁶See e.g. Anon., *Irelands Amazement, Or the Heavens ARMADO* . . . (London, 1642), A2v; Vicars, *Prodigies and Apparitions*, passim; Geneva, *Astrology*, 80–3.

⁶⁷*A Directory For The Publique Worship of God* . . . (London, 1644), 24; Williamson, et al., *National Prayers*, ii, 471–2; Firth & Rait, *Acts and Ordinance*, i, 589; *Journal of the House of Commons*, v, 1646–1648, 662.

with scriptural verse, it made much of the weather as affirmation of the regime's legitimacy. It prompted a critical response from the Quaker, George Fox. Fox claimed the drought was God's judgement on a political regime that was persecuting the Quakers and that had abandoned the liberty and freedom for which the civil war had been fought.⁶⁸ At the height of the next year's harvest, Cromwell had thought it necessary, sitting as Lord Protector with his Council, to spend 'a day of Humiliation to seeke God for seasonable weather . . . much wanted in the 3 nations'.⁶⁹

The politically charged period of the Restoration offers a telling example of the politics of weather. The political tensions of the early 1660s were played out in part in a battle to impose alternative readings of the markedly bad weather of the early 1660s. Coronations were highly choreographed events, subject to close observation for auguries, good or bad. Restoration of the monarchy gave Charles II's coronation in April 1661 heightened symbolic and political importance.⁷⁰ Considerable play was to be made of Charles's associations with the sun and thus with the Restoration as the return of sunshine after the violent weather of the civil wars. According to Charles's supporters, the weather had been bad in the days before his coronation but – auspiciously – had cleared on the day itself. Alas, as Charles went to his coronation feast, it began ominously to thunder and lighten, 'with the greatest Force, Vehemence and Noise, that was ever known at that season of the Year'.⁷¹ Pepys, who dismissed those who sought to read the weather for political significance, nevertheless noted in his diary, 'strange it is to think that these two days have held up fair', but that at the point the king left the hall 'it fell a-raining and thundering and lightening as I have not see it do some years'.⁷² Panegyrics were produced to attempt a favourable and celebratory reading of the stormy weather.⁷³

Predictably, those angered at the restoration of the monarchy and of a national church without toleration for dissenters offered a very different reading of the storm. Puritan non-conformists collected and published in a series of anonymously-authored volumes a determinedly (and disapproving) providentialist reading of prodigious happenings, including extreme weather, that was intended to demonstrate God's condemnation of the Restoration.⁷⁴ In May 1661, heavy rain and flooding on the day before the public hangman was to burn the Covenant, the founding charter for the Anglo-Scottish alliance against Charles I, prompted comparisons with earlier ill-fated reigns.⁷⁵ Three weeks later, prompted by continuing heavy rains, Charles issued orders for a fast and day of humiliation. In appointing a fast, Charles was responding to a request from Parliament, but he must also have been aware of the way the persistently adverse weather was being used by his critics. In a sermon to the House of Commons on the appointed fast day, the preacher, Thomas Grenfield had to contend with those who pointed to the rain that had greeted Charles when he first entered the City and which had continued

⁶⁸Wilbur Cortez Abbott, ed., *The Writing and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, iii, 225–9; *By the Lord Protector A Declaration; CSPD 1649–60*, 167; [George] F[ox], *A Warning From the Lord, To all such as hang down the head for a Day, and pretend to keep a Fast unto God*.

⁶⁹Firth, ed., *Clarke Papers*, iii, 50.

⁷⁰W. Jones, *Crowns and Coronations*, 298–326.

⁷¹Reedy, 'Mystical politics', 23–3, at 33.

⁷²Latham and Matthews, *Diary of Samuel Pepys*, ii, 86.

⁷³See e.g. Bold, *On The Thunder*; Anon., *Fryday May 17.1661*.

⁷⁴*MIRABILIS ANNUS; MIRABILIS ANNUS SECUNDUS; Or, The SECOND YEAR; MIRABILIS ANNUS SECUNDUS: OR, THE SECOND PART*. For the background to these see Burns, *Age of Wonders*, 12–56.

⁷⁵Porter, Roberts and Roy, eds., *Diary And Papers Of Henry Townshend*, 294; [Anon.], *MIRABILIS ANNUS*, 47–8.

ever since his Coronation. Charles' opponents had evidently (and awkwardly) cited I. Sam.12, 17: *I will call unto the Lord, and he shall send thunder and rain that ye may perceive and see that your wickednesse is great . . . in the sight of the Lord, in asking you a King.*⁷⁶ At the start of the next year, a heavily providentialist royal proclamation attributed continuing problems with the weather to God's judgement on the – unspecified – sins of the land. It called again for a national fast, and in fast sermons before the Commons preachers identified the failure to execute justice on Charles I's murderers as the cause of the unseasonable weather.⁷⁷ The loyalist, John Evelyn noted in his diary the immediate change in the weather. But Charles' nonconformist critics pointed to the storm that had torn the royal arms from the Coronation triumphal arches erected in the City, badly damaging in particular the arch representing the church and blowing down the heads of the executed regicides that had been put on public display.⁷⁸

The succession of James II, a known catholic, again focused attention on the weather at his coronation. Although the wind was said to have been only gentle, James had to proceed under a torn canopy, while the flag at the Tower of London raised to announce his crowning was also torn by the wind, at the very point that he was being crowned it was claimed. The loyalist bishop, George Hicke later wrote that he put 'no stress on these omens' but, he went on to say, 'I cannot despise them; most of them, I believe, come by chance, but some from superior intellectual agents, especially those which regard the fate of kings and nations.'⁷⁹ Having destroyed a catholic invasion in 1588, a hundred years later the wind blew away the threat of a catholic dynasty under James II. Violent westward winds had prevented William III's expedition, leading to talk of a 'catholic wind', but on the day of James' birthday, an event ominously marked by an eclipse of the sun, the wind had veered to the east to keep the Royal Navy at anchor and to blow William's invasion force to a south-western landing that avoided James' army. As one Surrey diarist noted, he heard people say, 'This is a Protestant wind.'⁸⁰

V

Towards the end of the seventeenth century, attitudes to the weather began to change. The author of a cultural history of the English weather argues that in the last decades of the seventeenth century sermons, pamphlets and newspapers no longer interpreted meteorological phenomena as 'uncontestable instances of special providence.'⁸¹ Systematic daily recording, assisted by the use of meteorological instruments, sought to 'normalize the weather.'⁸² 'God's providential goodness' could now be seen in the regularities of England's temperate climate rather than in a continuing belief in unusual weather as evidence of God communicating through the doctrine of

⁷⁶Williamson, *et al.*, *National Prayers*, ii, 649–57; Grenfield, *The Fast*, 17–18.

⁷⁷T. Harris, *London Crowds*, 290.

⁷⁸*MIRABILIS ANNUS SECUNDUS; Or, The SECOND YEAR*, 59; White, *An Alarum*; Latham and Matthews, *Diary of Samuel Pepys*, iii, 32.

⁷⁹W. Jones, *Crowns and Coronations*, 317.

⁸⁰C. Jones, 'Protestant Wind of 1688', 201–220; Israel & Parker, 'Of Providence and Protestant weather', 356–8; Jenkinson, 'Late Surrey chronicler', 12.

⁸¹Jankovic, *Reading the skies*, 58. By 1742, a two-volume history of bad weather year-by-year shows no interest in providential explanations: Thomas Short, *A General Chronological History*.

⁸²See e.g. Harcourt Williams and Stevenson, eds., "'Observations of Weather'".

judgements.⁸³ State prayers, fasts for a change in the weather, and providential explanations for famine as God's judgements on the sins of the nation were to continue in Presbyterian Scotland and Ulster into the eighteenth century, but with the exception of the one-off fast following the severe storms of 1703/4 there were to be no further national fast days for weather in England after 1662.⁸⁴

Change of course was slower, and at the level of popular culture more uneven, than this summary might suggest. Non-conformists, whose attachment to a providential God lasted longest, might for example continue to meet 'to beg rain' and note with satisfaction, 'God sent it.'⁸⁵ Prayers for fair weather remained in the church's litany, and the introduction of a special thanksgiving prayer for an abundant harvest after the difficult harvests of the 1790s established a pattern of use that continued up to the middle of the nineteenth century.⁸⁶ Locally, the Church might continue to preach that sin was the cause of dearth and repentance the remedy.⁸⁷ But increasingly, diarists and autobiographers no longer looked for a hidden meaning in the extreme weather events they recorded.⁸⁸ The recurrence of unusual weather events continued to offer occasions for grumbling about the weather, especially in years of harvest failure and hardship, but whether weather talk in the face of a receding belief in bad weather as a direct expression of divine anger continued to play a role in the later politics of church and state remains a subject for further research

VI

In a recent collection demonstrating the creativity of work in the new cultural history of weather, it has been suggested that 'the evidence for England does not support the claim that climatic events were read as evidence of the Stuart monarchy's deficiencies.'⁸⁹ A generalisation drawn from a case study of the later-seventeenth century 1683/4 winter fair on the frozen Thames, this might of course offer further evidence of the later shift in ideas about the causes and meaning of extreme weather events. There was however a *politics* to grumbling about the weather in early modern England that did reflect critically on the government. It was occasioned as much by unseasonable, as by extreme, weather events.

The dependence of many activities in early modern society on the weather meant that it was always likely to be a topic of comment and concern. Weather talk was an everyday activity, only the smallest fraction of which survives in the historical record. Grumbling about the weather in early modern England was of course sometimes no more than that. But the belief that God communicated through the weather meant that grumbling could become political. In the crisis of the Henrician Reformation, a conversation between the servants of two knights in which one told another of

⁸³Golinski, *British Weather*, xii.

⁸⁴Williamson, *et al*, *National Prayers*, ii, 20–22, 155–60, 164–5, 173–9, 187–90, 196–9, 210–13, 225–31, 318–20, 383–4, 225–31; Cullen, *Famine in Scotland*, 123.

⁸⁵Bagshawe, *Bagshawes of Ford*, 37.

⁸⁶Williamson, *et al*, *National Prayers*, ii, 649–57.

⁸⁷See, eg. Alan Booth, 'Food riots in the north-west of England 1790–1801', *Past & Present*, 77 (1977), 100.

⁸⁸See, variously, Clarke, ed., *Life and Times of Anthony Wood*; Holmes and C. Jones, ed., *Diary of William Nicholson, Bishop of Carlisle*; Harland, ed., *Autobiography of William Stout*; Henstock, ed., *Diary of Abigail Gawthern*.

⁸⁹William Calvert, 'Winter and Discontent', in Miglietti and Morgan, *Governing the Environment*, 114–132, at 127. Calvert's lively essay was designed as a critical engagement with Geoffrey Parker's 2013 *Global Crisis*.

a prophecy that priests would rise against the king had begun with talk of ‘stormy weather, and then the world’.⁹⁰ With its belief in God as the ultimate determinant of weather events, weather talk was part of a common cultural inheritance, an example of what David Underdown identified as a shared political vocabulary between elite and people.⁹¹ It was the consensus that unusual or extraordinary weather events should be seen as a direct expression of divine anger or approval that gave weather talk its political potency. Extreme weather could be read as a sign of God’s disapproval of policies and personnel (up to and including the monarch) in church and state. As Alexandra Walsham has argued more broadly for the political role of a Calvinist providentialism in early Stuart politics, it had the potential to forge oppositional alliances between elite and people against the threat to true religion and English liberties.⁹²

Since all daily experienced the weather this could give rise to an everyday politics, participation in which required neither literacy nor print (although the causes and meaning of, especially extreme, weather events were a popular topic in both cheap and learned print). Since talking about the weather was an everyday activity, it was a political resource open to all and anyone could offer an opinion about the causes and meaning of unseasonal or extraordinary weather events. State and church might hope to police print, but controlling everyday talk was more difficult, the more so since in England’s *regionally* variable climate knowledge of extreme weather events and their meaning might for some be experienced through rumour and report. At times of crisis, the conjunction between political and weather events doubtless promoted a tendency to detect a causal link between the two. State and church sought to offer an authorised reading of what the weather meant, offering a catch-22 reading in which both good and bad weather could be claimed as a demonstration of God’s love and approval, alternatively rewarding or chastising his people. But Post-Reformation, in a world of competing or conflicting authorities, there was an inevitable instability in the attempt to control interpretation.

The otherness of the early modern England mental world means that we need to recognise that political thinking and popular protest could take very different forms in the past. Wars of religion might also be weather wars. Weather beliefs did not, as in early modern China, topple dynasties, but weather talk troubled successive early modern English monarchs.⁹³ Political instability or politically charged days (like coronations) doubtless created a heightened sensitivity to the weather, and the conjunction between political and weather events promoted a tendency to detect a causal link between them. That government and church felt it necessary to offer official pronouncements in proclamations and from the pulpit about the meaning of weather events offers testimony to the anxieties that popular grumbling about the weather might arouse. At moments of political crisis – the Reformation, the English Revolution or Restoration – weather talk could challenge the legitimacy of the regime, helping to undercut an early modern culture

⁹⁰Elton, *Policy and Police*, 58, and see also 142.

⁹¹Underdown, *A Freeborn People*.

⁹²Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons*, 163, 441, 508. Thomas, *Religion and Decline of Magic*, 519, 562–3, 642; Walsham, *Providence*, 5, 116, 225, 248, 333.

⁹³For the damaging interrelationship between a Confucian reading of the political significance of ‘heaven-sent disasters’ and the impact of severe weather in early modern China, see Parker, *Global Crisis*, 125–51.

of obedience by questioning loyalty to a church that did not obey God's true message or to a monarch that God did not favour.

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