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The politics of weather in early modern England

John Walter

Department of History, University of Essex, Colchester, UK

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.

CONTACT John Walter  jwalter@essex.ac.uk  Department of History, University of Essex, Colchester, UK

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*.

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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

I

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 humoral 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 Rugge], *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; *Certaine Godly exercises*; Bull, *Christian praier*.

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,

²²Styrye, *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.