



Anne Cotterill

Cold Tyranny and the Demonic North of Early Modern England

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Foreword

As our planet appears to be warming, cold weather and winter ice and snow are gradually changing in quality, quantity, and seasonal behavior—when they appear and for how long they remain. The effects of global warming on cultures and peoples south of the Arctic are constantly in the news—from fires to floods to extreme drought to heat domes. But for Arctic peoples, the climate changes are equally, if not more, destructive of their way of life. Polar sea ice, for example, is thinning or disappearing altogether, affecting the migratory patterns and health of sea mammals and land animals, which in turn affect the survival of northern hunting cultures. My book may seem an unlikely response to this reality, focused as it is on early modern Britain rather than on contemporary climate change and ongoing ecological traumas to the human and nonhuman natural world. But not unlike the explosion of interest toward the end of the twentieth century in the history of the book from a sense that physical texts were giving way to digital ones, my interest in cold, ice, and the north responds to concern for what's being lost. To an historically trained literary scholar of early modern England, the earlier time offers a ready-made, thought-provoking perspective on today's warming. For then the world's climate, at least in Britain and northern Europe, was not warming but cooling in a phase climatologists have called the Little Ice Age. The power of cold and winter, instead of gradually diminishing as seems to be happening now, was felt to be intensifying—not steadily but on and off—over the seventeenth century creating great suffering in what were still mainly agricultural communities in Britain but also in London. Other books have documented the Little Ice Age; my focus here is on how cold and winter were perceived in several sorts of nonfiction texts and how they were dramatized in a selection of literary ones during this colder time before the existence of the modern thermometer or the ability to measure cold's force except by its effects. Ice in the form of arctic pack ice appeared demonic by repeatedly frustrating—blocking—England's political and economic ambitions for northern exploration and Far East commerce via maritime navigation. But in addition, the early modern, invariably Christian textual voices in this book often register experiences of cold and ice as fearful, as hostile to life's requirements but also as evidence of a parallel, fallen world of emotional and psychological cold: the absence of human warmth filled instead by the demonic chill of tyrannical meanness and deathly pride. Such attitudes, nursed in Western classical and medieval Christian thought, were far from the perception of the, then, virtually unknown indigenous peoples



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of the far north, over whom the British and other Europeans and their descendants in North America attempted to assert control in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Now, in the twenty-first century, with the threat of the loss of earth's ice, the very different perspective of these Arctic peoples, for whom cold and ice have been the basis of deep-rooted cultures and a sustainable relationship to their environment, is being documented in texts such as *The Meaning of Ice: People and Sea Ice in Three Arctic Communities* (2013) and Inuit activist Sheila Watt-Cloutier's *The Right to Be Cold* (2015). I return to these texts and their deeply moving, almost elegiac perspective on cold at the end of this book. In our present crisis of global warming, cold is beginning to take on more positive values than ever before in our Western culture, at this late date opening us who live south of the Arctic to new awareness and appreciation of northern peoples' complex understanding of the nature of cold.



Introduction

Abstract

The introduction situates this book's themes of outer and inner cold weather within the current field of ice humanities among other important ecocritical work. It outlines the book's structure, reviews evidence of fluctuating warm and cold periods in England preceding the early modern period's Little Ice Age, gives examples of the representation of winter and the seasons in medieval English texts, introduces the classical tradition of the barbarous Scythians of the north and lingering medieval Christian associations of the north with the devil and spiritual danger, and notes the relation between geography, climate, and temperament in ancient humoral theory still powerfully evoked by early moderns. The introduction concludes with brief descriptive summaries of the seven chapters and final coda.

Keywords: Little Ice Age, ice humanities, geohumoralism, seventeenth-century English politics, representations of winter

'Tis bitter cold
And I am sick at heart.
—*Hamlet* (1600), 1.1.6–7¹

Cold weather and knaves come out of the *North*.
—John Ray, *A Compleat Collection of English Proverbs* (1737)²

We'd rather have the iceberg than the ship,
Although it meant the end of travel.
—Elizabeth Bishop, "The Imaginary Iceberg" (1946), lines 1–2³

1 William Shakespeare, *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al., 3rd ed., 4 vols. (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2016), *Tragedies*, 359. In this chapter, further citations of the text of Shakespeare's plays by act, scene, and line number refer to this edition and are cited as *The Norton Shakespeare*, plus the appropriate volume name and page number.

2 John Ray, *A Compleat Collection of English Proverbs*, 3rd ed. (London, 1737), 15.

3 Elizabeth Bishop, *The Complete Poems, 1927–1979* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983), 4.

Cold Tyranny and the Demonic North of Early Modern England traces in a number of English texts composed during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries—among the worst years of the so-called Little Ice Age—a pattern of association between icy, wintry physical landscapes and an icy inner landscape of human cruelty and tyranny whose rigors promote the ultimate chill of *rigor mortis*. According to the *OED*, the word “rigor” originally entered the language in the early fifteenth century not only as meaning “harsh inflexibility ... severity, sternness, cruelty” but also as a medicinal term for “the sensation of numbness ... stiffness,” “the feeling of being very cold, accompanied by shivering, shaking.” Hovering behind this association of cold with tyranny’s rigors are two early traditions of casting the cold north as threat: (1) that of historians and poets of the classical Mediterranean world, from the ancient Greek Herodotus to the later Roman Ovid, who wrote about a race of fearsome northern peoples called the Scythians as cruel, uncivilized, even cannibalistic barbarians; and (2) that of the medieval Christian world, whose patristic writers aligned the far north with Satan and his demonic forces. The bottom of Dante’s hell, farthest from the warmth of God’s love, is an icescape where Satan and the worst of sinners eternally freeze. The story I tell here is that an increased attention to the physical cold of winter—both at home in Britain during the Little Ice Age and in newly discovered Arctic regions—overlapped with a time of increased critical attention to the institutions of kingship and Church and fear of tyranny from both. Such ferment and fears are reflected in the period’s ongoing struggles between king and Parliament leading to civil wars, the public execution of a monarch, the Restoration, and the Glorious Revolution. Perhaps not surprisingly, the binding, numbing power of ice and the power of northern winters to deface, kill, and bury life suggested representing the winter season as tyrannical but also suggested the fallen human parallel to winter: the fearful specter of cold-hearted humans as tyrannical winters who deal in death.

Although the term Little Ice Age “carries different meanings in different fields” which delineate the cold years slightly differently (and for different parts of the world), many climatologists refer to the Little Ice Age in northern Europe as roughly the period 1350/1400–1850 and note its two coldest phases dominated the weather of the seventeenth century.⁴ The Grindelwald

4 Glaciologists, for example, track the expansion of glaciers as affected by air temperature and precipitation, while paleoclimatologists are more likely to consider the effect on global temperatures of volcanic explosions and solar minima. See Christian Pfister et al., “Early Modern Europe,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Climate History*, ed. Sam White, Christian Pfister, and

Fluctuation from about 1565 to 1630 (named for “the contemporaneous expansion of the glacier bordering the Swiss town of Grindelwald”) was followed by the Maunder Minimum from 1654 to 1715 (named for nineteenth-century astronomer Edward Walter Maunder who documented the dearth of sunspots, a conspicuous solar calm, occurring during this chilly period).⁵ The causes of the Little Ice Age remain debated, but the cooling has been “usually attributed to a combination of orbital, solar, and volcanic forcings.” Indeed, the famous “Year Without a Summer,” 1816, has been thought the effect of several “large tropical [volcanic] eruptions.”⁶ My concern here is with the perception of physical cold articulated by a number of early modern north European, mostly English, voices, both literary and nonliterary: the feel of being cold, its effects on the human body and on the natural world, and its relationship, as a figure, to the disaster of human coldness in the sense of a void of warm feeling—being cold-hearted or cold-blooded, two terms the first use of which the *OED* assigns to Shakespeare at the opening of the seventeenth century.

Meteorology as Politics

As a dialectic rooted in human biology, heat and cold have proved among the oldest, most powerful metaphors for inner as well as outer life in the Western tradition. The exiled, wintry Old English heart of “The Wanderer,” Wallace Stevens’s “The Snow Man,” the fire and ice of not only Frost’s poem on passion but also Dante’s *Inferno* and Renaissance love lyrics all come immediately to mind (not to mention Disney’s cinematic money-maker, *Frozen*, adapted from Hans Christian Andersen’s 1845 fairy tale, “The Snow Queen”). In Galenic humoral theory, central to the early modern English

Franz Mauelshagen (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 265–95, 268. For a good account of the Little Ice Age, see also Dagomar Degroot, *The Frigid Golden Age: Climate Change, the Little Ice Age, and the Dutch Republic, 1560–1720* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), especially 22–54, and “Testing the Limits of Climate History: The Quest for a Northeast Passage during the Little Ice Age, 1594–1597,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 45, no. 4 (Spring 2015): 459–84, DOI:10.1162/JINH_a_00755.

5 Dagomar Degroot, “‘Never such weather known in these seas’: Climatic Fluctuations and the Anglo-Dutch Wars of the Seventeenth Century, 1652–1674,” *Environment and History* 20, no. 2 (May 2014): 239–73, 241, DOI:10.3197/096734014X13941952681034.

6 Pfister et al., “Early Modern Europe,” 268–69. For more information on how volcanic eruptions affect climate, see Xian Wu et al., “Volcanic Forcing Degrades Multiyear-to-Decadal Prediction Skill in the Tropical Pacific,” *Science Advances* 9, no. 15 (April 12, 2023), DOI:10.1126/sciadv. add9364.



understanding of human physiology and its relation to the natural world, heat and cold along with wet and dry were the binaries representing the four primary qualities, combinations of which resulted in the four basic elements “of perceivable matter”—“dry and cold yields earth; moist and cold, water; moist and hot, air; and hot and dry, fire.”⁷ These elements in turn were believed to underlie human being by, in different combinations, making up the form of the four basic human substances, fluids, called humors, which were thought to materially affect emotions, overall health, and temperament. Body heat and coldness were also considered “an attribute of sex difference.”⁸

Today, threatened by global warming, we are preoccupied by heat and its powers to melt, wither, and burn. A recent headline in *The Washington Post* on the new prevalence of forest fires quotes Steven J. Pyne, an expert on environmental history and the management of wildland and rural fire, about the relationship between rising world temperatures from our burning of fossil fuels and wildfires: “We are creating the fire equivalent of an ice age,” what Pyne calls the “Pyrocene.”⁹ Pyne invokes the comparison to “an ice age”; yet the dramatic rapidity of the most recent warming and our immediate concerns for the planet can allow us to forget that as description for emotion, morality, and political comment, the physical realities of cold, ice, and winter’s obliteration of the familiar have loomed large in human experience and imagination yet been little noted by literary and cultural scholars—until recently. In light of the planet’s accelerated warming and related environmental crises to which humans have contributed—the gradual disappearance of earth’s ice being just one example—scholars of literature and cultural history have been engaged ever more intensely in interdisciplinary conversations with environmental scientists and with

7 See Davydd J. Greenwood, “Humoral/Environmental Theories and the Chain of Being,” in *The Taming of Evolution: The Persistence of Nonevolutionary Views in the Study of Humans* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 27–43, 30. But see also the authoritative work on early modern humoral theory and Shakespeare by Gail Kern Paster, *Humoring the Body: Emotions and the Shakespearean Stage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), and Gail Kern Paster, Katherine Rowe, and Mary Floyd-Wilson, eds., *Reading the Early Modern Passions: Essays in the Cultural History of Emotion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

8 Gail Kern Paster, “The Unbearable Coldness of Female Being: Women’s Imperfection and the Humoral Economy,” *The English Literary Renaissance* 28, no. 3 (September 1998), 416–40, 416, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6757.1998.tb00760.x>. On humoral theory more broadly, to which we’ll return, see, for example, Paster, *Humoring the Body* and references in note 4.

9 Shannon Osaka, Michael E. Miller, and Beatriz Ríos, “‘The fire equivalent of an ice age’: Humanity Enters a New Era of Fire,” *The Washington Post*, June 10, 2023, accessed June 11, 2023, www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2023/06/10/canadian-wildfire-smoke-pyrocene/.

climatologists and climate historians to consider what literature uniquely reveals about past perceptions of weather and climate and of relationships between humankind and the nonhuman environment. Scholars of the early modern period “from the perspective of an environmentally-critical present” have been asking new questions for reading sixteenth-, seventeenth-, and eighteenth-century texts to highlight these texts’ perceptions of the natural world of earth and gardens, skies, wind and weather, waters and animals—of humans’ impact on the nonhuman and vice versa.¹⁰ To what extent did early moderns perceive, as Dan Brayton and Lynn Bruckner argue, “at times the inseparability of the human and the nonhuman”?¹¹ Or as Robert N. Watson earlier asked in his brilliant book on late Renaissance pastoral, how did, or could, the early moderns perceive nature distinct from a relationship to themselves?¹²

¹⁰ Dan Brayton and Lynne Bruckner, eds., *Ecocritical Shakespeare* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2011), xx. Examples of early literary criticism drawing on the sciences of the environment and interest in ecology include Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005); for the Renaissance/early modern period, Robert N. Watson, *Back to Nature: The Green and the Real in the Late Renaissance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); and for the “blue humanities,” Steve Mentz, *At the Bottom of Shakespeare’s Ocean* (London and New York: Continuum, 2009), looks at oceans without and within Shakespeare’s characters. The appearance of Brayton and Bruckner’s *Ecocritical Shakespeare* was followed by studies that have honed in on early moderns’ representation of particular aspects of the environment and its relationship to humans, such as Gwilym Jones’s *Shakespeare’s Storms* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015) on the work of meteorological phenomena of thunder, lightning, wind, and rain in Shakespeare’s plays; Lowell Duckert’s *For All Waters: Finding Ourselves in Early Modern Wetscapes* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); and Sophie Chiari, *Shakespeare’s Representation of Weather, Climate and Environment: The Early Modern “Fated Sky”* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), followed by her impressive *Shakespeare and the Environment: A Dictionary* (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2022). Our own disastrous weather events have prompted thinking about early moderns’ response to disasters of various kinds related to the environment, such as the critical readings collected in Sophie Chiari, ed., *The Experience of Disaster in Early Modern English Literature* (New York and London: Routledge, 2022); while Steve Mentz’s earlier focus on the watery worlds of Shakespeare’s oceans subsequently expanded into exploration of maritime disasters as a “central metaphor for historical change.” In *Shipwreck Modernity: Ecologies of Globalization, 1550–1719* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), he proposes “An Age of Shipwreck” as a way of thinking about humans’ important relationship to the global ocean that began with the era of exploration and circumnavigation. *The Routledge Handbook of Shakespeare and Animals*, edited by Karen Raber and Holly Dugan (New York and London: Routledge, 2021), brings together the fields of animal studies and Shakespeare scholarship, offering a series of essays that consider the dividing line but also the connections between animals and humans in Shakespeare’s plays.

¹¹ Brayton and Bruckner, *Ecocritical Shakespeare*, 3.

¹² Watson, *Back to Nature*, for example, Chap. 1, “Ecology, Epistemology, and Empiricism,” 3–35.



In their landmark volume from 2011, Brayton and Bruckner drew on Ursula Heise's "precise tripartite definition of ecocriticism" as involving "a 'triple allegiance' to 'the scientific study of nature, the scholarly analysis of cultural representations, and the political struggle for more sustainable ways of inhabiting the natural world.'"¹³ Since then, early modern historians such as Dagomar Degroot and Sam White and literary scholars like Tobias Menely, Lowell Duckert, Steve Mentz, and Sophie Chiari have engaged from various theoretical and disciplinary directions with the sciences of climate history and the natural world in their analyses of Arctic exploration, the Anglo-Dutch wars, colonial American settlement, and of canonical and noncanonical literary texts.¹⁴ Menely, practicing a "geohistorical poetics," argues for a reading practice—"stratigraphic criticism"—that takes into account "the Earth's superimposed layers and discordant forms as an archive of planetary change."¹⁵ Duckert and Mentz have dived deep into waters of the early modern period and argue for their impress on not only lives, poetry, and theatre but as an immersive ecological approach to the past and its texts. *Cold Tyranny and the Demonic North* has benefited from the historical work on the so-called Little Ice Age of, among others, Degroot and White; it covers some of the same texts as Menely's *Climate and the Making of Worlds* and has drawn inspiration from Duckert's and Mentz's imaginative linking of known and little-known texts, their exploration of the early modern watery world, and their suggestive ecology of reading. I enter this discussion of early moderns' perception of their environment and of their relationship to the natural world by focusing on a specific historical moment in England, roughly 1550–1750 but centered in the seventeenth century, a nodal point when a series of events stimulated interest in and knowledge of experiences of extreme cold, ice, and winter both at home and, for the first time, far north.

As Jonathan Healey's *The Blazing World: A New History of Revolutionary England, 1603–1689* documents, England's seventeenth century was a turbulent moment of intense interest in politics, especially in the nature

13 Brayton and Bruckner, *Ecocritical Shakespeare*, 4.

14 See notes 1–2, including Degroot, "Never such weather known in these seas"; "Testing the Limits of Climate History"; *The Frigid Golden Age*. See also Sam White, "The Real Little Ice Age, 1594–1597," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 44, no. 3 (Winter 2014): 327–52, DOI:10.1162/JINH_a_00574; White, *A Cold Welcome: The Little Ice Age and Europe's Encounter with North America* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2017); Tobias Menely, *Climate and the Making of Worlds: Toward a Geohistorical Poetics* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2021); Duckert, *For All Waters*, and "Pericles's Deep Ecology," *Studies in English Literature 1500–1900*, 59, no. 2 (Spring 2018): 367–81, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/sel.2019.0017>; Mentz, *Shipwreck Modernity*; Chiari, *Shakespeare and the Environment* and *Shakespeare's Representation of Weather*.

15 Menely, *Climate and the Making of Worlds*, 21.

of kingship and the fearful specter of a tyrannous monarch—and of a Roman Catholic one, the two often perceived to be more or less one and the same.¹⁶ Coming on the heels of the Reformation of the previous century, the seventeenth century was shaken by religious ferment and apocalyptic readings of political but also of meteorological events. Meteorology could become politics—and there was weather to complain about. Particularly cold decades during the Little Ice Age for the period covered in this book included the 1590s, the 1690s, and the 1740s, although as scientists emphasize, temperature ranges in these periods fluctuated, and warmer winters (and summers that could “sear” the “sunburned meadows” of Marvell’s “Damon the Mower” [10]) could alternate with years of prolonged, unusually cold seasons.¹⁷ The English reflected their experience of notably these cold times by documenting in text and broadside harsh winters and cool, wet summers. Simultaneously, beginning in the mid-sixteenth century, English and Dutch maritime explorers began sailing far north in search of an eastern or western passage to China over the Arctic, and some of these navigators and seamen composed sensational narratives, published individually or in Richard Hakluyt’s and Samuel Purchas’s popular travel collections. The writers described not the passage they were commissioned to find but another kind of new world: cold that froze eyelids and iron nails to one’s tongue, mountainous and thundering icebergs, their ships locked fast and in danger of being crushed by pack ice, ghostly polar bears that appeared quietly out of nowhere and devoured sailors. A byproduct of England’s early northern exploration was the establishment of diplomatic and trade relations with Russia in 1555; and new accounts by diplomats and merchants of that vast northern world of frigid winters and exotic peoples became available, one of the most notorious being Giles Fletcher, the Elder’s *Of the Russe Common Wealth* (1591), which was known to most if not all the imaginative writers featured in this book. Prompted by experiences of extraordinary English winters and by accounts of frigid land- and seascapes in northern voyage and diplomatic narratives, the Restoration’s newly established Royal Society commissioned and published its first research on cold in 1665.

At this interesting time of increased attention to cold, literary, political, religious, medical, and scientific vocabularies, I argue, were still

16 Jonathan Healey, *The Blazing World: A New History of Revolutionary England, 1603–1689* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2021). Healey notes, “In the Protestant mind of the age, Catholicism was associated with tyranny and arbitrary government,” 84.

17 Andrew Marvell, *The Poems of Andrew Marvell*, ed. Nigel Smith (London and New York: Pearson Longman, 2003), 136.

interconnected. Medieval Christian associations of the far north with Satan's seat and of extreme cold with the demonic, with evil, still persisted and heightened physical cold's fearful fascination and moral weight, making northern cold not only an important but also a problematic subject for natural philosophers and a complex, timely figure in poetry for states of mind, heart, and soul. And in politically volatile seventeenth-century England, the specters of unusual frost, snow, and ice whose rigidity exemplified a necessity of life—water—transformed into threat, became notable figures in writing for meditation on cold-blooded, cold-hearted tyranny and violence. Increasing cold and ice also raised concerns about English national identity as northern, including Britons' relationship to the barbarous, ungovernable Scythians of ancient and early modern historiography.¹⁸ Still under the sway of Aristotle's "tripartite divisions of climatic regions"—the world divided by latitudinal bands into northern or frigid, southern or torrid, and middle or temperate zones—early modern Britons strove to belong on the northern edge of the temperate zone rather than be associated with the reputed lack of civilization farther north.¹⁹ Early in Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* (1610–11), Imogen likens her blocking royal father of ancient Britain to "the tyrannous breathing of the north" (1.3.37), the cold winds that nip the growth of warm life, in this case her and Posthumous's love.²⁰

My subject is how extreme cold and ice in the seventeenth century take on a distinctly moral and political cast. They are evoked to figure what was then considered the most dangerous enemy of mankind, the devil, and humanity's ongoing capacity since the Fall for deadly inhumanity, cruelty exemplified in the tyrant's insatiable appetite for power over life and death. *Cold Tyranny and the Demonic North* divides into two main parts

18 The scholarship on early modern England's struggle with national identity once their Scythian ancestors were acknowledged is vast. See, for example, Richard Helgerson's *Forms of Nationhood: The Elizabethan Writing of England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Deborah Shuger, "Irishmen, Aristocrats, and Other White Barbarians," *Renaissance Quarterly* 50, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 494–525, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3039188>; John Wands, "The Theory of Climate in the English Renaissance and *Mundus Alter et Idem*," in *Acta Conventus Neo-Latini Sanctandreami: Proceedings of the Fifth International Congress of Neo-Latin Studies*, ed. Ian D. McFarlane. Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies 38 (Binghamton, NY: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, 1986), 519–29; and especially the work of Mary Floyd-Wilson, *English Ethnicity and Race in Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

19 There are numerous discussions of the classical climate zones, but I draw here on Floyd-Wilson's *English Ethnicity and Race*, 2. Her book's exploration of geohumoral theory has been extremely useful for my thinking.

20 *The Norton Shakespeare, Romances and Poems*, 227.

(chapter summaries follow this introduction). The first part, “At Home and Far from Home: English Records of Winter’s Cold,” features “data” about cold in the words of those who lived with it at the time, who in different kinds of sources describe their experiences with and thoughts about winter cold, snow, and ice. I begin with a sample of contemporary printed pamphlets and broadsides that remark on phenomena of cold weather in England, not least the freezing of London’s Thames, which happened twelve times in the seventeenth century alone, according to one historian’s account.²¹ This selection of ephemera about England’s winters is followed by three different printed accounts of unplanned overwintering in Arctic winters: the first Arctic best-seller by Gerrit de Veer about Dutch navigator Willem Barentsz’s expeditions, especially his third (1596–97), to find a northeast passage over Russia to China; a less well-known story by Edward Pellham, gunner’s mate, of eight English whalers, including himself, accidentally left behind by their London-based Muscovy Company ship and forced to survive, stranded, on Spitsbergen one winter (1630–31); and, “the first book of northwest passage exploration published by an expedition’s leader for an English monarch,” Thomas James’s unusually eloquent and emotional narrative of spiritual distress, documenting his failed attempt to find a passage over Canada.²² His account centers on the frightful winter for him and his crew on Charlton Island at the bottom of Hudson Bay during 1631–32 and is distinguished by two original poems he composed, first in spiritual horror at the terrifying cold and ice and later in grief when leaving behind the graves of four crew members.

The second part, “Literature and the Lab: Imaginative and Experimental Explorations of Cold,” reads four more or less canonical imaginative texts from the period—Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* (ca. 1610), Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667), Dryden and Purcell’s semi-opera *King Arthur* (1691), and Thomson’s final 1744 version of “Winter” from *The Seasons*—along with Restoration virtuoso Robert Boyle’s longest scientific work, *New Experiments and Observations Touching Cold, or, An Experimental History of Cold, Begun* (1665). Each of the imaginative texts in the second part reflects the author’s familiarity with and use of one or more of the texts in the first section in order to draw a connection between, on the one hand, the natural, material

21 My source for this figure was Ian Currie, *Frosts, Freezes and Fairs: Chronicles of the Frozen Thames and Harsh Winters in Britain since 1000 AD* (Coulsdon, Surrey: Frosted Earth, 1996), 4–8.

22 Frédéric Regard, ed., *The Quest for the Northwest Passage: Knowledge, Nation and Empire, 1576–1806* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016; first published 2013 by Chatto and Pickering), 13.

world of killing cold, blanketing snow, and hard-edged ice and, on the other, of human cold, specifically tyranny's rigid silencing of dissent and diversity of voices. Cold's forbidding landscapes in this early modern writing reveal a preoccupation with fearful icy human rigidity akin to physical and spiritual death and with moral evil. Human cold may take the demonic form of murderous hatred, of lust for power and revenge, and narcissistic self-love as dramatized by Milton's Satan; or of a monarch transformed by unfounded jealousy into a dangerous tyrannical despot such as Leontes in *The Winter's Tale*. Oswald, warring Saxon invader in Dryden's *King Arthur*, and his rapacious wizard Osmond, who commands winter cold in April and binds humans under his control, may together nod toward the Dutch militaristic monarchy of William III under the chill of whose reign Dryden as Roman Catholic was disenfranchised. The "grim Tyrant" (898) Winter, "the cruel Season" (243), in James Thomson's *The Seasons* comes to mirror in its deathly "Rage" (914) human cruelty, tyranny, and injustice, not least in heavily oppressing the poor and vulnerable ("little Tyrants rag'd," 367).²³ Devout Anglican virtuoso Robert Boyle, called heat the right hand of nature and cold her left, perhaps to suggest the more sinister hand. Working against what Dryden once called the "tyranny" of Aristotle over "freeborn reason," Boyle begins and ends detailing his initial research on cold with melancholy notes of distaste for such a difficult, because hitherto unexplored and diffuse yet "barren," topic, yielding limited knowledge in relation to what he "suffer'd" to conduct experiments on ice and cold.²⁴

Ice Humanities and the Human Fall into Cold

Claudio in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, imprisoned and terrified of dying, imagines among the horrors after death being pierced by the freezing cold of hell's "thick-ribbèd ice" (3.1.123), ribs that cannot be penetrated.²⁵ In the 1770s explorer James Cook first crossed the Antarctic Circle and found ice everywhere "of such extent that I could see no end to it." He refused to

23 James Thomson, *The Seasons*, ed. James Sambrook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 244, 214, 246, 220.

24 John Dryden, "To My Honoured Friend, Dr. Charleton," in *Selected Poems*, ed. Steven N. Zwicker and David Bywaters (London and New York: Penguin, 2001), 24, lines 1, 3; Robert Boyle, *New Experiments and Observations Touching Cold, or an Experimental History of Cold, Begun*, in *The Works of Robert Boyle*, ed. Michael Hunter and Edward B. Davis, vol. 4 of 14, 203-542 (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1999), 208, 222, 224.

25 *The Norton Shakespeare, Comedies*, 928.

go further, insisting on “the enexpressable horrid aspect of the Country, a Country doomed by Nature never once to feel the warmth of the Suns rays, but to lie for ever buried under everlasting snow and ice.”²⁶ But the distance we have come from such perceptions of the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries is reflected in a book from almost two decades ago, Mariana Gosnell’s masterly *Ice: The Nature, the History, and the Uses of an Astonishing Substance*, a paean to and delighted exploration of ice and its relation to us in its many dimensions, along with the fact of its being threatened today by global warming.²⁷ More recently, reflecting the development of new directions within literary criticism that draw on environmental concerns is the work of ice humanities, emerging in light of the fact that the earth’s ice is not “everlasting” as Cook imagined, instead “has been widely recognized to be in crisis.”²⁸ “The Arctic is warming at least twice as rapidly as the global average and some parts of the far north are warming three to four times faster.”²⁹ Sverker Sörlin and Klaus Dodds, in their introduction to *Ice Humanities: Living, Working, and Thinking in a Melting World*, observe, “How humans have engaged with ice in the past is already a fantastically rich topic to explore. ... With the waning of the ice the ice humanities will, in a way, sadly, only grow in volume and acuteness.”³⁰

Ice humanities takes the cryosphere or the ice-covered part of the earth’s surface as its special concern: “No longer resilient nor long-lasting, the melting and thawing of ice have provoked new interactions between humanities and science scholars interested in how creative and literary modalities of expression might make sense of the fate of the world’s ice. ... Artists are increasingly drawn to ice as a topic of inquiry into human fate, folly, and enigma.”³¹ One visual artist, for example, raising consciousness of the fragility

26 Quoted in Eric G. Wilson, *The Spiritual History of Ice: Romanticism, Science, and the Imagination* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 161–62.

27 Mariana Gosnell, *Ice: The Nature, the History, and the Uses of an Astonishing Substance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007; first published 2005 by Alfred A. Knopf).

28 See, for example, Klaus Dodds and Sverker Sörlin, eds., *Ice Humanities: Living, Working, and Thinking in a Melting World* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022), 18. Hester Blum has researched the fascinating relation between voyagers to the icy poles and their need to create printed texts on board ship for their own sanity and community. Her book—Hester Blum, *The News at the Ends of the Earth: The Print Culture of Polar Exploration* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2019)—opens up amazing archives of their printed ephemera. Mariana Gosnell’s *Ice* inspired me with its vast detail.

29 Klaus Dodds and Jamie Woodward, *The Arctic: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 1.

30 Dodds and Sörlin, *Ice Humanities*, 24.

31 Dodds and Sörlin, *Ice Humanities*, 19.



of polar ice in our currently fast-warming climate has been Olafur Eliasson, who, with geologist Minik Rosing, created the temporary installation *Ice Watch*, consisting of twelve large blocks of ice “cast off from the Greenland ice sheet” and “harvested from a fjord outside Nuuk,” then arranged in clock formation in prominent places where they were left to melt: in Copenhagen in 2014, in Paris in 2015, and in two locations in London in 2018.³²

The icebergs that once amazed, mystified, and threatened early modern sailors and explorers by their immense size and unstoppable force have become in our warming era “rather kin with the tragic stranded whales the media observe, and can cause widespread emotion.”³³ Elizabeth Leane has proposed a new term, “cryonarrative,” “cryo-” from the ancient Greek *κρύος* meaning ice, frost, icy cold, to describe “the kinds of stories humans are telling about ice in the contemporary period”; and in order to highlight icebergs’ significance as actors and, in some sense, story tellers outside of “an anthropocentric story,” she argues for thinking about icebergs as “planetary travellers whose journeys are entangled with, but not reducible to, human events and activities.”³⁴ As travelers, they have become as interesting and individual as the lone human travelers who described with awe and horror the icebergs they saw in the early era of Arctic exploration or, even further in the past, as the speaker of Riddle 31 of the Old English Exeter Book who evokes an iceberg as a terrifying floating battle-ax. In fact, the human Arctic traveler and the iceberg, the once endangered and the once powerful, have exchanged places. Such massive yet now clearly transient natural phenomena are an example of why writing about cold, such as this book, takes on an urgency and elegiac cast often characteristic of current ecological perspectives. *Cold Tyranny and the Demonic North* was inspired by, and hopes to move others similarly to contemplate, what humans will lose as part of our complex environment but, also tragically, as part of our cultural imagination when certain earlier, powerful realities of cold, ice, and winter weather vanish. How much, for example, have humans depended on the hardness of winter’s cold and ice to recognize, figure, or justify their own morally cold and hard interior?

Hence, this volume’s interest in cold and ice is at home with the project of the ice humanities and with the thoughtful ecocritical work of, among others, Duckert, Mentz, and Chiari, and of Sophie Lemerrier-Goddard who

32 Olafur Eliasson and Minik Rosing, *Ice-Watch* (Copenhagen, 2014; Paris, 2015; London, 2018), accessed May 20, 2023, <https://olafureliasson.net/archive/artwork/WEK109190/ice-watch>.

33 Dodds and Sörlin, *Ice Humanities*, 22.

34 Elizabeth Leane, “Cryonarratives for Warming Times: Icebergs as Planetary Travellers,” in Dodds and Sörlin, *Ice Humanities*, 250–65, 251, 254.

has come to my attention most recently, all of whom engage precisely and imaginatively with the early moderns' elemental world.³⁵ My book's initial inspiration, however, began in autobiography. I lived for over a decade in Iceland experiencing its cold dark winters, ferocious wind, whipped winter oceans, and whitened mountains, along with a new sense of spring as less about greening than about the gradual return of light—a welcome gift yet sometimes frustrating when increasing daylight only revealed the bitter cold whites and grays of ice. Later, as a student of early modern British literature, I became curious about the historical record of contact between Britain and Iceland as well as between Britain and other parts of Scandinavia in the period, intersections which the pioneering Ethel Seaton early explored,³⁶ and that interest led to reading in classical through early modern European preconceptions, including myths and superstitions, about northern peoples and their cold world, as well as classical theories about climate and about the body's humoral, or internal, climates. The early Christian associations, biblical and literary, of the cold north and ice with Satan and the demonic, exemplified by the persistent medieval notion of Iceland's volcano Hekla as a fiery cold entrance to hell, prompted my reading in early Arctic exploration. Hekla “was pictured as perpetually vomiting flames on Abraham Ortelius's 1570 map of Iceland” that “also shows the Icelandic waters inhabited by monsters.”³⁷ I wondered how easily religious fears of the mysterious far north in the sixteenth century might be overruled by pressing mercantile and colonial designs to conquer and claim that region. Did the north lose its potency as demonic and dangerously magic, as northern Europeans began sailing and whaling there? How did voyagers' documented evidence about Arctic nature and its effect on human minds and bodies impact the seventeenth century's imaginative literature? And how did poets respond to early natural philosophical approaches to investigating the nature of cold and ice—poetry *and* scientific investigations sharing witness of unusually harsh English winters during Europe's Little Ice Age? And in a country where church attendance was required, where Sunday sermons reminded listeners of human sinfulness in a fallen natural world and urged calls to self-scrutiny, how much did contemporary winters and Arctic cold signal the danger of national moral as well as physical disaster?

35 See Sophie Lemerrier-Goddard, “Frozen: English Journeys to the End of the World,” in Chiari, *The Experience of Disaster in Early Modern English Literature*, 26–43.

36 Ethel Seaton, *Literary Relations of England and Scandinavia in the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935).

37 Karen Oslund, *Iceland Imagined: Nature, Culture, and Storytelling in the North Atlantic* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011), 39.

Over time, what began as an historicist and archival project to read closely early modern documents related to Arctic exploration, to Britain's knowledge of Iceland and vice versa, and to British and especially English winters in the Little Ice Age, became haunted by unavoidable contrasts to and parallels with our present moment when the world is not chilling down but warming up. Melting polar ice is opening exactly the Northwest Passage to the east above Canada and the Northeast Passage over Russia and Siberia that early modern explorers sought but were barred by ice from discovering. Lowell Duckert marks the timeliness for us of the written observations of early modern explorers who sailed north:

Their climatological treatises arrive at a useful interdisciplinary point for us right now as we create our own passages in response to a warming world; it is not anachronistic to think through climate complexities like global warming—a world with or without ice—alongside these writers who, like us, found themselves sliding into uncertain futures.³⁸

“Sliding into uncertain futures”: indeed apocalyptic rhetoric and fears echo across both eras—early modern and contemporary—about the impact of human actions on climate. Earlier voices worried that sinful human acts on an individual or a national scale were drawing down divine punishment in the form of prolonged cold and storms; in our current moment, we blame humans' unconstrained mining and consumption of fossil fuels, destruction of natural habitats and species, and practices promoting air, ground, and water pollution. Robert Markley, writing about Defoe's *The Storm* (1704), which documented the destructive Great Storm of November 26–27, 1703 that swept through southern England and Wales, suggests that in the Little Ice Age,

the frequency and strength of storms that England experienced led to a more volatile conception of the natural world than one might assume from reading ahistorically the literature of agricultural improvement, eighteenth-century georgic, or early Romantic poetry [W]riters in the early modern era frequently read into meteorological phenomena eschatological and even apocalyptic significance.³⁹

38 Duckert, *For All Waters*, 107–8.

39 Robert Markley, “Casualties and Disasters: Defoe and the Interpretation of Climatic Instability,” *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 8, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2008): 102–24, 104, DOI:10.2979/JEM.2008.8.2.102.

Sophie Chiari notes in her introduction to *The Experience of Disaster in Early Modern English Literature*, disasters that included terrible frosts, that “Whether disastrous episodes were considered [in early modern England] as natural or unnatural is open to debate, for there was obviously a fine line between the natural and the unnatural.”⁴⁰ *Cold Tyranny and the Demonic North* assembles examples of how depicted experiences of extraordinary cold and winter appear to draw a fine line between the natural world and the human or between what is unnatural in nature and what is unnatural in humanity—not exactly because of concern, as in our day, about the destructive impact of human behavior on the environment, but because of what the phenomenon of extraordinary cold reveals about a parallel frightening capacity of humanity for the destructive disaster of cold-heartedness or icy indifference. Given the omnipresence in early modern England and Scotland of the Church and its vision of human sin beginning with the Fall—Adam and Eve drawing down with themselves the fall of nature—the texts I explore point to the fear that the greatest potential environmental disaster of all is the human being in the sense of humans’ capacity for blighting all life through deceit including self-deceit, greed, cruelty, and cold-heartedness, a perspective with some current resonance.

Francis Spufford’s *I May Be Some Time: Ice and the English Imagination* signaled a surge of interest by literary scholars in what Katherine Bowers calls “the Arctic sublime” and the “polar Gothic” in late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts, exploring what happens to the human will and psyche in extreme polar landscapes.⁴¹ *Cold Tyranny and the Demonic North in Early Modern England* starts further back in time to read some of the earliest written responses to the Arctic and to British winters in the Little Ice Age, perspectives that preceded, informed, and ultimately gave way to the so-called “polar Gothic.” My purpose is to bring together nonfictional accounts of cold and the far north and fictional representations of cold winters and hearts, which coincided with the worst moments of the Little Ice Age, with the first English northern travel for trade and conquest, and with the beginnings of an organized scientific community, all in a century of political and religious upheaval in England centered on fear of icy tyranny in government and church. This early modern discovery of the cold north preceded and led to

40 Chiari, *The Experience of Disaster in Early Modern English Literature*, 2.

41 Francis Spufford, *I May Be Some Time: Ice and the English Imagination* (New York: Picador, 1997); Katherine Bowers, “Haunted Ice, Fearful Sounds, and the Arctic Sublime: Exploring Nineteenth-Century Polar Gothic,” *Gothic Studies* 19, no. 2 (2017): 71–84, DOI:10.7227/GS.0030. See also Wilson, *The Spiritual History of Ice*.

the better-known explosion of interest in the exploration of the Arctic and Antarctica in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which in turn has led to the research that now alerts us to the cold and ice we are losing.

While the focus of *Cold Tyranny and the Demonic North* is on writing published from the late sixteenth to the mid-eighteenth centuries, the rest of this introduction establishes some basic facts about climate in Britain from the early English era to the sixteenth century and briefly observes a few striking examples of literary representations of and associations with cold in early English and Middle English texts. I also introduce two interrelated traditions of representing the cold north—the classical Greek and Roman and the medieval Christian—which, along with humoral theories relating latitude, climate, and national temperaments, informed English imaginations and scholarship from the early medieval through the early modern era, if not equally at all times. Hence, patterns of association and thought about wintry cold from those classical and patristic traditions are essential background to my study. This introduction reviews the early Christian association of Satan and hell with the north, evident in Latin, early English, and Middle English texts, and evoked, for example, by Joan La Pucelle in Shakespeare's *I Henry VI* as she desperately summons hell's fiends to aid France's cause: "You speedy helpers that are substitutes / Under the lordly monarch of the North, / Appear and aid me in this enterprise" (5.3.5–7).⁴² The representation of winter cold in Old Norse pagan mythology is introduced as well, with the understanding that knowledge of these or similar pre-Christian myths not written down until the twelfth or thirteenth century in Iceland may still have come to England with the first Germanic and Scandinavian settlers. Early English and Old Norse "are plainly cognate languages," suggesting at least the possibility that "the mythological beliefs of the two communities might have been cognate too."⁴³ Also the Scandinavian settlement of England in the ninth century, when England had already become Christian, or other more passing contacts between the English then and sea-going Scandinavians, might have brought characters and stories of Old Norse myths into England. The tenth-century Gosforth Cross in Cumbria, "part of the Danelaw area of England settled by Scandinavian raiders," combines Christian and Old Norse pagan figures, as does the Thorwald Cross from the same era found on the Isle of Man.⁴⁴

42 *The Norton Shakespeare, Histories*, 361.

43 Heather O'Donoghue, *English Poetry and Old Norse Myth: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 10.

44 Alexandra Harris, *Weatherland: Writers and Artists under English Skies* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2015), 42.



Evidence about Climate

Climatologists suggest that the rise of the Roman Empire was accompanied by an amelioration in climate, while its fall seems to have coincided with a deterioration in climatic conditions. That deterioration would have been felt in England in the century after the arrival of Germanic tribes and just before the arrival in Kent in 597 of Augustine (later “of Canterbury”) to begin the process of converting the early English to Christianity.⁴⁵ Hubert H. Lamb notes “there was a general tendency towards recovery of warmth in Europe through Roman times, and of increasing dryness, until about 400 CE. A gradual, global warming up to 400 would, of course, be consistent with the evidence of rising sea level.”⁴⁶ The rising sea level during this warmer era changed the coastlines of the North Sea countries, which may have influenced migrations into England:

The slow rise of world sea level, amounting in all probably to one metre or less ... by AD 400 produced a notable incursion of the sea from the Wash [the large bay and estuary in the middle of England’s east coast, between Lincolnshire and East Anglia] into the English fenland and maintained estuaries and inlets that were navigable by small craft on the continental shore of the North Sea from Flanders to Jutland. ... This is a circumstance which may have helped the Anglian and Saxon migrants launching out across the North Sea from their previous continental homelands.⁴⁷

However, an overall cooler, more disturbed climate seems to have prevailed after the migrating tribes settled in England and particularly after a period coinciding with the beginning of the conversion of the early English to Christianity in the late sixth century. Lamb argues that most of the storms and sea floods around the coasts of the North Sea in the first millennium, of which reports still survive, are dated from the sixth and ninth centuries, while increased storms and flooding may have contributed to the widespread abandonment of land and cultivation in the low-lying, unusually flat, Jæren coastal region of southwest Norway, sending those Scandinavians elsewhere, possibly further west.

45 Jennifer Neville, *Representations of the Natural World in Old English Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 4.

46 Hubert H. Lamb, *Climate, History and the Modern World*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 157. Earlier, on p. 153, the author notes rising sea levels in Europe and Scandinavia during the time of the Roman Empire up to ca. 400 CE.

47 Lamb, *Climate, History and the Modern World*, 162–63.

A few very remarkable winters were reported in this time, perhaps the most famous being the “winter-without-an-end” of 535–36 CE, whose cause scientists have debated but whose effects were reported around the globe. Dendroclimatologists study tree rings to determine past climates, and dendroclimatologist Ulf Büntgen of the Swiss Federal Research Institute for Forest, Snow and Landscape Research WSL and his colleagues have identified what they call “The Late Antique Little Ice Age,” prompted by three significant volcanic eruptions in 536, 540, and 547 CE, which resulted in a long cooling in the northern hemisphere from the mid-sixth through the seventh century.⁴⁸ The 536 eruption “resulted in a dry fog that is recorded in historical sources from Byzantium to China, while the worst of the cold apparently occurred in the year 540–41.”⁴⁹ “The tree-ring evidence that the prolonged and extreme cold period did occur is incontrovertible.”⁵⁰

In Old Norse mythology appears the notion of *Fimbulvetur* (“Mighty Winter”), which immediately precedes the end of the world, Ragnarök, in a battle between the gods and the giants.⁵¹ The “Mighty Winter” refers to three successive winters where snow comes in from all directions, without any intervening summer. During this time will be innumerable wars, depravity, and faithlessness, when ties of blood will no longer be respected.⁵² We can only speculate about a possible connection between the myth and an actual sixth-century experience of “winter-without-an-end.” But the associations

48 Penny Sarchet, “125-Year Mini Ice Age Linked to the Plague and Fall of Empires,” *NewScientist*, February 8, 2016, accessed February 1, 2024, <https://www.newscientist.com/article/2076713--125-year-mni-ice-age-linked-to-the-plague-and-fall-of-empires/>.

49 Michael G. L. Baillie, “Dendrochronology Raises Questions About the Nature of the AD 536 Dust-Veil Event,” *The Holocene* 4, no. 2 (1994): 212–17, <https://doi.org/10.1177/095968369400400211>.

50 Elizabeth Jones, “Climate, Archaeology, History, and the Arthurian Tradition: A Multiple-Source Study of Two Dark-Age Puzzles,” in *The Years without Summer: Tracing A.D. 536 and Its Aftermath*, ed. Joel D. Gunn, BAR International Series 872 (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2000), 25–34, 27.

51 The notion of *fimbulvetur* appears in stanza 44 of the poem “Vafþrúðnismál,” or “Vafþrúdnir’s Sayings” in Snorri Sturlason’s thirteenth-century *Eddukvæði* or *Poetic Edda*. In that poem, Óðin enters into a wisdom contest with the “cold-ribbed giant,” Vafþrúðnir, and demands to know the future for gods and men—and for himself. In a recent edition in English, *The Poetic Edda*, trans. Carolyne Larrington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 47, stanza 44 reads as follows, Óðin addressing the giant:

Much I have travelled, much have I tried out,
 much have I tested the Powers;
 which among men will live when the famous
 Mighty Winter comes among men?

52 Gwyn Jones, *A History of the Vikings*, 2nd ed. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 318.



between cold and winter with war and a breakdown of human civilization recur in the seventeenth century.

Besides the winters of 535–36 and 540–41, Lamb notes that the winter of 763–64 is documented as particularly harsh from many parts of Europe, with enormous snowfalls and great losses of olive and fig trees in southern Europe. The winter's effect was felt in Northumbria, for example, as evidenced in a letter of 764 from Cuthbert, Abbot of Wearmouth and Jarrow, to Bishop Lul in Germany, in which Cuthbert says he has sent, as requested, certain books copied out. "And if I could have done more, I would gladly have done so. For the conditions of the past winter oppressed the island of our race very horribly with cold and ice and long and widespread storms of wind and rain, so that the hand of the scribe was hindered from producing a great number of books."⁵³ The Nile froze in 829, then another such winter in 859–60 produced ice strong enough to bear laden wagons on the edge of the Adriatic near Venice. Finally in 1010–11 there was ice on the Bosphorus and on the Nile.⁵⁴

The colder weather in what is now Great Britain, which seemed to develop after 400, did not break until near the end of the early medieval period, leading into what has been called "The Medieval Warm Epoch," ca. 1000–1300.⁵⁵ This warmer epoch was followed in turn, though gradually, by the Little Ice Age. As Brian Fagan has noted, however, there was "never a monolithic deep freeze, rather a climactic seesaw that swung constantly backwards and forwards, in volatile and sometimes disastrous shifts."⁵⁶ The Little Ice Age appears to have had especially severe moments in the 1400s and around the 1590s and the 1690s.⁵⁷ "Alpine glaciers underwent three far-reaching advances

53 Kevin Crossley-Holland, ed. and trans., *The Anglo-Saxon World* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1982), 168–69. See also Dorothy Whitelock, ed., *English Historical Documents c.500–1042*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 1996; first published 1979), 886–87.

54 Joel D. Gunn, "A.D. 536 and Its 300-Year Aftermath," in Gunn, *The Years without Summer*, 5–20, 11; Lamb, *Climate, History and the Modern World*, 165.

55 "But by the late tenth to twelfth centuries most of the world for which we have evidence seems to have been enjoying a renewal of warmth." Lamb, *Climate, History and the Modern World*, 171.

56 Brian Fagan, *The Little Ice Age: How Climate Made History, 1300–1850* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 48.

57 Lamb, *Climate, History and the Modern World*, 142. Christian Rohr, Chantal Camenisch, and Kathleen Pribyl, "European Middle Ages," in White et al., *The Palgrave Handbook of Climate History*, 247–63, briefly divide the climate of the European Middle Ages (ca. 500–1500 CE) into (1) the period ca. 500–1000, before the Medieval Warm Period (MWP); (2) the Medieval Warm Period, lasting ca. 1000–1300; and (3) a transitional period between the MWP and the Little Ice Age, ca. 1300–1500. See also Timothy P. Newfield, "The Climate Downturn of 536–50," in White et al., *The Palgrave Handbook of Climate History*, 447–93.

during the late 1200s–ca. 1380, the 1580s–ca. 1660, and 1810s–ca. 1860. These events are associated with minima in solar activity—the Wolf (1280–1350), Maunder (1654–1715), and Dalton (1790–1820) minima—and with the cooling effect of multiple tropical eruptions.⁵⁸

Medieval Winter and the Seasons

“English literature begins in the cold”: with these words, Alexandra Harris opens her chapter on weather in early English writing and art in her survey of the English experience of weather.⁵⁹ “Winter” is the oldest of the Germanic seasonal words (Gothic *wintrus*), likely derived from a root meaning “the wet season,” and comes out of an ancient Indo-European tradition of two seasons, winter and summer.⁶⁰ In Chapter 15 of *De temporum ratione* (*Of the Reckoning of Time*), Bede remarks on the use of two seasons, winter and summer, in the early days of the English people (“Antiqui autem Anglorum populi. ... Item principaliter annum totum in duo tempora, hyemis, videlicet, et aestatis dispartiebant”), the six months when the days were longer than the nights roughly constituting summer, and the other six assigned to winter. The Old English word “winterfylleð,” notes Bede, was their word for October, for winter began on the full moon of that month.⁶¹ The Old English word for season, *missere* (Old Norse *misseri*) means literally half-year. However, most references to seasons in vernacular and Latin texts, even from early medieval England, testify to the more familiar idea of four seasons. Still, the conception of two seasons along with that of four seasons co-existed during the Old English and Middle English periods as alternative, sometimes as competing, frames of seasonal reference. According to the *OED*, the word “spring,” meaning the season, takes off towards the end of the fifteenth and especially in the sixteenth century, along with the lovely phrase for the season, “(the) spring of the leaf.” *Lencten* is the earlier Old English word, and *ver*, a version of the Latin and Old French word for spring, appears in Middle English.

58 Christian Pfister et al., “Early Modern Europe,” 268–69.

59 Harris, *Weatherland*, 26.

60 Earl R. Anderson, *Folk-Taxonomies in Early English* (Madison and Teaneck, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, and London: Associated University Presses, 2003), 223, 226.

61 Bede’s text is referred to in Nils Erik Enkvist, *The Seasons of the Year: Chapters on a Motif from Beowulf to The Shepherd’s Calendar, Commentationes Humanarum Litterarum* 22, no. 4 (Helsingfors: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 1957), 4. I quote from the Latin and translated text at <https://www.jassa.org/?p=1711>, accessed February 3, 2024.

The earliest Latin debate-poem, *Conflictus veris et hiemis*, between Spring (“Ver”) and Winter (“Hiems”), is generally ascribed to early English theologian, scholar, and poet Alcuin (ca. 732–804), who spent much of his career at Charlemagne’s court. The debate reflects an understanding of a year consisting of two main seasons. The voice of a playful, confident Spring celebrates that season of warmth and activity heralded by the cuckoo’s song: in spring the cuckoo, representative of Nature’s creatures including humans, will “sire children” (line 30), labor to produce food, travel, and build houses. Winter is portrayed as the lazy season of rest from work, a season of sleep and feasting on the fruits of labor. Here “Frozen Winter” (line 13) grumbles misanthropically at the thought of the cuckoo’s and Spring’s approach and any disturbance to inaction.⁶² The two-season opposition between winter and spring reappears, for example, at the end of Shakespeare’s *Love’s Labor’s Lost* (1594–95) in the little song-debate or “dialogue” (5.2.870) between Spring or Ver represented by the cuckoo and Winter or Hiems represented by the owl (5.2.878–913).⁶³ Winter appropriately has the last word as the comedy ends unexpectedly with the postponement of spring’s rituals of love and marriage.

According to Earl R. Anderson, the earliest reference to the four seasons is by a Hellenistic astrologer, Antiochus of Athens, who relates the four seasons of the year to the four “seasons” of human life or Ages of Man, also to the four humors, the four elements, and to colors and temperaments—correspondences that remained commonplaces into the early modern period and basic to humoral theories of medicine and physiology.⁶⁴ The pseudo-Aristotelian *Secreta secretorum* was a highly popular medieval handbook providing summaries of the whole theory of the seasons and the relation of the seasons to medicine, astronomy, cosmology, and philosophy. While it “appeared to be a book of advice composed by Aristotle for Alexander the Great,” it was in fact a tenth-century treatise from Arabia “drawing together all kinds of thinking from ancient Greece and the Middle East.”⁶⁵ It was translated into Latin by Philip of Tripoli in the thirteenth century, thence into French, and then extracts were rendered into English verse by John Lydgate in the fifteenth century, completed by Benedict Burgh. Again the four seasons

62 Alcuin, “The Debate of Spring and Winter,” in *Poetry of the Carolingian Renaissance*, ed. Peter Godman (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985), 144–49.

63 *The Norton Shakespeare, Comedies*, 394.

64 Anderson, *Folk-Taxonomies in Early English*, 224.

65 Harris, *Weatherland*, 74. See also Steven J. Williams, *The Secret of Secrets: The Scholarly Career of a Pseudo-Aristotelian Text in the Latin Middle Ages* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003).



were thought to correspond to the four elements (earth, air, fire, water), the four “qualities” (hot and cold, wet and dry), the four humors, or fluids, that governed the body (blood, choler or yellow bile, melancholy or black bile, and phlegm), and the four ages of man (childhood, adolescence or youthfulness, full manhood, and old age). Planets and winds were also brought in as specially aligned with these groups of four.

“Old English writers,” however, “seem to have singled out winter for special and extended treatment. Their poetry reflects a pronounced correspondence between old age, the final Age of Man, and the season of winter,” so that winter is used frequently as a term for both old age and for age itself—i.e., age and time reckoned in winters.⁶⁶ In the Old English *Genesis B*, Satan, ingloriously thrown from heaven into hell and furiously indignant at his newly tortured, transformed condition, longs for revenge—just a moment (*ane tid*), one winter’s hour (*ane winter-stunde*, “winter” perhaps suggesting even the shortest possible hour of light), to rally his troops and get back at God (lines 369–70).⁶⁷ Further, the Old English word *frod* means both “old age” and “wisdom,” and as Zwikstra has argued, the word *frod* reckons age not so much or necessarily in years but in terms of the mind’s process of maturing, an aging through adversity into wisdom or understanding.⁶⁸ Note that the word *frod* never appears in a prose text but seems to be part of a poetic convention of meaning that collects together old age, the mind, and increase instead of decline, while decline is more commonly the theme in old English writing when the focus is on the body in old age. The connection between human aging in all of its aspects—into knowledge and into physical weakness—links the physical harshness of cold and of the reality of aging with mortality and the Western tradition of a fall from a Golden Age or Edenic Garden, from life as an eternity of warmth and plenty, to time that brings winter and death.

Winter “as a season is consistently presented in a negative light, yet when associated with *frod*, the wisdom of old age, it is unambiguously presented in a positive light.”⁶⁹ The physical affliction of winter and of old age is seen as negative (“decline of prowess would no doubt have been especially

66 Corey J. Zwikstra, “Wintrum Frod: *Frod* and the Aging Mind in Old English Poetry,” *Studies in Philology* 108, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 133–64, 142. DOI:10.1353/sip.2011.0009.

67 See Frederick J. Klaeber, “Concerning Old English *Winterstund*,” *Philological Quarterly* 19 (1940): 146–47.

68 “The etymological evidence, then, as a kind of preliminary evidence, suggests that the wisdom expressed by the etyma of *frod* was contingent upon the workings of the mind and had nothing inherently to do with chronological age.” Zwikstra, “Wintrum Frod,” 135.

69 Zwikstra, “Wintrum Frod,” 146.



noticed in a society that valued a heroic ethos of physical ability in war”), but “surviving winter is positive as can be the mental reward for surviving into old age.”⁷⁰ Zwikstra complicates Anderson’s suggestion that in Old English poetry winter “functions as a metaphor for adversity” and argues that “At issue is not so much physical adversity, such as the harshness of winter, as internal adversity and how it is experienced and processed by the individual person’s aging mind.”⁷¹ Zwikstra cites examples to show that the early English did conceive of the mind as aging, as having an age of its own, distinct from the age of the body, and that aging of the mind was reflected in abilities involving knowledge or intelligence, counsel or experience.⁷² Hence, in *Beowulf* the aging Danish king Hrothgar, though no longer physically able to protect his people without help, describes himself as having “wintered into wisdom” (line 1724 in Seamus Heaney’s translation of “Ic þis gid be þē / āwraec wintrum frōd”).⁷³ Addressing the brilliantly successful Beowulf, who had routed the supernatural threats to Hrothgar’s mead-hall and is about to return to Geatland, Hrothgar warns him against the dangers of thoughtless evil behavior because of overweening confidence in his bodily strength, which will fade in time, urging the warrior to cultivate wisdom and goodness in hope of eternal heavenly reward.

Of the season words available in Old English, *winter* is by far the most frequently used; and besides the word “winter,” Old English had twenty-seven compound words with winter, such as “winter-biter” (having the bitterness of winter), “winter-burna” (a stream running full like a torrent from winter), or “winter-cearig” (sad from age or from the gloom of winter). The early medieval English, scholars agree, “were preoccupied with winter, as evidenced in their literature.”⁷⁴ The harshness of winter and difficulty surviving it may have been reasons for so much language about its menace; another reason might be their preoccupation with the end of the world or doomsday—the last age or winter of the world. Although not specifically early English, a related preoccupation haunts Old Norse mythology with its story of *Ragnarök*, the end of the world and the gods (mentioned above), preceded by *Fimbulvetur*, three years of unending winter, of terrible snow and fierce winds, when the sun, moon, and stars will have disappeared, three winters of continuous wars and a general collapse of all kinship and

70 Zwikstra, “Wintrum Frod,” 146–47.

71 Zwikstra, “Wintrum Frod,” 149.

72 Zwikstra, “Wintrum Frod,” 151–52.

73 Seamus Heaney, trans., *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), 119, line 1724.

74 Zwikstra, “Wintrum Frod,” 143.



friendship bonds, ending in the cataclysmic war and fiery destruction of the gods and evil giants. Norse mythology, however, also describes a subsequent rebirth of the world.⁷⁵

Old Norse mythology imagined the first created world ending in winter and war; but perhaps more interestingly it imagined the origins of life springing out of the two extremes of cold and heat when the warmth of a burning, flaming south, called Muspellsheim, meets the icy cold of the north, a dark, freezing realm of mists called Niflheim.⁷⁶ The great void before the creation of the world, extending huge and empty between these two extremes of bright, seething fire and dark cold, was called Ginnungagap. At the center of Niflheim was a spring called Hvergelmir, the source from which eleven poisonous rivers streamed into Ginnungagap and hardened into thick layers of ice until the northern regions of Ginnungagap were filled with ice and rime. Mist and wind-whipped rain kept the ice hard. The southern part of Ginnungagap, however, bordering on Muspellsheim, was warm and mild. Where these two extremes met, the warmth melted the ice, turning it into flowing drops, and life sprang up “taking its force from the power that sent the heat. The likeness of a man appeared, and he was named Ymir.”⁷⁷ Interestingly, the underworld of Old Norse mythology was located north from Midgarður, the realm of men, and was the same Niflheim that existed before the world’s creation: that bitterly cold, grim, endlessly dark place of freezing mists, now ruled over by a monstrous goddess, Hel, half-alive and half-dead. Her cold citadel was called Hel, where the wicked went after death.

Medieval Winter as Adversity and the Horror of Exile

In Old English, winter in the plural is a synecdoche for “year” and in the singular for adversity.⁷⁸ In one famous passage from Bede’s *Historia ecclesiastica* or *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, II.xiii, a counselor to

75 The most famous description of Ragnarök is in “Völuspá” or The Sibyl’s or Seeress’s Prophecy, the opening poem of Snorri Sturluson’s *Poetic Edda*. See, for example, *The Poetic Edda*, trans. Larington, 3–13. In *The Prose Edda* by Snorri, towards the end of the first part called “Gylfaginning,” are two sections (52, 53) that describe the world after Ragnarök and the world’s rebirth: Snorri Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*, trans. Jesse L. Byock (London: Penguin, 2005), 76–78.

76 See Kevin Crossley-Holland, *The Norse Myths* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex and New York: Penguin, 1980), 3.

77 Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*, 14, from section 5 of “Gylfaginning.”

78 Anderson, *Folk-Taxonomies in Early English*, 226.

pagan King Edwin of Northumbria urges the king to convert to Christianity (he does convert in 627) by portraying the dark unknowns of human existence—whence we come and what happens after death—as like a perpetual night of raging winter weather from whose mystery we can take refuge only momentarily in this present life, as in a warm fire-lit mead-hall—the traditional haven against threat that powerful Old English rulers traditionally offer their followers. The counselor stunningly portrays the fragility of this safety with an image of a sparrow flying in one door of the hall while everyone sits at dinner, the bird briefly escaping winter into warmth, but flying straight out through another door back into the cold:

“Such,” he said, “the present life of men on earth seems to me, king, in comparison with that time which is unknown to us: as if, while you were sitting at dinner with your leaders and ministers in the winter time, with the fire lit in the centre and the upper room filled with heat, with the raging storms of winter rains or snow everywhere outside, a sparrow were to arrive and fly swiftly through the house. As it enters through one door and soon exits through another, during the time when it is inside it is not touched by the winter storm, but nevertheless, after the briefest space of calm, when it has hastened forth, turning from winter and soon back into winter, it escapes your eyes. Thus this life of men appears for a moment; what follows, or what came before, we absolutely do not know.”⁷⁹

“The present life of men,” the counselor points out, is hemmed in by frightening darkness—whence we come before this life and what we face after its end. When the safety of this haven is lost, there may be no other. Hence, if this new religion brings any answers or help, argues the counselor with Edwin, we should embrace it.

Winter cold as bitter adversity and the horror of an indifferent universe is evoked in elegiac poems such as “The Wanderer” and “The Seafarer,” where the harshness of the weather, of being alone exposed to the elements, becomes a figure for the speaker’s situation of exile far from the warm, interior community of a powerful lord’s mead-hall and hearth fire. The speaker of “The Wanderer” uses the word “wintercaerig” or winter-sorrowing, being worn with winter cares or cares of age, to describe himself. As Neville notes, through “the depiction of the natural world, the state of the human race on earth reveals itself to be a state of perpetual siege,” although the cold, snow, and hail, while more powerful than humans, are oblivious of

79 Neville, *Representations of the Natural World in Old English Poetry*, 24.

the human predicament, appear indifferent. The line between indifference and hostility, however, is fine.⁸⁰ In “The Wanderer,” not sinfulness but the threat to survival in the hostile physical environment, and the perception that all human stability and achievements are transient, motivate the speaker’s seeking God at the end.⁸¹ The eighteenth-century shepherd who dies in a snowstorm in James Thomson’s poem, “Winter” (the subject of Chapter 7), becomes a wanderer dangerously beyond the bounds of his home and community while searching for his sheep; he dies an inadvertent, permanent exile unaided by any divinity.

The bleak cold outside the speaker of “The Wanderer” mirrors his interior world, the “frozen thoughts in his heart-case” of all he has lost.⁸² He has kept his sorrows to himself; instead of gold in a coffer, his heart is the “hoard-case” holding tightly only pain. The Wanderer appears to propel his boat with his arms in “the frost-cold sea”; instead of his “gold-friend,” his protector who gave gold treasures, the exile sees “yellow waves” (“fealwe wegas” translates literally fallow waves, meaning waves of a light, yellowish brown color, suggestive of winter light on the water as the sun rises). The bathing of sea-birds in the freezing water reflects the birds’ possible comfort in or indifference to the environment, unlike the speaker’s misery as “frost and snow fall, mingled with hail.” The freezing winter prompts the Wanderer to imagine that the end of the world will look like what he sees: storm-beaten stone walls are “covered with frost-fall,” while snow falls thickly; winter “binds the earth when darkness comes and the night-shadow falls, sends harsh hailstones from the north in hatred of men.”⁸³ The motif of winter cold and ice as seemingly malicious punishment “in hatred of men,” binding, imprisoning, is ancient and continues through the period of this book’s study and beyond.

The speaker of “The Seafarer,” also alone on the ocean in exile, although his present journey seems self-imposed, recalls suffering “a time of hardship” (“geswincdagum”) sailing the dangerously tossing seas and being freezing cold, his feet “frost bound / by cold fetters.”⁸⁴ He spent a winter “on the

80 Neville, *Representations of the Natural World in Old English Poetry*, 43.

81 Neville, *Representations of the Natural World in Old English Poetry*, 51.

82 “The Wanderer,” translated by Ethelbert T. Donaldson in *The Middle Ages*, vol. A of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. Alfred David and James Simpson, 8th ed. (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2005), 112–13.

83 Donaldson, trans., “The Wanderer,” 113.

84 Quotations from “The Seafarer,” both Old English and modern English translation, are from *Old and Middle English c. 890–c.1400, an Anthology*, ed. and trans. Elaine Treharne, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 48–53.

ice-cold sea on the paths of the exile,” pelted by hail, “hung round with icicles,” sea birds his only company. No one who stays on land surrounded by friends and wine can imagine, he says, his experience of being alone in the elements in darkness, when “it snowed from the north, / frost gripped the earth, hail fell on the ground, / the coldest of grains” (31–33). In the Old English “Rune Poem,” the rune for hail is explicated by calling it “the whitest of grains” in Maureen Halsall’s translation, or “the hardest of grains, the whitest of seeds” in Craig Williamson’s, before it falls and “strikes in the wind,” a “water-stone.”⁸⁵ Hail as “the hardest” and “whitest” of grains, water turned to stone, is the opposite of sustenance, what destroys agriculture. The rune for ice, “clear as glass,” emphasizes that its “slippery cold” glitters gemlike but cannot be grasped, turns the “glittering ground” into a “floor of frost.”⁸⁶ By the latter half of “The Seafarer,” however, we see that the cold wintry path of exile paradoxically represents the speaker’s choice. Such a cold, solitary existence becomes a figure for the warmth of spiritual longing for divine joy from eternal pleasures of the soul that eschews worldly, transitory measures of earthly success such as wine, women, and song—the comfortable life that the speaker calls “dead” (“þis deade lif,” 65). In the last eight lines, the speaker reconceives the meaning of home and the meaning of life, which is after all not to win earthly glory and pomp but to live in such a way on earth that at death “we should come there / into that eternal blessedness” (119–20).

The eyes of the speakers of “The Wanderer” and “The Seafarer” have been opened by loss to insight as to the fragility of what they once considered the height of human happiness, security, and nobility; and the bleak winter landscape incorporates that loss and insight. Both describe their present state of solitary, wintry exile as essentially representative of the human condition from the perspective of eternity. Other Old English texts paint the pain of wintry cold as earthly torments, tests of courage, to be endured by the saintly. The poem “Andreas” shows St. Andrew’s courage while tortured and then imprisoned in darkness by the Mermedonians through the freezing cold of winter storms, when the earth is bound in fetters and seas bound in ice. The grimness of the season emphasizes the heroic endurance and faith of men such as St. Andrew:

85 Maureen Halsall, *The Old English Rune Poem: A Critical Edition* (Toronto, Buffalo, NY, and London: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 89, lines 25–26; Craig Williamson, trans., *The Complete Old English Poems* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), “The Rune Poem,” 943, lines 34–36.

86 Williamson, trans., “The Rune Poem,” lines 41–44.

The night seemed endless. Snow lashed the earth
 With winter storms. Winds whipped the land
 With sleet and hail, freezing blizzards.
 Bitter cold attacked the earth, locked the land
 With ice-chains. Frost and mist,
 Gray winter warriors, stalked the earth.
 Icicles hung like wicked water-spears.
 Rivers shivered and froze like rock.
 Ice formed a bridge over the water.
 Darkness and cold ruled the land,
 But the innocent man kept courage in prison,
 His mind steadfast, his heart secure
 In the goodness and glory of his beloved Lord. (1292–1304)⁸⁷

As Neville has pointed out, however, the cold is not demonic, only bitter; the devil, a force distinct from the weather, has urged the Mermedonians to capture and punish Andrew. The devil soon appears and tempts St. Andrew's enemies to physically torture him further, then tempts Andrew to apostatize. The cold, while it binds up the natural world and locks humans in their homes, does not equal the binding in prison of tortured Andrew's body or the devil's threats.

B. K. Martin notes, "There is nothing corresponding to this description of winter weather in the extant prose versions of the Andrew legend, and it is likely enough that it is an original passage added by the Old English poet."⁸⁸ It is likely, too, that it is, as Diamond and Martin argue, "a set piece, a conventional theme," whereby the poet rhetorically amplifies the basic idea of winter's cold and misery with selected details that recur in other early English poetic contexts, such as the showers of hail, rime, and frost locking fast the lands of men, ice locking up the water, making a bridge across rivers—"the bonds [in the sense of fetters] of cold."⁸⁹ Martin makes the point that the notion of winter cold represented as a force that binds or locks up the earth and water is used in two ways in Old English verse: for "amplifying and objectifying the hardships of a solitary man by setting him in a frost-bound wintry landscape" or as part of emphasizing that winter is

87 "Andreas: Andrew in the Country of the Cannibals," in Williamson, *The Complete Old English Poems*, 190–236.

88 Bernard K. Martin, "Aspects of Winter in Latin and Old English Poetry," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 68, no. 3 (1969): 375–90, 377.

89 Martin, "Aspects of Winter in Latin and Old English Poetry," 378.

in a continuum of seasons and part of a divine order, that the fetters come and go.⁹⁰ As examples of the latter use, he offers a passage in *Maxims* I.71–77, where the fetters of frost are portrayed as part of God's cycle of the seasons, and also two passages in *Beowulf*. In the bard's lay, "The Fight at Finnsburg," after the winter's tense truce between Danes and Frisians, locked in by a frozen sea, the sea ice melts with the new year, and the Danes take revenge. Later, the sword that Beowulf uses to kill and behead Grendel's mother afterward melts "as ice melts / when the Father eases the fetters off the frost / and unravels the water-ropes."⁹¹

Wintry descriptions of the binding of cold and bridges of ice are frequent in certain Latin texts by Virgil and Ovid, the reading and imitation of which would have been part of the formal education of the monks writing early English verse. Examples include Virgil's descriptions of the proverbial cold of Scythia in the *Georgics* and Ovid's accounts of the miseries of his exile at Tomis (now Constanța) on the Black Sea.⁹² Ovid emphasizes the horror of his cold exile among northern barbarians by describing how the cold freezes the great Danube so hard it becomes a bridge for the Scythians' heavy ox-carts:

Why tell of brooks frozen fast with the cold and how brittle water is dug out of the pool? The very Hister [Latin name for Danube], not narrower than the papyrus-bearing river [the Nile], mingling with the vast deep through many mouths, freezes as the wind stiffens his dark flood. ... Where ships had gone before now men go on foot and the waters congealed with cold feel the hoof-beat of the horse. Across the new bridge, above the gliding current, are drawn by Sarmatian oxen the carts of the barbarians ... I have seen the vast sea stiff with ice, a slippery shell holding the water motionless. And seeing is not enough; I have trodden the frozen sea, and the surface lay beneath an unwetted foot. ... At such times the curving dolphins cannot launch themselves into the air; if they try, stern winter checks them; and though Boreas may roar and toss his wings, there will be no wave on the beleaguered flood. Shut in by the cold the ships will stand fast in the marble surface nor will any oar be able to cleave the stiffened waters. I have seen fish clinging fast bound in the ice, yet some even then still lived." (Ovid, *Tristia*, III.x.25–50)⁹³

90 Martin, "Aspects of Winter in Latin and Old English Poetry," 379.

91 Heaney, *Beowulf*, 111, lines 1608–10.

92 Martin, "Aspects of Winter in Latin and Old English Poetry," 380.

93 Ovid, *Tristia, Ex Ponto*, trans. Arthur Leslie Wheeler, 2nd ed., rev. George P. Goold (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 139.

Similarly, Virgil describing Scythia where “Tis ever winter,” lying under mounds of snow, in *Georgics* III.349–83 notes how the waters of what is now called the Sea of Azov, often considered a northern extension of the Black Sea, freeze enough to drive wagons across its surface:

Sudden ice-crusts form on the running stream, and anon the water bears on its surface iron-bound wheels—giving welcome once to ships, but now to broad wains! Everywhere brass splits, clothes freeze on the back, and with axes they cleave the liquid wine; while lakes turn into a solid mass, and the rough icicle hardens on the unkempt beard. (360–66)

Virgil pictures the Scythians killing deer easily as the animals become caught by the mountains of snow, the Scythians then lolling in caves dug deep in the earth, building fires with trees, and drinking. “Such is the race of men lying under the Wain’s seven stars in the far north, a wild race, buffeted by the Riphean East-wind [Riphean Mountains, a mythical range in the far north of Eurasia from which issued chilling blasts], their bodies clothed in the tawny furs of beasts” (381–83).⁹⁴

According to Martin, Virgil “seems to be the first major Roman poet to make use” of the detail of icicles forming on a person because of extreme cold—“the rough icicle” on the Scythian’s “unkempt beard” above—a detail that recurs in Old English texts.⁹⁵ Virgil uses the image of the icicle in the beard again in the *Aeneid*, Book 4, when Mercury, sent by Jupiter, flies past Atlas while on the way to Carthage in order to prompt Aeneas to leave Dido’s court and take up his destined mission in Italy. Atlas is holding up the heavens while wrapped in dark clouds and “beaten with wind and rain; fallen snow mantles his shoulders, while rivers plunge down the aged chin and his rough beard is stiff with ice” (4.246–51).⁹⁶ Ovid uses the same detail in *Tristia* for the barbarian northerners he meets: “With skins and stitched breeches they keep out the evils of the cold; of the whole body only the face is exposed. Often their hair tinkles with hanging ice and their beards glisten white with the mantle of frost” (*Tristia* III.X.19–22).⁹⁷ The iced beard lives on, for example, in Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, with the likely help of Gerrit de Veer’s popular illustrated account of Willem Barentsz’s

94 Virgil, *Eclogues, Georgics, Aeneid I–VI*, trans. Henry Ruston Fairclough, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 179–81.

95 Martin, “Aspects of Winter in Latin and Old English Poetry,” 386.

96 Virgil, *Eclogues, Georgics, Aeneid I–VI*, 413.

97 Ovid, *Tristia, Ex Ponto*, 137–39.



Arctic voyages (see Chapter 2). Fabian taunts Sir Andrew, hopeless suitor of Olivia, with Olivia's preference for Count Orsino's new page, the disguised Viola, and sees Sir Andrew already exiled to Arctic isolation, frozen out of the competition: "you are now sailed into the north of my lady's opinion; where you will hang like an icicle on a Dutchman's beard" (3.2.22–23).⁹⁸

In the examples above, wintry cold binds the earth and drives humans to seek shelter, but the cold or ice is not specifically demonic targeting individuals. In the Old English Exeter Book, the iceberg described in riddle 31 (K-D 33) in Williamson's 2017 edition *is*, however, dangerously threatening to sailors in ships.⁹⁹ Eerily female and sinister in its cold, slow movement over the waves, beautiful and destructive, it cries out with horrible laughter ("hleahfor wæs gryrelíc"), which may be the sound of the iceberg's breaking up, fragmenting—it has sharp edges ("Ecge wæron scearpe"). Early modern Arctic navigators, like those whose accounts are the subject of Chapter 2, dreaded the terrifying thunder of icebergs cracking and fought exhaustively to save their ships from damage or from being utterly crushed by the huge, hidden, powerful structure of ice. In the riddle, the iceberg is called "battlegrim" (Williamson) ("wæs hio hetegrim"), "hatefully deadly" (Beechy), "slow" yet a "slaughterer" ("biter beadoweorca").¹⁰⁰ A "savagely wound-worker," the thing digs into, with also the sense of engraving, the ship-walls (or shield walls), "plundering hard" with a hateful mystery or rune or secret, which Williamson thinks could be the invisible part of the iceberg below water.¹⁰¹ Finally the riddle's voice speaks cunningly ("sægde searocræftig") of the riddle of her existence: her mother is also her daughter. Water turns into ice turns into water. The liquid element essential for life hardens under the pressure of cold into a form hostile to life until warmth can restore to water its fluid, life-giving state. Another riddle (66 in Williamson, K-D 68, 69) also reflects fascination with the mystery of icebergs as hardened water. The last line in translation reads, "On the wave a miracle: water turned to bone" ("wæter wearð to bane"), making the iceberg perhaps more human than in the previous riddle yet emphasizing the sensation of cold

98 *The Norton Shakespeare, Comedies*, 773.

99 K-D refers to George Philip Krapp and Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie's edition of the Old English poetic codex, *The Exeter Book* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936) and the numbering of the riddles in that edition. Later editors and translators may number them differently.

100 I draw from two different commentaries on this riddle: firstly, Craig Williamson, ed., *The Old English Riddles of the "Exeter Book"* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977), the riddle itself on 87–88 and his commentary on 237–42; and, secondly, Tiffany Beechy, *The Poetics of Old English* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 95–96.

101 Williamson, *The Old English Riddles of the "Exeter Book,"* 240–41.

to the bone or of bone laid bare. A third riddle, 77 in Williamson (K-D 81), conveys the terrible feel of cold by speaking through an inanimate object: a long-suffering roof-top weathercock, “puff-breasted” but skewered and hoisted on a pole, twisting and battered by strong forest-shaking winds, by hail, sleet, frost, and snow, is forced to stand exposed on one foot to show which way the wind blows.

Before cold and frost were temperatures measurable by science, they were felt by and affected the body physically and emotionally and created physical realities of survival, as well as specific transformations and challenges of the landscape. The associations of cold, then, with death, war, exile, hostility to the human or loss of the humanly familiar, and with, as in Old Norse mythology, the end of the known world represent some of the traditional human responses in writing to the reality of freezing cold—at least in texts historically preceding and, in some cases, drawn on to create the English-language texts studied in this book.

The Cold North and Satan: North and South as Spiritual States

In the Christian tradition, the association of the north with Satan, with man’s fallen state, and the demonic appears to begin with a number of biblical verses and their interpretation by early patristic writers, who forged a connection between light, heat, and the east with the warmth of heavenly charity, and between darkness, cold, north, and the west (where the morning star sets) with the chill of Satanic hard-heartedness and self-centered pride. The Christians drew on references from ancient Hebrew prophets in the Old Testament, such as Isaiah 14:12–14, where Lucifer is said to have wanted to exalt himself above God “in the sides of the north” of heaven but fell, and later where God warns of a threatening northern people for Judah and Jerusalem, for example in Jeremiah 1:14 (“Out of the north an evil shall break forth”), 4:6 (“I will bring evil from the north, and a great destruction”) and 6:22–23 (“Behold, a people cometh from the north country. ... They shall lay hold on bow and spear; they are cruel, and have no mercy”).¹⁰² Barry Cunliffe has noted that Jeremiah “was written in the late seventh or early sixth century at just the time that Scythian raiders were making their way south through the Levant towards Egypt.”¹⁰³ So these two particular traditions of demonizing

¹⁰² Translations are from the King James Bible.

¹⁰³ Barry Cunliffe, *The Scythians: Nomad Warriors of the Steppe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 34–35.



the north may have been reacting to the same historical nomadic peoples from the Asian steppe who migrated west and south.

The apocryphal book of 2 (Slavonic) Enoch (also called *The Book of the Secrets of Enoch*) follows the ascension of the patriarch Enoch through ten heavens of the cosmos, including one where sinners are tortured in “the northern region.” This northern hell is dark and icy cold as well as fiery:

And those men carried me to the northern region, and they showed me there a very frightful place; and all kinds of torture and torment are in that place, cruel darkness and lightless gloom. And there is no light there, and a black fire blazes up perpetually, with a river of fire that comes out over the whole place, fire here, freezing ice there, and it dries up and it freezes; and very cruel places of detention and dark and merciless angels, carrying instruments of atrocities torturing without pity. And I said, “Woe, woe! How very frightful this place is!” (Chapter 10)

Enoch is told the place has been prepared as “eternal reward” for “those who do not glorify God” but commit any of a long litany of sins, from stealing, lying, fraud, and murder to witchcraft, idolatry, and lack of compassion for and generosity to the hungry and needy.¹⁰⁴

The North African Christian convert, apologist, and theologian, Tertullian (died ca. 220 in Carthage), appears earliest to have associated the name Lucifer, the morning star, with the devil,¹⁰⁵ while Jerome, in a passage from his *Commentaria in Isaiam prophetam*, links the setting of the star Lucifer, the fall of the rebel angel, and the west (“et suo vitio de Lucifero Vesper effectus est, et non oriens, sed occidens”).¹⁰⁶ The idea of a rebellion of angels is not biblical, but the church fathers appear to have derived it from an allegorical reading of Isaiah 14.12–14. Luke 10.18 (“And he said unto them, I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven”) served to “reinforce the identification of the names and the tradition of a rebellion in heaven,” the passages from Isaiah and Luke being linked by Jerome.¹⁰⁷ In a commentary on Zechariah 14.4–5 about the coming of the Lord, in which the Mount of Olives near Jerusalem splits in the middle, “and half of the mountain shall remove toward the north, and half of it toward the south,” Jerome interprets the directions as

104 Francis Andersen, trans., “2 (Slavonic Apocalypse of) Enoch, Ms. J,” accessed January 21, 2020, <https://www.marquette.edu/maqom/slavonicenoch.html>.

105 Paul Salmon, “The Site of Lucifer’s Throne,” *Anglia* 81 (January 1963): 118–23, 119, <https://doi.org/10.1515/angl.1963.1963.81.118>.

106 Salmon, “The Site of Lucifer’s Throne,” 122.

107 Salmon, “The Site of Lucifer’s Throne,” 119.

spiritual signposts: the virtuous will gather in the southeast and the sinners in the northwest.¹⁰⁸

In Chapter 22 of his Letter 140 to Honoratus (also known as the Book on Grace), Augustine connects the devil and the north through the cold of cold-heartedness. He elaborates on the connection between God, “the light of the heart, not of those eyes which are in the flesh,” and the light of charity, quoting 1 John 1.5, and 1 John 4.8. Augustine writes that he who hates his brother “is [still] in darkness,” the darkness into which the devil and his angels fell because of excessive pride: “Therefore, the Devil and his angels, by turning from the light and warmth of charity, and going over to pride and envy, were benumbed as by an icy hardness. Therefore they are figuratively located in the north.”¹⁰⁹ He then draws together positive associations in the Bible of southerly winds to align God’s mercy and grace with its southerly warmth, as distinguished from cold northerly blasts. In the following passage, he begins by quoting from Psalm 125.5:

“Turn again our captivity, O Lord, as a stream in the south”; doubtless, the captivity in which they were held under the Devil, as under the north wind, where they were chilled by abounding iniquity, and were, so to speak, frozen. Hence, also, the Gospel says: “And because iniquity hath abounded, the charity of many shall grow cold” [Matt. 24.12]. But, truly, when the south wind blows, the ice is melted and the streams flow; that is, when their sins are forgiven the people flock to Christ by charity. Hence, also, it is written elsewhere: “And thy sins are melted away as the ice in the fair, warm weather” [Ecclesiasticus 3:17].¹¹⁰

In his Commentary on Psalm 48, Augustine uses Isaiah 14:12–14 to identify Satan with the north. The second verse of the psalm reads, “Beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth, is mount Zion, on the sides of the north, the city of the great King.” Augustine in response writes,

108 Thomas D. Hill, “Some Remarks on ‘The Site of Lucifer’s Throne,’” *Anglia* 87 (1969): 303–11, 305, <https://doi.org/10.1515/angl.1969.1969.87.303>. The main verse in question, Zechariah 14.4 reads: “And his feet shall stand in that day upon the mount of Olives, which is before Jerusalem on the east, and the mount of Olives shall cleave in the midst thereof toward the east and toward the west, and there shall be a very great valley; and half of the mountain shall remove toward the north, and half toward the south” (King James translation).

109 Augustinus Aurelius, Bishop of Hippo (Saint Augustine), *Letters 131–164*, vol. 3 of *Letters*, trans. Sister Wilfrid Parsons, *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation* 20 (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1953).

110 Saint Augustine, *Letters*, 3:104.

The North is wont to be contrary to Sion: Sion forsooth is in the South, the North over against the South. Who is the North, but He who said, “I will sit in the sides of the North, I will be like the Most High?” The devil had held dominion over the ungodly, and possessed the nations serving images, adoring demons; and all whatsoever there was of human kind anywhere throughout the world, by cleaving to Him, had become North.¹¹¹

Another example from the church fathers of the association made between cold, winter, and spiritual corruption overseen by Satan is in Book II of Pope Gregory the Great’s sixth-century *Moralia in Job*, or *The Books of the Morals of St. Gregory the Pope, or An Exposition on the Book of Blessed Job*. The passage occurs in his exposition of Job 1.6: “Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan came also among them.” Gregory comments that in scripture every detail, whether it be “the posture of the body” or “the temperature of the air” or “the character of the time,” reflects or foreshadows the action that is to come; and because Job’s trial will end in “victory, it is related to have begun by day.” Gregory draws on passages from the gospels of John and Matthew to demonstrate that references to cold or winter signal the presence of wickedness:

when the Evangelist was telling that none out of Judaea were at that time to prove believers in our Lord’s preaching, he prefaced it by saying, *and it was winter*, for it is written, *Because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold* [John 10.22, Matt. 24.12]. Therefore he took care to particularize the winter season, to indicate that the frost of wickedness was in the hearers’ hearts. Hence it is that it is beforehand remarked of Peter, when on the point of denying our Lord, that *it was cold, and Peter stood with them, and warmed himself* [John 18.18]. For he was now inwardly unenlivened by the warmth of Divine love, but to the love of this present life he was warming up, as though his weakness were set boiling by the persecutors’ coals.¹¹²

In the Old English *Genesis A*, the angel called at first “the guardian [or prince] of the angels” (“ærdon engla weard”) led a group of heaven’s angels

111 Augustinus Aurelius, Bishop of Hippo (Saint Augustine), “Exposition on Psalm 48,” trans. J. E. Tweed, paragraph 3, accessed February 16, 2024, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1801048.htm>.

112 Gregory the Great, *Morals on the Book of Job*, trans. Charles Marriott and James Bliss, 3 vols. (Oxford: John Henry Parker; London: J.F.G. and J. Rivington, 1844), 1:68.

into trouble by boasting that he could lead them to partition up heaven with God. He said he “would possess a home and a throne in the northern part of the kingdom of heaven.”¹¹³ In *Genesis B*, “The angel of insolence” decides he can build “A stronger seat of power to the north and west, / A higher throne in heaven” than God’s.¹¹⁴ The Old English poet of *Genesis B* “is deliberately situating heaven, earth and hell on a southeast-northwest axis, since he later describes how Eve, after eating the forbidden fruit, looks to the southeast to see God in his glory”: “With my unveiled eyes, I can see the Lord / Who shaped this world, surrounded by splendor, / Gathered in glory in the south-east of heaven.”¹¹⁵ Hill notes a similar direction associated with Christ coming in judgment in *Christ III*, the lines in question translated by Williamson as “Then suddenly to Mount Zion, out of the southeast / Shall come the blazing light of the Shaper’s sun, / Brighter than any mind can imagine.”¹¹⁶

Besides differing from the biblical Genesis by depicting Satan’s rebellion and fall from heaven as preceding the temptation and Fall of Adam and Eve, the Old English version of Genesis also contains a unique lament by Adam to Eve in which he anticipates the new misery of winter cold with hail and frost as part of their fallen condition:

How shall we two now live or be in this land, if a wind comes here, from west or east, south or north? A cloud will rise up, a shower of hail will come pressing from the sky, will come mingled with frost, which will be sinfully cold. At times the bright sun will shine, blaze hot from the heavens, and we two will stand here naked, unprotected by clothes. There is nothing at all covering us two as a protection against the storm, nor any goods at all planned as our food, but rather mighty God, the ruler, is angry with the two of us. What must become of us two now? (*Genesis B*, lines 805–15)¹¹⁷

The Old English poet would have had the example of the description in the first book of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* of the descent of humanity from

113 Daniel Anlezark, ed. and trans., *Old Testament Narratives* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2011), 5.

114 Williamson, *The Complete Old English Poems*, 44, lines 279 and 282–84.

115 Hill, “Some Remarks,” 303; Williamson, *The Complete Old English Poems*, *Genesis B*, 56, lines 739–41.

116 Hill, “Some Remarks,” 304; Williamson, *The Complete Old English Poems*, “Christ III,” 343, lines 34–36.

117 Anlezark, *Old Testament Narratives*, 61–63.

the Golden Age, the halcyon days under the rule of Saturn, into a “silver race” under the sway of Jove, which brought changing seasons and extreme weather—burning heat and freezing winds that congealed icicles, so that men had to seek the shelter of homes (Ovid’s lines 113–21). In the Old English version of the Fall, the power of the natural world looms especially large as human powers are circumscribed by God, are “fallen.”¹¹⁸ Neville argues that representation of the natural world is one of the Old English poets’ techniques for defining human issues and what it means to be human. The human world becomes the perceived target or at least recipient of the natural world’s terrible force.

In *Genesis A*, the rebel angels are thrown down into a hell of unending night and torment that included fire but also “færcyle” (43), intense cold. In *Genesis B*, the poet again emphasizes that hell included extremes of both hot and cold: “There each and every enemy has an eternally kindled flame in an evening boundlessly long; then in the dawn the east wind comes, a frost tormentingly cold. Fire or cold, they must always have some hard affliction” (313–17).¹¹⁹ In the fragmentary text *Solomon and Saturn II*, a dialogue between the biblical wise Solomon and the pagan god Saturn, in which Saturn asks why some men are saved and others succumb to Fate’s blows, appears a description of hell as a “a winter-cold death,” the place for souls whose hearts have abandoned love and gone hard at the core like “steel-hard stone.”¹²⁰ It was created as a place for the devils after their war in heaven. Finally, at the end of Blickling Homily XVII, the Dedication of St. Michael’s Church, occurs probably the Homilies’ most famous passage, a vision of a specifically northern hellscape of tortured souls that features frosty woods, devilish monsters, and black water into which souls dropped forever, reminiscent of the description of Grendel’s hellish mere in *Beowulf*. In *Beowulf* a “frost-stiffened wood” (in Seamus Heaney’s translation) surrounds the mere whose surface mirrors the gnarled mazy tree-roots, while at night the water burns like an inferno—the familiar Old English blend of extremes of ice and fire (Heaney’s lines 1361–67). The homily’s speaker asks his audience to entreat St. Michael “and the nine orders of the holy angels, that they be our aid against hell-fiends” and proceeds to a vision of St. Paul of souls lost to those demons:

looking toward the northern region of the earth, from whence all waters pass down, he saw above the water a hoary stone; and north of the stone

118 Neville, *Representations of the Natural World in Old English Poetry*, 21.

119 Anlezark, *Old Testament Narratives*, 25.

120 Williamson, *The Complete Old English Poems*, 966, line 402, and 967, line 449.

had grown woods very rimy. And there were dark mists; and under the stone was the dwelling place of monsters and execrable creatures. And he saw hanging on the cliff on the icy woods many black souls with their hands bound; and the devils in likeness of monsters were seizing them like greedy wolves; and the water under the cliff beneath was black. And between the cliff and the water there were about twelve miles, and when the twigs brake, then down went the souls who hung on the twigs and the monsters seized them. There were the souls of those who in this world wickedly sinned and would not cease from it before their life's end. But let us now bid St. Michael earnestly to bring our souls into bliss, where they may rejoice without end in eternity. Amen.¹²¹

These passages from Latin and Old English texts persistently associate the north and west with devils revolting against God and humans fallen away from God, with locations of punishment after death for the worst sins.

In his note on the lines in William Langland's fourteenth-century *Piers Plowman*, in which Holy Church describes Lucifer setting his foot in the north in heaven in order to "be like the most high" (Passus I: 107–11), Derek Pearsall points to the allusion to Isaiah 14:12–14 and how "the association of Lucifer and the north was strengthened by the patristic association of heat with charity and of cold with unrepentant sin," possibly also by Germanic or Old Norse mythology that placed hell down under the earth and north, as well as by early medieval geographical prejudice of people writing in the Mediterranean and north Africa.¹²²

The volcanic Mount Hekla in Iceland, according to some ecclesiastical historians and medieval folklore, even into the eighteenth century, was said to be an entrance to hell. Hekla erupted three times in the fourteenth century, twice in the sixteenth century, and twice in the seventeenth, with its longest eruption in 1766 lasting almost two years. Indeed all

121 Homily XVII, "Dedication of St. Michael's Church," is in Richard Morris, trans., *The Blickling Homilies*, Old English Series (Cambridge, ON: In Parentheses Publications, 2000), 99–105, 105, accessed January 20, 2024, www.yorku.ca/inpar/Blickling_Morris.pdf. As Alexandra Harris notes, some scholars believe that both Grendel's mere and this sermon-writer's description of misty, rimy hell-woods were derived from the third-century *Visio S. Pauli* "or from a lost Anglo-Saxon version of it." Harris, *Weatherland*, 396.

122 William Langland, *Piers Plowman*, ed. Derek A. Pearsall (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979), 48. See also Colleen M. Franklin, "An Habitation of Devils, a Domicill for Unclean Spirits, and a Den of Goblins: The Marvelous North in Early Modern English Literature," in *The Mysterious and the Foreign in Early Modern England*, ed. Helen Ostovich, Mary V. Silcox, and Graham Roebuck (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2008), 27–38, 28, 34.



of Iceland appeared as hell with the massive eruption of Iceland's Laki volcano in June 1783, which lasted into early February 1784 and cooled the whole northern hemisphere by at least 1 C.¹²³ Witches of the far north, such as in Iceland or Lapland, were suspected of controlling winds and selling them to mariners.¹²⁴ Hence, the second witch in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1606–7) offers to speed on the first heading in revenge to Aleppo:

Second Witch: I'll give thee a wind.

First Witch: Th'art kind.

Third Witch: And I another.

First Witch: I myself have all the other,
 And the very ports they blow,
 All the quarters that they know
 I'th' shipman's card. (1.3.12–18)¹²⁵

In Thomas Nashe's *Summers Last Will and Testament* (1600), Autumn invokes the superstition about northern witchcraft and the sale of winds for humorous effect:

For as in Ireland and in Denmark both,
 Witches for gold will sell a man a wind
 Which, in the corner of a napkin wrapped,
 Shall blow him safe unto what coast he will:
 So make ill servants sale of their Lords wind,
 Which wrapt up in a piece of parchment,
 Blowes many a knave forth danger of the Law.¹²⁶

123 Oregon State University, Volcano World, "Laki, Iceland – 1783," accessed June 5, 2022, <https://volcano.oregonstate.edu/laki-iceland-1783>.

124 On Hekla's reputation as the mouth of Hell, see Sigurður Þórarinnsson, *Hekla: A Notorious Volcano*, trans. Jóhann Hannesson and Pétur Karlsson (Reykjavík: Almenna Bókafélagið, 1970), 6, who sites as an example a reference in the twelfth-century Anglo-Norman poem on the voyage of Saint Brendan by the monk, Benedeit; Oslund, *Iceland Imagined*, 39; and Kristen Poole, "When Hell Freezes Over: The Fabulous Mount Hecla and *Hamlet's* Infernal Geography," in *Supernatural Environments in Shakespeare's England: Spaces of Demonism, Divinity, and Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 95–135. On the tradition of northern witches selling winds, see, for example, Ernest J. Moyne, *Raising the Wind: The Legend of Lapland and Finland Wizards in Literature*, ed. Wayne R. Kime (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1981).

125 *The Norton Shakespeare, Tragedies*, 920.

126 Thomas Nashe, *Selected Writings*, ed. Stanley Wells (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 121.



In Chaucer's "The Friar's Tale," a despicable summoner meets a yeoman or forester in a green jacket and hat with black fringes. Both lie in identifying themselves to the other as a bailiff, for the yeoman later reveals he is a fiend who lives in hell. The summoner begins their acquaintance, however, by asking the yeoman where he lives, that he might visit him, and the yeoman "hym answered in softe speche, / 'Brother,' quod he, 'fer in the north contree, / Whereas I hope som tyme I shal thee see'" (1412–14).¹²⁷ And in the fourteenth-century text *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Gawain travels alone north through bitter freezing winter storms to undergo moral testing by the unearthly, supernatural Green Knight.

Finally, Dante's fourteenth-century *Inferno*, which—before its translation into English in the late eighteenth century—was known to English writers literate in Latin, Italian, or French, places Satan in hell's deepest pit, immobilized forever under ice. Only his six bat-wings stir to create the cold wind that maintains the freezing cold. He is the first and ultimate exile from heart and home and benefactor, emptied of all goodness, a monstrous cipher that chews on Judas, Brutus, and Cassius, Dante's other worst of sinners.

Geohumoralism: The Relation between Geography, Climate, and Temperament

"*Klima*, for the Greeks," according to Tobias Menely, "referred to a latitudinal band, an inclination of the Earth with respect to the sun. ... By the seventeenth century, if not earlier, this cosmographic idea of climate had begun to coalesce with a Hippocratic understanding of the relation of bodily health to regional environments. ... *Climate* is thus a comparative term contrasting fixed places with respect to physical features but also salubriousness, fitness for inhabitation, cultivation, and prosperity."¹²⁸ Mary Floyd-Wilson has drawn attention to two competing ancient theories of geohumoralism or the relation of latitude, and therefore climate, to national temperament: that of Hippocrates's *Airs, Waters, Places*, and that of Aristotle in his *Problems* and his *Politics*. The ancients generally referred to residents of the relatively unknown northern part of the world as Scythians, and for Hippocrates the Scythians' environment and climate reflected exactly their physical appearance and temperament: the cold, moist air made for

127 Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 124–25.

128 Menely, *Climate and the Making of Worlds*, 38.



cold, moist, pale, and heavy, fleshy, and phlegmatic or sluggish bodies and brains. “All the men are fat and hairless,” claims Hippocrates, “and likewise all the women, and the two sexes resemble one another.” For Hippocrates, the Scythians are the “most effeminate race of all mankind.”¹²⁹ The men lack the generative heat for procreation, so suffer from impotence, and often dress and act as women. “Male submissiveness, in turn, produces a female-dominated society: the women behave as Amazons.”¹³⁰

Floyd-Wilson argues that Hippocrates’s unflattering vision of northern peoples was countered by the English with Aristotle’s more dominant classical theory of climatic effects on human bodies. Aristotle contradicted Hippocrates by positing that northern people’s physiology was the opposite of their environment: they are excessively heated, big-bodied, densely fleshed by the cold, which keeps their heat collecting inside them. The Aristotelian tradition also finds northerners excessively moist, like Hippocrates, but for a different reason: because of the denseness of the flesh their moisture is retained within them, which “enlarges the physique and deepens the voice.”¹³¹ Cold environments generate a fullness of blood and heat, meaning that northerners have courage, a “tall stature, fair complexion, straight red hair, blue eyes,” but still sluggish minds because of all that retained moisture.¹³² Clearly, as Richard Spavin argues, the Greek theories of the relation of climate, physique, and temperament were designed to establish Greece as the locale where a balance of mental and physical strengths could prevail and civilization could flourish.¹³³ For example, Aristotle claims in Book 7 of his *Politics* that Greece had developed ideally in the middle temperate zone:

The nations inhabiting the cold places and those of Europe are full of spirit but somewhat deficient in intelligence and skill, so that they continue comparatively free, but lacking in political organization and capacity to rule their neighbors. The peoples of Asia on the other hand are intelligent and skillful in temperament, but lack spirit, so that they are in continuous subjection and slavery. But the Greek race participates in both characters, just as it occupies the middle position geographically,

129 Hippocrates is quoted in Floyd-Wilson, *English Ethnicity and Race*, 25.

130 Floyd-Wilson, *English Ethnicity and Race*, 26.

131 Floyd-Wilson, *English Ethnicity and Race*, 30, quoting Vitruvius.

132 Floyd-Wilson, *English Ethnicity and Race*, 30.

133 Richard Spavin, “Jean Bodin and the Idea of Anachorism,” in *Governing the Environment in the Early Modern World: Theory and Practice*, ed. Sara Miglietti and John Morgan (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 38–55, 39.

for it is both spirited and intelligent; hence it continues to be free and to have very good political institutions, and to be capable of ruling all mankind if it attains constitutional unity. (1327b 20–35)¹³⁴

And at the time, Alexander the Great seemed to be proving Greece indeed “capable of ruling all mankind.”¹³⁵ Those peoples who lived with excessive cold or excessive heat, who lived on the outer edges of the world—who were not Greek or Roman, in fact—by Greek theories were necessarily rendered savage and brutish by the excessive temperature. But those who lived in cold regions were singled out as being dull-witted, more so than those in warm regions. As Aristotle says, the heat in their nature “recoils owing to the coldness of the region in which they live, so that they are very like the drunken and are not of an inquisitive turn of mind, but are courageous and sanguine; but those who live in hot regions are sober because they are cool.”¹³⁶ Hence, when Emilia wonders to Desdemona whether Othello is jealous after he storms at her about the handkerchief, Desdemona replies, “Who, he? I think the sun where he was born / Drew all such humours from him” (3.4.30–31).¹³⁷

The sixteenth-century French political philosopher and professor of law, Jean Bodin (d. 1590), produced *République* (1576, Latin translation 1586, English translation 1606), which contained a highly influential synthesis of classical and medieval traditions of geohumoral theories on the relation of climate and national character. “By the mid-sixteenth century it was an unquestioned commonplace that environmental factors—the temperature, water, soil, and terrain—necessarily conditioned the appearance, complexion, temperament, and potential of all people.”¹³⁸ Bodin calls all northerners “Scythians,” including the Britons, Irish, Scots, Germans, and Danes; in the north, he locates Britain, Ireland, Gothland, Denmark, lower Germany, Scythia, and Tartary.¹³⁹ But while Bodin considers the inhabitants of these areas as characterized by hot and moist humors and to be voracious, fierce, slow-witted, and given to great bouts of drinking, eating, and fighting, he also terms them chaste because lacking sexual desire.

Richard Helgerson’s *Forms of Nationhood* early drew attention to the struggle of English sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writers to confront

134 Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Harris Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 565–67.

135 Spavin, “Jean Bodin,” 39.

136 Floyd-Wilson, *English Ethnicity and Race*, 31.

137 Floyd-Wilson, *English Ethnicity and Race*, 1.

138 Floyd-Wilson, *English Ethnicity and Race*, 36.

139 Floyd-Wilson, *English Ethnicity and Race*, 36.

and challenge their country's status as "northern," distanced from the Mediterranean centers of cultural wisdom.¹⁴⁰ Floyd-Wilson has argued since that "a fundamental sense of displacement" gave rise to an English fear of "depressing geographical determinism," the inescapable disadvantage of their northern climate to intellectual life: "For the sunn, which wee want, ripens witts as well as fruits," complains Milton in the suppressed digression in his *History of Britain* (see Chapter 4). "The barbarous Scythian" (1.1.117) that Lear claims to prefer to his daughter Cordelia's apparent cruelty belonged to the classical nomadic race of the Frozen Zone. In Pierre Charron's *Of Wisdome* (1612?), northern people are both phlegmatic and sanguine, in "deference to both Hippocrates and Aristotle!"¹⁴¹ Cold climates, according to sailor and Arctic explorer Luke Foxe, "breed no Schollers." According to Margaret Cavendish, or at least to the character Sir Experience Traveller in her play, *The Lady Contemplation: Part I*, the "extream coldnesse" and remoteness of such climates "should congele their Spirits and stupifie their Brains."¹⁴²

Belief in the humors and their relation to the elements and qualities extended also to their relationship to the seasons as well as to geography and climate. Winter was frequently aligned with the qualities wet and cold, with the element of water, with phlegm as its humor, and variously old age, senility, and decrepitude as its age of man. In some early seventeenth-century humoral charts, however, such as that of Thomas Walkington's diagram from "The Optic Glass of the Four Humors" (1639), a fairly late contribution to early modern Galenic physiology, or in Henry Peacham's *Minerva Britannia* (1612), winter's qualities are cold and dryness, its element earth, its humor black bile or melancholy, its organ spleen, its planet Saturn. In *Timon of Athens*, hearing that the senators, "old fellows" (2.2.208), to whom he has been generous won't help him but gave "cold-moving nods" to Timon's steward, "froze" him "into silence" (2.2.206–07), Timon aligns old age and

140 See note 18 above.

141 Floyd-Wilson, *English Ethnicity and Race*, 38.

142 Luke Foxe, *NORTH-VVEST FOX, or, Fox from the North-west passage. Beginning with King Arthur...* (London: B. Alsop and Tho. Fawcet, 1635), "The Preface to the Reader" [iii], where Foxe warns the reader "expect not here any flourishing Phrases or Eloquent tearnes, for this Child of mine begot in the North-wests cold Clime, (where they breed no Schollers,) is not able to digest the sweet milke of Rethorick." Margaret Cavendish, *Playes Written by the Thrice Noble, Illustrious, and Excellent Princess, the Lady Marchioness of Newcastle* (London: Printed by A. Warren for John Martyn, James Allestry, and Tho. Dicas, 1662), contains the play, *The Lady Contemplation: Part I*, 181–211. In act 2, scene 6, Sir Experience Traveller explains to Lady Conversation why he has not found great wit in cold countries: "I cannot conceive the reason, unlesse the extream coldnesse of the Climate should congele their Spirits, and stupifie their Brains, making the Spirits unactive to get, and the Brain too barren to breed and bear Wit."

its approach to death with winter's cold. He explains the senators' lack of human warmth, kindness, by imagining their warm blood as dried up, in preparation for their return to the cold earth:

Their blood is caked, 'tis cold, it seldom flows,
 'Tis lack of kindly warmth they are not kind;
 And nature, as it grows again toward earth
 Is fashioned for the journey, dull and heavy. (2.2.210-13)¹⁴³

Chapter Summaries

“Empress of the Northern Clime’: London in Winter” (Chapter 1) reviews pamphlets and broadsides printed in England between 1570 and 1740, which document some of the historically harsh winters, along with public concern that England was becoming “Freezland”—part of the barbaric classical Frozen Zone. Some texts reflect a popular reaction, echoed in sermons, to increased cold and severe winter weather as divine punishment for sins, individual and national. They allude to passages on snow, hail, and ice in the Psalms and Job, for example, as reminders of the biblical Fall of humankind into winter and into interior human icescapes of greed, selfishness, and cruelty. Others describe the freezing of the Thames and the river’s frost fairs, the introduction of skates from Holland (with wonder that England had now become similarly “northern”), and the material suffering and deaths of city and country dwellers and of livestock from lack of fuel and food. This and the following chapter comprise the book’s first section of primary texts documenting experiences of cold at home in England and by sailors and whalers in the far north.

“Cold Chaos and Half-Eternal Night’: Overwintering Far North” (Chapter 2) continues the focus on nonfictional, nonliterary texts from the period that testify to knowledge of intense cold—in this case, winter cold and darkness beyond what was known in England. Two narratives report on winter above the Arctic Circle: Dutch sailor Gerrit de Veer’s (1598) on the final voyage of navigator Willem Barentsz and crew to seek the Northeast Passage, which included overwintering on the northeast coast of Novaya Zemlya; and English gunner’s mate Edward Pellham’s (1631), who with seven companions was accidentally abandoned by their whaling expedition and survived a winter on the west coast of Spitsbergen. Welshman Thomas James, sent by Bristol

143 *The Norton Shakespeare, Tragedies*, 869.

merchants to find the Northwest Passage and who wrote and published his account (1633) at the command of Charles I, was locked in ice at the bottom of James Bay in Canada and wintered with his crew on Charlton Island—below the Arctic Circle, but with cold sufficiently terrible that he prayed for spiritual help. De Veer's text, an instant hit enlivened by dramatic woodcuts, was probably known to Shakespeare and certainly to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century readers, including to Milton, Boyle, Dryden, and Thomson. The original Dutch was immediately translated into Latin, French, Italian, and German; the English translation (1609) was reprinted in part in Purchas's *Haklytus Posthumus* (1625). Pellham's text was not reprinted in the seventeenth century; but the image of men in an Arctic wasteland waiting expectantly for the sun to return above the horizon or waiting for rescue became a figure in English poetry for a lover desiring that life-saving affectionate glance from the beloved or for situations where the fortitude of men waiting helplessly for rescue could be invoked. Thomas James's unusually well written and personal account included two original poems that expressed his intense spiritual horror of the encompassing cold darkness and ice and his grief at the loss of four men as he wintered on Charlton Island at the base of Hudson Bay. James's text was reprinted in the eighteenth century and was important especially for Robert Boyle and James Thomson.

The second, longer section of this book features four imaginative texts—a play, an epic poem, a semi-opera, and a long descriptive poem—plus Robert Boyle's longest published scientific writing, *New Experiments and Observations Touching Cold*, the first published research on cold sponsored by the Royal Society. Each of the imaginative texts explores a relation between the mind of a despotic figure and winter's cold; and all five writers would have been familiar with some of the texts in the first section and with both the classical and biblical traditions associating the cold north with barbaric or demonic threat, winter with the Fall. In "Weathering the Fall in *The Winter's Tale*" (Chapter 3), the "winter's tale" of the play reminds us of earlier classical (Ovidian) and biblical tales that treat the fearful Fall for men and for women into sexuality and time, dependent on the biology of reproduction to keep the human seasons revolving. King Leontes of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* (ca. 1610) freezes his heart and Sicilian court to wintry iciness and sterility and ignores divine correction, spreading death. The play reverses the geographical settings of its source story, draws on the old tradition of two seasons, winter and summer, to subtly disconnect human cold from geography in order to emphasize the long suffering caused by a ruler's deluded tyranny. A single reference to the Russian king—the most famous at the time of performance being Ivan the Terrible, though dead for over

twenty-five years—briefly intimates the horror of that far northern ruler as Sicily's own.

Addressing the epic poet's fascination with the dialectic of heat and cold, "Milton and 'Horror Chill': Cold Within and Without" (Chapter 4) sits at the center of this volume about winter cold perceived as demonic and tyrannical in being merciless to human life. As supreme student of the classical tradition and biblical scholarship, of Dante and Renaissance humanism, and a Republican polemicist who defended the necessity of regicide, Milton depicts in *Paradise Lost* (1667) the original monarch of evil, Satan, as occupying despotically a hell of alternating extremes of ice and fire. Milton's absorption of Dante's *Inferno* where Lucifer freezes in ice for eternity and his reading in northern travel literature and diplomatic narratives out of Russia, which lies behind his *Brief History of Moscovia* (1640s but not published until 1682), shape his depiction of hell's landscapes "where cold performs the effect of fire" (2.595).¹⁴⁴ Milton's Satan engineers the Fall of mankind into new horrors of cold he was the first to feel: the shiver, the chill, of horror at disobedience to and distance from God, of unrepented moral transgression; then exile from a paradisaical climate of perpetual spring to an environment of extreme weather including the snows, hail, and ice of fiercest cold.

"Nature's Cold Left Hand: Robert Boyle's *Experimental History of Cold, Begun*" (Chapter 5) inquires what effect the long-standing perception of wintry cold as a sign of a fallen natural world and darkened human heart might have had on investigations into cold of London's newly established Royal Society, which was dedicated to the objective experimental study of the material world. This chapter reads closely Robert Boyle's Preface to his *New Experiments and Observations Touching Cold, or, an Experimental History of Cold, Begun* (1665), where he begins by misremembering a statement of the Society's intellectual father, Francis Bacon, to whom Boyle attributes his own designation of heat as the right hand of nature and cold the left, cold thus potentially carrying the associations of the Latin sinister. The preface suggests that cold—a subject the Royal Society requested him to investigate—tested Boyle's stamina, became a wearisome yoke from which he was finally eager to slip free for a while, encouraging others to continue his work. A devout Christian and serious chemist ready to put long-standing classical assumptions about the physical world to repeated experimental testing, Boyle reveals an ambivalent, complex attitude toward cold. Of

144 John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Alastair Fowler, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 138.



delicate health and something of a hypochondriac, he complains he “long suffer’d” through unpleasant, unfruitful experiments, read “melancholy” travelers’ accounts of survival in brutal Arctic winters, and endured other demands of this “barren” and “diffus’d” subject. His self-admitted prolixity and at times casual forgetfulness (towards the end of his Postscript, speaking of mixing either “calcined Lead” in vinegar or “quick-Lime” in water, he adds parenthetically “one of them I did make use of, though I have forgotten which”), along with his insistence on a loose organization of his volume’s parts speaks to an intellect wary of any frozen security about cold’s nature.¹⁴⁵ Meanwhile, he draws heavily on the narrative of Northwest Passage navigator Thomas James, who wrote of “Satans malice” in the face of terrifying ice and bleakness at sea, the utter uselessness of man-made scientific tools like a compass when tested by Canadian winter storms, and fear for his soul.¹⁴⁶

“Armed Winter and Inverted Day’: The Politics of Cold in Dryden and Purcell’s *King Arthur*” (Chapter 6) examines Dryden’s use of heat and cold as a critical language of the natural and unnatural in English politics in his career as laureate for the Restoration Stuart monarchs and in his final decade after the Glorious Revolution as a disenfranchised Roman Catholic. While Poet Laureate and Historiographer Royal under Charles II, Dryden had celebrated his patron with encomiums linking his restoration to the warmth and joyful fertility of spring’s return. In the 1670s he had boldly turned Milton’s blank verse epic into a rhymed five-act drama, *The State of Innocence and the Fall of Man*, originally intended for opera but never performed. Fifteen years later, by the time his blank verse semi-opera *King Arthur* was completed and performed (1691), Dryden was living in internal exile, like Milton after the Restoration, writing under the censorship of William III’s government. His text reflects the impress of *Paradise Lost* in how winter cold, as a climatic inversion, is conjured by demonic powers—in Dryden’s text associated with the pagan military invader, Saxon Oswald. Oswald’s evil magician briefly transforms England into an illusory wintry hell of deceit, complete with a Genius of Cold who longs to freeze to death. Dryden uses cold to critique obliquely the current national climate of war—begun with military Dutch stadtholder William III’s “invasion” of England in November 1688 precipitating the flight of Roman Catholic

145 Boyle, Robert, *New Experiments and Observations Touching Cold, or an Experimental History of Cold, Begun*, in *The Works of Robert Boyle*, ed. Michael Hunter and Edward B. Davis, 14 vols. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1999), 4:203–542, 224, 218, 208, 209, 456.

146 Thomas James, *The Strange and Dangerous Voyage of Captaine Thomas James, a Critical Edition*, ed. Colleen M. Franklin (Montreal and Kingston, ON: McGill-Queens University Press, 2014), 39.



King James II and, after William's assumption of the throne, continued by his absencing that throne to fight on the continent against France. Such a military ruler, sending Englishmen to be killed, would be an unnatural inversion of what Dryden had long evoked as Charles II's peace-loving, warmly temperate, and civilizing rule.

"James Thomson and the Despot of Winter" (Chapter 7) reads the descriptive long poem on the season that closes the final version of Thomson's *The Seasons* (1746). Born and raised with the long winters habitual to the rural Scottish border country of Roxburghshire, James Thomson, son of a Presbyterian minister, left divinity study and moved to London aged twenty-four. Within a year he had begun "Winter," which he would spend the next twenty years revising and enlarging. A deep reader of Milton, of the Bible as well as Virgil, Spenser, and Newton, he joined the "Patriot" Whig opposition to Walpole and wrote among other work a long poem called *Liberty* and an introduction to Milton's *Areopagitica* re-issued by Thomson's publisher as a response to Walpole's Licensing Bill to control the press. Apparently an avid reader of northern travel literature, Thomson tracks his roving narrator's eye through a range of northern winter landscapes: from the isolated Scotch borderlands to the Swiss Alps to Russia, Lapland, and Tartary. Throughout, Winter is a ruler that binds all fast; the motif of silenced prisoners of human injustice and of a furious Nature runs through the poem, the "sad" (802) Russian exile icily bound in "unbounded Wilds" (799) hinting at the darker despotic side of Peter the Great whose rule Thomson celebrates as a model of enlightenment. The final figure of "Dread Winter" (1024) is that of a tyrant "who reigns tremendous o'er the conquer'd year" (1025),¹⁴⁷ and for all Thomson's mid-eighteenth-century scientific and exacting descriptive tastes, "Winter" ends as ghoulish and Gothic in its emphasis on horror. Examples of verse portraying the winter season as a grim tyrant continue at least through the end of the eighteenth century.

The book's brief Coda reminds us that our presently warming planet is melting the Arctic ice that once blocked early modern explorers. We face the future loss of exactly that winter cold whose hardships early modern English perceived as divine punishment or malevolent. Among those most impacted by the loss of Arctic cold and ice from the burning of fossil fuels is the indigenous Arctic population who've lived for centuries on the Russian and North American sides of the Bering Strait, on Baffin and Ellesmere Islands in northern Canada, and on the west coast of Greenland. Ice has been

147 James Thomson, *James Thomson: The Seasons*, ed. James Sambrook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 240, 250.



their “life force,” as Inuit Sheila Watt-Cloutier writes, around which their unique culture has been built, which will disappear along with the ice.¹⁴⁸ While early Arctic explorers feared northern devils and witches, Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” with which we close, suggests, from the point of view of those living with ice, where the devil resides after all.

148 Sheila Watt-Cloutier, *The Right to Be Cold: One Woman’s Fight to Protect the Arctic and Save the Planet from Climate Change* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 258.

