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# An Environmental 'poetics of space'* in *Poly-Olbion* (1612 and 1622)

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*Abstract*

The article examines the mechanism by which space is created and disrupted in Michael Drayton's chorographic poem, *Poly-Olbion* (1612 and 1622). Gaston Bachelard propounds that 'Inhabited space transcends geometrical space': once space is inhabited, it develops the agency to co-create with its inhabitants. Applying this theory of domesticity to Drayton's representation of water, the article argues that the poem similarly presents the non-human with agency to shape and disrupt space alongside people and their histories. Attending to the spatial agency of the non-human in this way allows for a new ecocritical reading of space in *Poly-Olbion*, aiming to address what it means to read space in the face of environmental change.

*Keywords*: Chorography, Ecocriticism, Erosion, *Poly-Olbion*, Spatial Studies

## 1. *Introduction*

At the centre of *Poly-Olbion*'s frontispiece sits Albion, the feminised vision of the nation, as indicated by the words 'GREAT BRITAINE' engraved upon her rocky throne.[1] William Hole's etching clearly associates Albion with the nation's land: she holds a cornucopia, filled with fruits and flowers, both symbols of agricultural abundance, and she wears a garment that is embellished with inland cartographic iconography, including trees, rivers, and hilltops. The sea is spread out behind her, providing a backdrop for this powerful female representation of the land of Britain. However, the maritime also encroaches on the foreground: the archway framing Albion is decorated with crabs and shells, a counter to the cornucopia in her left hand, and her cartographic gown

[*] Bachelard 2014.

[1] See Drayton (1931-1941). The poem (including all etchings and illustrative notes) appears in vol. 4. All references in the present essay are to Hebel's edition (1933).

is complemented with a string of ocean pearls.[2] This creeping maritime presence is verbalised in the accompanying poem 'Upon the *Frontispice*', which asks the reader to 'see *Albion* plas't, / … in *Neptunes* armes embras't' (Drayton 1933, 'Upon the *Frontispice*', ll. 1-2). This metaphor – a metaphor that recurs in the body of the poem, as well as in John Selden's Illustrations – recognises the importance of the sea in shaping the land that makes up the nation (*The fifth Song*, l. 328 and Selden's note in Drayton 1933, 43). As Neptune wraps his arms around Albion, so he 'encloses' her, physically demarcating where the land (and as such, the nation) comes to an end (OED, 'Embrace', v.2.3.a). Thus, by using the metaphor of embrace, *Poly-Olbion* acknowledges the role that the sea plays in shaping cartographic place: the sea is written with the power to dictate what appears on the map. The 'embrace', of course, is not static. The ebb and flow of tides continually reshapes the edge of the land throughout the day, whilst over time, the erosive force of those waves accumulates, redefining the coastline more permanently. These changes are not registered through Hole's cartographic etchings; Drayton's poetry, however, alludes to the impact of Neptune's watery embrace. At the coastline of North Wales, for example, the 'robustious shocks' of Neptune's tides 'shoulder up against the griesly Rocks' of the coastline (*The tenth Song*, ll. 77-78). The emphasis that Drayton gives to the force of the waves leaves the encircled land seeming fragile in their wake: as such, Neptune's embrace becomes more a threat than a sign of his friendship.

This early reference to Neptune's watery embrace of Albion is representative of the agency to shape and disrupt cartographic place that Drayton extends to the non-human environment throughout the poetry of *Poly-Olbion*. Since the 'spatial turn' in the humanities, the study of early modern chorography – Drayton's generic forebear – has been invigorated.[3] Much of this criticism has focussed on the politics of the genre, unsurprisingly considering the influence of Henri Lefebvre's theory of space as socially produced (1991; see, in particular, Helgerson 1992; McRae 1996; Klein 2001a). Studies of the representation of space in *Poly-Olbion* have been similarly politically orientated, drawing on the theoretical frameworks offered by both Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau to focus on people and mobility (de Certeau 1984; see also McRae 1999; Klein 2001b). There is, however, an apparent crossover between the study of space and ecocritical studies (as highlighted by Lynn Robson's review of the two fields) that remains underexplored in the early modern (2010). Indeed, the two seem so closely connected that in a recent essay, Bernhard Klein provides a footnote referring to literature 'on space and/or natural environment' (2020, 147). Alongside the interest in the poem through a spatial lens, over the past decade *Poly-Olbion* has increasingly been the subject of ecocritical attention for its poetic representation of environmental change, such as deforestation and the drainage of the fens (see, in particular, Dasgupta 2010; Borlik 2011; McRae 2011 and 2020). These two fields – both of which have been significantly influential in *Poly-Olbion* studies – have recently been examined together by Todd Borlik, which puts 'a green spin on Helgerson's argument' to read the poem as 'an early intimation of bioregional thinking' (2020, 90). Borlik thus builds on previous criticism of the poem, highlighting that natural history (as much as human history) is important to Drayton in defining place.

The present essay aims to similarly take seriously the role of the non-human environment in the poem's conception of space; however, I am additionally interested in tracing the material impact of non-human spatial agency, particularly on the coast.[4] Devon and Cornwall provide

[2] Here, I draw on Bernhard Klein's discussion of the frontispiece (2020, 148-151).

[3] For an overview of the genre of chorography, see McRae 2013 and Vine 2017.

[4] There is precedent to this environmental approach to spatial studies that can be found in other disciplines. See, for example, Steinberg and Peters 2015.

a geographic focal point for the present essay, a region selected because of the sheer volume of contemporary chorographic material available, but also because of the extensive coastline: the first song of *Poly-Olbion* (which focusses on these two counties) sees Drayton paying significant attention to the impact of the sea. The first part of the present essay examines the chorographic representation of the apparently stable natural boundary between these two counties, the River Tamar. Despite the decisiveness of river as boundary, chorographers from both sides acknowledge its permeability: in particular, there are several Devonian parishes situated on the Cornish side of the river. People and mobility can thus be understood as vital in the production of space in these local chorographies. In contrast, Drayton extends spatial agency to the Tamar and her tributaries through his use of prosopopoeia, attributing to the non-human environment the capacity to choose whether or not to commit to the boundary. Drawing on Gaston Bachelard's theory of domestic space as discussed in his *The Poetics of Space*, I argue that the non-human in *Poly-Olbion* becomes a co-creator of space alongside the human inhabitants. In the second part of the present essay, I turn my attention to the material impact of this spatial agency attributed to the non-human environment, arguing that the physicality of the sea in shaping the land is presented as both a spatial and environmental threat, especially given the heightened anxieties about coastal change during the period in which Drayton was writing, provoked by visions of lost lands and the massive flooding along the Bristol Channel in 1607. As such, I aim to offer a new reading of the spatial-environmental implications of non-human agency in *Poly-Olbion*. Crucially, I suggest that the absence of the human at these coastal sites allows the non-human waves excessive agency, and whilst the poetry might not offer any pragmatic solutions, I argue that it encourages preservation of the fragile land through memory. In doing so, Drayton invites the human reader to be a protective participant at the coastline, to once again co-create with the non-human.

## 2. *Producing Space with the Non-Human*

Devon and Cornwall, the two most southwestern counties in England, were once united as part of the same kingdom, Dumnonia. This kingdom was divided into two counties at the River Tamar during the reign of King Athelstan in the tenth century, at least according to the twelfth-century historian William of Malmesbury (1847, 134). Malmesbury's account is now generally disputed, but regardless of the veracity of the story, it was the tale of division that chorographers from both sides of the river recounted.[5] Richard Carew, for example, opens his *Survey of Cornwall* (1602) with reference to the Saxon invasion and subsequent settlement, which drove the Britons 'to seek their safeguard in the waste moors, craggy mountains, and wild forests of Wales and Cornwall' (2000, 11). He later returns to this historical moment with greater geographic specificity, describing how Athelstan 'drave [the Britons] out of Excester [in Devon], where, till then, they bare equal sway with the Saxons, and left only the narrow angle on the west of Tamer River, for their inhabitancy, which hath ever since been their fatal bound' (109-110). Writing from the other side of the river, Thomas Westcote's account of the split in *A View of Devonshire* (completed in 1630) is very similar: following Carew, Westcote also describes how Athelstan 'chased the Britons … out of these parts, now called Denshire' and drove them 'beyond the river now called Taw-meer; making that river the bounds, limits, or meer between the two counties' (1845, 28). The affinity between these two accounts of the

[5] T.M. Charles, for example, concludes that this version of Devon and Cornish history is an 'improbable story' (2013, 432).

division gives Malmesbury's version of history greater credence through the act of telling and retelling, which aids the writers in constructing a stable understanding of their own counties. In evoking the Athelstan myth, they acknowledge the history shared between Devon and Cornwall but remind the reader of the present-day natural boundary that clearly demarcates each county. Further, they both describe the river in decisive terms. For Carew, it becomes the 'fatal bound' (2000, 110), suggesting the inevitability of Dumnonia's division. Meanwhile Westcote provides an etymology of 'Taw-meer', with 'meer' signifying 'a bound or limit: so Taw-meer, Taw the bounds' (1845, 28). This is reaffirmed by contemporary county maps of Devon and Cornwall, which visualise (and perhaps overemphasise) the decisiveness of the Tamar as a boundary from an elevated perspective: in John Speed's map of Devon, for example, the eastern edge peters out into Somerset and Dorset, whereas the western divide appears clearer because of the river's role as a natural boundary (1614, 19-21). Whatever history might have to say about the region, these writers make firm its division through the assertiveness of the river, a stable boundary between Devon and Cornwall that has remained in place ever since.

This stable boundary, however, is disrupted by movement and exchange across the river. Carew makes note that the 'commendable' physician 'Mr Atwel' is 'sometimes Parson of Calverly in Devon, and now of St Tue [St Ewe] in Cornwall', highlighting his migration from one county to the other (2000, 70). Inversely, Carew recalls the mass movement during the Cornish rebellion of 1497, when an army of around 6,000 'marched into Devon, besieged and assaulted Excester, and gave the Lord Russell … more than one hot encounter' (111). Non-human inhabitants, of course, display little regard for the boundary, and Carew notes the red deer that 'range thither out of Devon' and the trout-like 'shoat' that is 'peculiar to Devon and Cornwall' (39, 43). Grazing practices similarly encourage movement, since the 'Devon and Somersetshire graziers feed yearly great droves of cattle in the north corner of Cornwall' (39). The exchange of property represents another kind of disruption: the Boconnock Estate is situated firmly within Cornwall, but 'appertained to the Earls of Devon', along with his 'sisters and heirs' (74). Further examples can be found along the Tamar itself, such as Milbrook, which is described as 'severed from Devon by the general bound, yet upon some of the foreremembered considerations have been annexed thereunto' (116). Westcote, on the other hand, is firmer in describing Milbrook as 'belonging unto us' (that is, Devonians) (1845, 375). Each time the boundary is broached, it creates an 'iland' of Devon within Cornwall, disrupting the illusion of the firm line between one county and the other and highlighting the permeability of the river as boundary.[6] This permeability allows the chorographic description to stray over the river. For example, as Westcote reaches the River Tamar, he looks over the onto the 'Cornish side' to include 'Saltash, Villa de Esse, Essas-town', the 'ruined castle of [Trematon]', as well as (naturally) the Devonian villages (*ibid.*). Westcote does not linger long in describing these 'transmarine places': there is, he suggests, no need to 'enlarge one word, being already well performed by a far more judicious and learned pen in the Survey of Cornwall' (376). By citing Carew, Westcote establishes the complementary nature of the two chorographies, as if they are meant to read alongside one another. The chorographies become rather like the counties they describe: two separate texts with one description that permeates the other, nonetheless.

The practices of living beings thus transmute the separate geographic places of Devon and Cornwall into less static, socially produced spaces. Drawing on Michel de Certeau's famous image of looking down on New York City from the World Trade Centre, when consulting

[6] I borrow this phrase from William Pole, who describes the Devonian parish of Thorncomb as an 'iland compassed about w[ith] Dorsetshire & Somersetshir' (1791, 112).

Speed's map, the River Tamar might appear to provide a solid bound; however, the people on the ground in reality continually unnerve its apparent certainty (1984, 91-92). The cartographic perspective is an example of place, which 'is transformed into a space by walkers' (117). Despite the acknowledged disruptions, I suggest that Carew and Westcote are ultimately concerned with replicating the county maps and maintaining the boundary, that is with upholding a stable sense of place. Westcote assures his reader that he strayed into Cornwall 'briefly, only for a remembrance that they are members of this county', that is to say, to reaffirm the more ambiguous parts of his county as Devonian, a literary act of beating the bounds (1845, 376). Carew, in contrast, creates some uncertainty about Milbrook's county, suggesting it is only '*some* of the foreremembered considerations' that include it in Devon (2000, 116; my italics). The formal context for this reasserted boundary is that they are ultimately writing chorographies of the separate counties, not a description of Dumnonia. Michael Drayton's chorographical poem, on the other hand, is not bound by the same formal constraints. The literary organisation of *Poly-Olbion* has been traced to William Camden's *Britannia* (first published in Latin 1587), in part because the Muse and narrator who bring forth the poem move (more or less) from county to county, emphasising individual units of land (Moore 1968; McRae and Schwyzer 2020, 4). However, the description is divided into songs which do not follow the county-by-county model, but rather bring together multiple counties into one unit of poetry, as well as one corresponding cartographic etching by William Hole. Through this boundary-crossing method of organisation, Devon and Cornwall are united poetically and visually as 'The first Song' (Drayton 1933).

This is not to suggest that Drayton completely disregards the division along the Tamar, which is succinctly described through a couplet in the opening argument to that song: '*Then takes in* Tamer, *as shee bounds* / *the* Cornish *and* Devonian *grounds*' (*The first Song*, *Argument*, ll. 7-8). In the body of the poem, the Tamar is reintroduced, 'swoop[ing] along, with such a lustie traine / As fits so brave a flood two Countries that divides' (*The first Song*, ll. 205-206). This both reiterates her role as boundary between Devon and Cornwall and suggests that her effectiveness lies in the reality of her physical form, her 'lustie traine', recalling the language used by both Carew and Westcote to stress the Tamar's firmness. This 'lustie traine' is formed and strengthened by the united efforts of tributaries from both counties: 'to increase her strength, shee from her equall sides / Receive their several rills' (ll. 207-208). What follows is a catalogue of Cornish tributaries to the Tamar, acknowledging also the 'proud aspiring hills' that contribute to the streams (l. 216). The description pivots on a rhyming couplet (Tamar is proud that she is 'by *Carewes* Muse, the river most renound, / Associate should her grace to the *Devonian* ground', ll. 217-218), creating a sonic connection between the two counties, even at the moment the poem crosses over the river from one side to another (ll. 218-219). A catalogue of Devonian tributaries into Tamar follows, reflecting the poetic description on the Cornish side, before the passage closes with reference to the region's united past:

But *Tamer* takes the place, and all attend her here,
A faithfull bound to both; and two that be so neare
For likeliness of soile, and quantitie they hold,
Before the Roman came; whose people were of old
Knowne by one generall name. (ll. 235-239)

The description here of Tamar as 'a faithfull bound' is overwhelmed by the points of similarity that Drayton is keen to note: the soil, the geographic proximity, and the pre-Roman past. Notably, the allusion to Dumnonia is not countered by the Athelstan myth, either in the poem or in Selden's illustrative notes on the passage, which simply gives name to the old kingdom (Drayton 1933, 20).

Drayton's poetic description along the Tamar oscillates between a commitment to upholding the cartographic units of place and allusion to a more mutable space defined by cross-county movement. The affirmation of the river as a 'faithfull bound' decisively upholds the border, recalling Westcote's assurance that he does not descriptively stray too far into Cornwall and hewing strikingly close to Carew's description of Tamar as a 'fatal bound'. On the other hand, the repeated references to sameness allude to the shared past, unnerving the stable sense of place. The sameness is reflected in the poetics: the Devonian passage seems to mimic the Cornish, similarly producing a catalogue of tributaries, with the transition from one county to another occurring over a rhyming couplet. Turning to the cartographic etching, the tributaries are over-emphasised by Hole's technique, creating cross-cutting channels which allude to movement over the river, even as the poetry describes the rills contributing to and strengthening the boundary.[7] In the present essay, however, I am less interested in tracing in more depth the intricacies of the poem's portrayal of Dumnonian place/space than I am in thinking through the mechanism by which the oscillation from one to another occurs. For de Certeau, place becomes space through human practices; hence, '*space is a practiced place*' (1984, 117). The boundary-crossing migration and networks of property laid out in the county chorographies provide a clear example of the disruption of place into space. Disruptive human practices are also evident in *Poly-Olbion* through Drayton's allusion to the shared history of Devon and Cornwall, which Selden strengthens in the Illustrations. Further, Drayton follows Carew in suggesting that the inhabitants of both counties are particularly skilled at wrestling, acknowledging a boundary-crossing culture through a sport that (as the poet's description highlights) relies on the invasion of the opponent's space (Drayton 1933, *The first Song*, ll. 239-247). The various throws that Drayton names ('The forward, backward, falx, the mare, the turne, the trip') all reflect the movement to and fro over the Tamar, whilst the aggression of the sport (the opponents are likened to 'Bulls set head to head') equally works to reassert the division (ll. 242-244). The Tamar and her tributaries, however, emerge as spatial agents alongside the human inhabitants. That Drayton extends agency to the non-human environment is evident in the use of prosopopoeia throughout the poem, allowing the land and waters to express their desires and emotions through song. In this passage, the Tamar is pleased by the 'plentious tribute' offered by one tributary: 'This honours *Tamer* much' (ll. 214-215). She is introduced as 'Proud', alluding to her attitude towards her role, and later is given the epithet of 'faithfull bound', highlighting her sense of commitment to both counties. Equally, the tributaries are sometimes eager to contribute – such as Kensey, who comes 'not much behind' Atre – and sometimes hesitant, like the creeping Lid (ll. 208-209, l. 221). They might even, as Thrushel, shirk their duties altogether, flowing underground 'To bellowe under earth' (l. 224). As these streams of water enact their agency, they do so in spatial terms: some mimic the writing and mapping of place that affirms what appears on paper; others, the boundary-crossing human practices that disrupt stable understandings of place.

Because human practices in *Poly-Olbion* are not solely responsible for the disruption of place into space, Gaston Bachelard's theory of domestic space seems to offer a clearer lens through which to read the poem. In Bachelard's study of the house, 'Inhabited space transcends geometrical space': the house becomes both 'its prime reality … made of well hewn solids and well fitted framework' and part of the 'human plane' (2014, 67-68). Human practices are still critical – the house transcends because it is inhabited – but these practices imbue

[7] See cartographic etching, included in Drayton prior to the first song. The exaggeration of the tributaries is particularly apparent when contrasted with Speed's depiction of the Tamar (1614, 19-21).

the structure of the house itself with agency. Through Drayton's poetic handling, the Tamar and her tributaries similarly become both their 'prime reality' (that is, water flowing through channels in the earth) and part of 'the human plane'. The rivers, driven by the human qualities bestowed upon them, thus decide to contribute (or withhold) the physical weight of their water, thereby practising place alongside the human inhabitants. That is to say, in *Poly-Olbion*, space is not just a human phenomenon.

### 3. *The Materiality of Spacial Agency*

By writing the non-human with agency, Drayton makes literal the fluidity of social space, much like he makes literal the weight of history: as Shannon Garner argues, 'The volume of gathering rivers literally gives weight to their arguments' about the past (2020, 137). Thus, the agency that Drayton attributes to the Tamar and her tributaries does not only contribute to the production of space; rather, their spatial agency has a material impact on the environment. As Kensey eagerly joins the Tamar thus strengthening the boundary, she does so by adding physical weight to her flow and width to her channel. Inversely, the Thrushel chooses to avoid the mainstream, and both current and boundary are consequently weaker than their potential. Since Drayton extends to the rivers the capacity to choose their course, there also lies latent within the poetry the possibility of change that could impact the boundary (either weakening or strengthening it) by affecting the environment. Indeed, just prior to the description of the Tamar, this possibility of material change becomes reality: the Camel (a river in Cornwall) is so affected by her misery over Arthur's death that she forges a new path for herself. She now – 'ever since her British *Arthurs* blood, / By *Mordreds* murtherous hand was mingled with her flood' – meanders in such a way that disregards 'her proper course' (Drayton 1933, *The first Song*, ll. 183-184). Here, the Camel's reaction to Arthur's demise results in a material change to the environment. What Drayton's description of her diverted course does not include, however, is the impact on the soil that forms her banks. As the river steers a new and 'carelesse' course through Cornwall, 'mutter[ing] to her selfe, in wandring here and there', the reader is left to imagine whether the river's banks spontaneously follow suit, moving to make way for the meandering Camel, or whether she forces her way through, creating her new path over time through the slow process of erosion (ll. 192-193). Thrushel's act of 'throw[ing] / Her selfe amongst the rocks' and going underground is similarly described through a sole focus on the river, and not its earthy channel. This aligns with Drayton's depiction of rivers throughout the poem, which, as I have previously argued, is broadly celebratory about the opportunities they offer in terms of connectivity and rural productivity, largely ignoring the threat rivers could (and did) pose, most particularly flooding (Naish 2024, 219-224).[8] The ocean, however, by continually shaping and reshaping the land, is presented as a far greater threat to the coast, both spatially and environmentally. The encircling sea is endowed with the capacity to dictate the edges of the nation, and it does so through a process suggestive of erosion. Whilst the words 'erode' and 'erosion' do not appear to have been used in relation to the environmental phenomenon until the nineteenth century, contemporary sources demonstrate an awareness of the

[8] It is worth noting that Drayton alludes to the threat posed by rivers via a prophecy concerning 'fatall Welland': '(Which to this ominous flood much feare and reverance wan) / That she alone should drowne all Holland' (1933, *The foure and twentieth Song*, *Argument*, l. 1 and ll. 6-7). This is, however, a brief mention, and the poem quickly moves on, in line with the more generally optimistic presentation of rivers.

impact of waves on the shore over time: writing in 1596, for example, John Norden describes 'the force of the water' as working away at the coastline in Kent (26).[9] Indeed, *Poly-Olbion* was written and published during a period, as per Borlik, of heightened environmental anxiety about coastal change (2023, 80). The publication in 1590 of John Twyne's *De rebus Albionicis, Britannicis atque Anglicis, Commentariorum libri duo* by his son Thomas popularised the 'isthmus hypothesis', the theory that Britain 'had at one time been actually joined to the mainland by a neck of land which, in the long processes of time and tide, had been gradually worn away' (Ferguson 1969, 30). The credibility of this theory, as Borlik notes, would have been bolstered by the catastrophic flooding along the Bristol Channel in 1607 (2023, 80), just five years prior to the first publication of *Poly-Olbion*.

The threat of the waves in *Poly-Olbion* is augmented by the repeated reference to Neptune. In evoking the figure of Neptune, Drayton's representation of the sea draws upon a great variety of allusions from classical texts and in early modern English writing, as Bernhard Klein demonstrates. As such, Neptune (and by extension the sea) is presented in *Poly-Olbion* as both 'a political operator and a dreaded natural force' (Klein 2020, 160-162). His political prowess, however, is not evident until after the first song, whereas the troublesome nature of the sea is present from the outset. For example, the assurance that the sea nymphs offer the Channel Islands – that they 'never need to feare' the stormy seas in which they are situated – ironically highlights that the land feels under threat from the dual forces of Neptune and Aeolus (Drayton 1933, *The first Song,* ll. 45-48). The threat grows stronger when the islands loudly reply 'With shrill and jocund shouts', and in doing so, awaken 'th'unmeaur'd deepes … / And let the Gods of Sea their secret Bowres forsake' (ll. 63-64).[10] Now active, the waves that break on Brisons (a tiny island off the coast of Cornwall) disturb the shore, leaving the sand 'troubled' (l. 73). Later attacks are more disruptive still, such as at St Michael's Mount, where Neptune comes 'cutting in, a cantle forth doth take' (ll. 80-81). This provides a literal description of the tidal island, separated from mainland for most of the day, but in potentially violent terms: the word 'take' in particular implies that the Mount might not want to give up his land. Meanwhile on the north coast, Neptune '*Hayles* vaster mouth doth make / A Chersonese [peninsula] thereof' (ll. 82-83). This literal description of a widened river mouth similarly highlights the material impact of the waves that shapes (and even reshapes) the coastal edges of Cornwall.

This opening passage thus introduces the coastline as vulnerable in the face of Neptune's force. That vulnerability is then exacerbated through descriptions of the relationship between land and sea in terms of sexual harassment, since Neptune's evident desire for the coast is not always reciprocated. For example, the Loe in Cornwall (a freshwater lake, separated from the sea by a shingle bank) is described by Drayton as formed 'Through [Neptune's] impatient love' (l. 143). The brute force of Neptune's desire results in a coastline that is physically overpowered, but not mentally swayed: to borrow the distinction drawn out by Jocelyn Catty, raped rather than seduced (1999, 19). The only insight that Drayton offers to the Loe's perspective is that 'shee had to entertaine / The lustfull *Neptune* oft', with the 'had' suggesting resigned duty, rather than willing participation (1933, *The first Song*, ll. 143-144). In the account that follows, Neptune's sexual violence becomes unignorable:

[9] Earlier uses tend to refer to bodily erosion, which appears to change around the nineteenth century: see OED, 'Erosion', n.1.a.; 'Erode', v.1.a.

[10] Klein suggests 'the sea gods keep out of the way in their secret under-water bowers' (2020, 163). However, I would argue that the couplet presents a burgeoning threat as the sea gods come out from ('forsake') their secret bowers.

[Neptune] when his wracks restraine,
Impatient of the wrong, impetuouslie hee raves:
And in his ragefull flowe, the furious King of waves,
Breaks foming o'er the Beache, whom nothing seemes to coole,
Till he have wrought his will on that capacious Poole. (ll. 144-148)

Neptune is again described as 'impatient', a quality that is stressed further through the image of the waves 'impetuouslie' raving against any constraints that might hold them back from the desired shore. That impatience is made more fearsome through the fact that his violent emotions are only eased when they are acted upon, that is when Neptune successfully assaults Loe. The violence is then held in perpetuity through the literal image of waves endlessly breaking against the shore, as well as through the lack of resolution in the poem, which simply moves on to describe the next stretch of coastline. The forcefulness of this unending assault is made more graphic through the emphasis on its material impact: the Loe is 'transform'd into a Lake' because of Neptune's advances. This simple description of an indent in the coastline is additionally suggestive of violent penetration, and thus simultaneously functions as a devastating portrayal of the physical impact of Neptune's assault. Along the coast from Loe lie the Meneage (on the Lizard peninsula) and the Roseland peninsula, both of which are inversely figured as male. This shift in the gender dynamic at first seems to signal a different relationship between the coast and the waves: it is still antagonistic, but the Meneage in particular seems better equipped to resist the forces of the waves. The Meneage 'jut[s] out' into the sea and 'with his threatning cleeves in horrid *Neptunes* mouth, / Derides him and his power: nor cares how him he greets' (ll. 151-153). Even as Neptune grabs onto the coastline, the Meneage vocalises his resistance and hurls insults at the sea god, providing a notable contrast to the description a few lines earlier of the amenable Loe. Roseland mimics 'his friend, the mightier *Menedge*', and boldly 'meets / Great *Neptune* when he swells, and rageth at the Rocks' (ll. 154-155). His attempts, however, are less successful and Neptune subsequently 'inforc[es] through his shocks / Those armes of Sea, that thrust into the tinny strand' (ll. 156-157). With the preposition 'into', the description of the various waterways (the 'armes of Sea') becomes threateningly penetrative, especially considering the proximity to the violent assault on Loe. The brief moment of resistance at the Meneage is thus quickly countered as Neptune's insistent force again succeeds at violating the coastline at Roseland.

Other parts of the coastline are more successful at resisting Neptune's advances, such as the 'Marble-minded breast' of the Isle of Purbeck in Dorset (2.94). Through her 'marble' mind, she resists any attempts at seduction from the waves, and with her 'breast' (which is literally formed with 'some veins of marble'), she resists their physical force.[11] At Hayle, protection comes in the form of a nymph, who ensures that the land is sheltered from the worst of Neptune's attacks through reciprocated passion. Despite the anxiety underlying the description of '*Hayles* vaster mouth' in the opening passage, the description of her nymph (given around twenty lines later) reveals an enthusiastic attitude towards the advances of the waves (l. 82). Hayle's 'lustie Nymph' expresses playful desire for union with the sea: as the river flows away from the land, the nymph is found 'bent all to amorous play' and 'disporting in the Deepe' with Neptune's 'Pages' (ll. 111-113). Further, her 'quick recourse into the *Severne* Sea' seems a good match for the impatience of Neptune, which Drayton stresses in his description of Loe, whilst also taking the action away from the coastline: the union occurs in 'the Deepe', thereby

[11] Drayton seems here to draw on William Camden's description of Purbeck (1695, 46).

providing protection to the land from the force of the waves. As a result, the material impact on the coastline seems to become less alarming than at other sites, and the nymph is described as 'One never touch't with care; but how her selfe to keepe / In excellent estate' (ll. 111-115). Hayle's speech that follows goes on to describe that 'excellent estate', highlighting the riches of the region's earth, namely the diamonds 'By Nature neatly cut, as by a skilfull hand' and the restorative 'Seaholme', or eryngo (ll. 119-120 and ll. 125-129). Drayton appears to put faith in the Hayle's nymph that she can enact her own agency, in doing so countering Neptune's violence, protecting the coastline, and even allowing it to thrive.

Purbeck and Hayle thus emerge as more resilient than the vulnerable southern coastline on account of their hard-wearing physical form and their enthusiastic nymph respectively. This only makes sites like Loe and Roseland seem more fragile by contrast: without veins of marble running through and strengthening the coast, it seems that Loe and Roseland similarly need some form of external protection as granted to the Hayle. There is, of course, the Meneage, hurling his insults at the sea god; however, whilst this functions as an act of resistance, it does not appear nearly as productive as the reciprocated passion offered by Hayle's nymph. Indeed, when Roseland attempts to copy the Meneage, his own resistance fails. Neptune's spatial agency needs regulation, without which he is able to terrorise the coast, resulting in significant spatial-environmental erosion, a particularly alarming image given the contexts of Twyne's theory of submerged land and the severe reality of the Bristol Channel floods. As Neptune enacts his unbalanced spatial agency along the southern coast of Cornwall, the vulnerability of the land to the sea god's erosive attacks arises from their lack of protection.

## 4. *Producing Space as Preservation*

Loe and Roseland are not only missing their own protective nymphs: there has also been no reference (unlike along the Tamar) to human inhabitants or their practices. In assaulting the coastline, Neptune follows his own unrestrained desire, rather than acting in response to the movements of people. This arguably leaves a gap, inviting the reader to step up and act as steward to the coastline. Although *Poly-Olbion* is a poem that has more often been read as displaying concern about the impact of excessive human activity, particularly through deforestation (see esp. Borlik 2011 and McRae 2011), Drayton is not completely antagonistic about all forms of human intervention. His description of Holland in Lincolnshire, for example, stresses the abundance that undrained fenland can offer (Drayton 1933, *The five and twenieth Song*, ll. 31-191), a description that is particularly poignant considering large-scale drainage works would commence nine years after the publication of *Poly-Olbion*'s second part.[12] Yet this description which seemingly celebrates the benefits of unmanaged fenland is immediately countered by a complaint from Kesteven about the 'unwholesome ayre, and more unwholesome soyle' of Holland (l. 196). Further, the fen-filled song starts with a dispassionate description of the county's drainage channels which 'draine, / Hemp-bearing *Hollands* Fen', juxtaposed with the image of the Muse's laborious progress as she attempts to wade 'Through Quicksands, Beach, and Ouze' (ll. 2-3 and 13). Excessive human activity (such as the devastation of England's woodlands) repeatedly prompts a reflection on and critique of 'mans gurmandize' (l. 140); however, Drayton simultaneously recognises, alongside the value of a hands-off approach to environmental management, the need for some human intervention. In stressing its vulnerability, the unprotected coastline of southern Cornwall can be read as a poetic plea for his reader to intervene, especially considering that human intervention to protect fragile

[12] For a history of fenland drainage, see Ash 2017.

stretches of coastline from the erosive force of the sea was possible. The state papers domestic, for example, reference work to restore and protect Dover Harbour in Kent, which (by the reign of Elizabeth I) lay in a state of decay on account of flooding and silt build up. These works, starting in 1579, included 'the immediate erection of three "groynes" to protect the haven' (Lemon 1856, 630), a groyne being (in Norden's words) 'a defence against the force of water, as an Elbow ejected out beyond the rest to preserve the land' (Norden 1596, 26). The state papers show that the plans for Dover Harbour developed over the years, but the references to protective groynes continue. There is also a reference in 1584 to the need to maintain the groynes themselves, one of which was 'fretting away very fast' (Lemon 1865, 215). Coastal preservation, however, might not always look like a groyne in the sand: Drayton also advocates, I suggest, for a less pragmatic and more nostalgic response to environmental degradation, namely preservation through memory.

St Michael's Mount starts his song by encouraging the Muse to linger a little longer on the coastline of Cornwall, but he soon breaks down into tears when recalling what seems to be the semi-mythical land of Lyonesse: the 'fortie miles now Sea, [that] sometimes firme fore-land was' (Drayton 1933, *The first Song*, l. 98).[13] Through his tears, the Mount recounts the story of Lyonesse's inundation:

Relating then how long this soile had laine forlorne,
As that her *Genius* now had almost her forsworne,
And of their ancient love did utterly repent,
Sith to destroy her selfe that fatall toole she lent
By which th'insatiate slave her intrailes out doth draw,
That thrust his gripple hand into her golden mawe;
And for his part doth wish, that it were in his power
To let the Ocean in, her wholly to devoure. (ll. 101-108)

The Mount's tale is fairly oblique in providing an exact cause for the loss of Lyonesse. The reference to the 'fatall toole' drawing out the land's entrails is likely an allusion to a history of excessive mining in the region, an explanation that seems to be supported by Camden's reference to 'veins of Tinn' found on the Isles of Scilly (1695, 1112). There is, then, the familiar concern about human greed. Equally, there is a problem of *disuse*: the land has now 'long … laine forlorne' and it is this abandonment that seems to have rendered her undesirable to 'her *Genius*' (likely Albion), who therefore breaks off their 'ancient love'.[14] Excessive human consumption, as is expected in ecocritical readings of *Poly-Olbion*, is implicated in this passage, but it appears that human abandonment has also played its part in Lyonesse's demise. Further, the slightly thorny nature of the passage, in relating the abandonment before the destruction, offers a reading of the tale in which the tragedy is set into motion by her heartbreak, with the land's desperate actions figured as a response to human neglect. A failure to remember is more cogently implicated as a reason for Camel's meandering course. Her 'careless[ness]' is initially prompted by grief, 'ever since her British *Arthurs* blood, / By *Mordreds* murtherous hand was mingled with her flood' (Drayton 1933, *The first Song*, ll. 193 and 183-184). As the song continues however, her winding course is accompanied by a complaint against 'this penurious

[13] Patrick D. Nunn and Rita Compatangelo-Soussignan describe Lyonesse as 'a now-submerged area of land either off the west coasts of Cornwall (southwest Britain) or encapsulating the Scilly Isles, an island group some 40 kilometres offshore' (2024, 1-2).

[14] It is not entirely clear who the figure of the Genius represents in this passage. A Genius is invoked at the beginning of the poem, with likely reference to the 'guardian spirit' of Albion (see OED, 'Genius' n. & adj., I.1.a.). This seems the best explanation in this passage.

age': 'time upon my waste committed hath such theft, / That it of *Arthur* here scarce memorie hath left' (ll. 199 and 202-203). Kept as she is in a state of continued grief for the now nearly forgotten Arthur, her deteriorated course is thus intrinsically tied up with the failure of modern Britons to uphold his memory. Elsewhere in the poem, the degradation of St Albans's soil into 'hotte and hungry sand' is supposedly caused by the dissolution of the monasteries (*The sixteenth Song*, l. 35). In particular, the failure to preserve the shrines from St Albans Abbey is what distresses the land, and consequently deteriorates the quality of the soil:

So that the earth to feele the ruinous heaps of stones,
That with the burth'nous weight now presse their sacred boanes,
Forbids this wicked brood, should by her fruits be fed. (ll. 79-81)

Even Stonehenge – whose past, Selden's notes suggest, is generally accepted as unknowable – is berated for the crime of 'not know[ing] who first did place thee there', that is of forgetting her past (*The third Song*, l. 54 and Selden's note in Drayton 1933, 60-61). This complaint against Stonehenge's failed memory becomes particularly striking when considered in the context of the degradation that is at stake.

Environmental deterioration is thus not only triggered by an extractive human mindset and resultant excessive and destructive activity; rather, there is a thread running through *Poly-Olbion* that presents degradation as a response to abandoned human practices. As such, the poem implores its reader to preserve through memory. This call perhaps seemed ever more urgent following the Reformation which saw not only (as at St Albans) the destruction of shrines during the dissolution of the monasteries, but also the gradual decline of Rogation ceremonies (or beating the bounds), a community practice that encouraged an embodied memory of the parish boundaries (see Woodcock 2020). This means of preservation is by no means as pragmatic as calling for a series of groynes along the southern coast of Cornwall; it could, however, foster a greater sense of stewardship. Philip Schwyzer, in his essay on *Poly-Olbion* and deep time, argues that Drayton is less concerned with the accuracy of the ancient and unknowable history being told than he is worried that 'modern men and women … should turn their eyes away in scorn' (2020, 228). The act of continuing to gaze back through history even as it cannot be known with certainty encourages, Schwyzer suggests, 'an ethos of sustainability and stewardship', calling upon the readers 'to raise their eyes from the dirt and take the long view, and so begin to live in a way that does honour to the sublime expanses of British space and British time' (228-229). That is to say, there is an ethics to remembering the land and its history, and I suggest that the spatial agency of the land presents that ethics as even more urgent. By continuing to remember the land and its history, Drayton suggests that its inhabitants might ensure its heart is not broken, that we might continue to co-create with the non-human, producing space together as a means of preservation.

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