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Forms of Catastrophe

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[S]wiche ben the customes of perturbaciouns, and this power they han, that they mai moeve a man from his place (that is to seyn, fro the stabelnesse and perfeccion of his knowynge).

—Geoffrey Chaucer, *Boece,* Book I, Prose 6

What can medieval and early modern literature say about catastrophe? Crisis, disaster, and catastrophe were perhaps no more common in the Middle Ages and Renaissance than they are today, but premodern writers often engaged the world's precarity in strikingly different ways than we might now. This special issue considers how premodern catastrophes—environmental, social, political—shape and are shaped by literary form. Some medieval and early modern writing responds directly to catastrophe or crisis, such as the many sermons that moralize pestilence.[1] Other premodern literature treats catastrophe as the dynamic backdrop to narrative action, such as Boccaccio's *Decameron*, occasioned by the plague, or crusader romances that narrate the brutalities of war. But rather than focusing on literature that takes a catastrophic phenomenon as its subject or occasion, this special issue seeks to bring focus to how early literature engages catastrophe as both event and form.

To do so is to return to a distinctively premodern understanding of catastrophe as καταστροφή (κατα "down" + στροφή "to turn"), a formal device in ancient drama depicting a play's final move toward resolution. *Catastrophe* only comes to denote our modern sense of "disastrous event" after the Middle Ages. Yet this modern meaning obscures the term's literary origins, which dominated its early usage. While absent from vernacular languages in the Middle Ages, the term *catastrophe* is nonetheless present in the medieval lexicon: it occasionally appears in medieval Latin literature where

it typically refers to the third part of a drama, what we would now call the denouement.[2] When *catastrophe* enters the vernacular late in the sixteenth century, it is as an anglicization of the Greek dramatic term. *Catastrophe*'s earliest English appearances reflect this literary origin. The 1538 *Dictionary of Thomas Elyot* defines *catastrophe* as "a subuersion."[3] In 1540, a didactic treatise on comedy draws on Horace's *De arte poetica*: "that thynge of all places of any comedy is metest to be done, whan the comedy is brought to his *Ectasis*, and draweth shortlye after towardes his *catastrophen*."[4] A 1611 dictionary brings these definitions together, defining the term as a "conclusion, last act, or part of a play; the shutting up of a matter; also, th'utter ruine, subversion, destruction, fatall, or finall, end of."[5] In its earliest English usages, then, the term denotes a shift, a conclusion, or an unveiling. In this sense, the catastrophe is a disruption or turn that brings order and clarification; it is a mode of closure and containment after chaos or crisis, but also an opening up of new possibilities.[6]

That we today tend to think of catastrophe as an event more than as a literary form is perhaps unsurprising. Most studies of the literature of catastrophe begin with modernity and its emphasis on the cataclysmic event or phenomenon.[7] And although the idea that "catastrophes and crises are exceptions [or] disruptions of order" is a commonplace of modern disaster studies, as the definitions above begin to show, premodern texts tell a rather different story: catastrophe is both exception and rule; it is a means of ordering as well as a medium of disorder.[8] Attending to this dialectic, this special issue of *JMEMS* aims to open a conversation both about how premodern writing engages the difficulty of giving form to catastrophic events and how it understands catastrophe itself as a form that affords certain literary modes and affective responses.[9] Although the past few years have seen the publication of several studies focused on premodern catastrophes as events, the six essays gathered in this issue explore how literary forms can be a productive entry point into thinking about the sensory, affective, and temporal dimensions of catastrophe.[10]

Attention to form has long been integral to the interpretive work of literary scholars, yet one of the insights of new formalism is its reminder that forms are products of history and culture and must be understood within the larger structures from which they emerge.[11] To focus on form is thus not to disavow history. Literary form is never culturally, socially, or politically indifferent. Rather, as Renée Trilling reminds us in her essay on *The Fortunes of Men* in this issue, "form and politics are . . . reciprocally constituting."[12] The essays that follow explore the situatedness of catastrophic forms. Some

focus on rhythmic or sonic structures. Essays by Trilling, Emily Thornbury, and Evelyn Reynolds examine how the alliterative structures of Old English verse afford an engagement with the order and the repetition of the catastrophes they represent; these verse structures also allow us to consider how catastrophe creates ruptures or suspends those experiencing it. Other essays, such as those by Patricia Clare Ingham and William Rhodes, think about the accumulative aesthetics and discontinuities of catastrophic lists and descriptions. Still others focus on the affordances of rhyme. As Ryan Netzley points out in his essay, some of the forms of the seventeenth-century country house poems, including their paratactic couplets, emerge in response to specific social contexts, practices, genres, and values. Taken together, the essays in this issue show how forms not only represent but also embody catastrophe's continuities and discontinuities, its rhythms and ruptures, its order and disorder, and its anxieties, uncertainties, and possibilities.[13]

I

Consider, for example, an anonymous Middle English lyric that meditates on three of the most tumultuous historical catastrophes of the mid-to-late fourteenth century: the Black Death, the 1381 Peasants' Revolt, and a 1382 earthquake.[14] The first two of these crises are now well known; the third (the lyric's primary subject) is perhaps less so. Around noon on May 21, 1382, an earthquake roiled England. Felt as far as northern France and the Low Countries, the quake especially affected London and Kent, toppling the bell tower at Canterbury Cathedral.[15] While it was a significant geological occurrence in its own right, the quake is now mainly remembered because it disrupted the Blackfriars Council, a meeting called by Archbishop Courtenay that resulted in the condemnation of twenty-four tenets of John Wyclif's teaching.[16] Because the tremors immediately followed the reading of the list of Wyclif's heresies, the event is now often called the "earthquake council" (*concilium terramotus*). Both the friars and Wyclif's followers read the catastrophe as a divine sign of the justness of their cause.[17]

Several poems memorialize the movements of the earth that day, including the Middle English lyric "On the Earthquake of 1382," which offers a glimpse into some of the ways in which premodern literature gives form the nearly inassimilable nature of catastrophe.[18] Across its twelve stanzas, this poem understands catastrophe as a dramatic turning point and uses forms—including anaphora, catalogues, shifts in scale, repetitions, and cliché—to convey a sense of the immediacy and horror of the catastro-

phe, but also its near inexpressibility. The lyric describes the effects of the three crises and explores their function as warnings, a point articulated in an alliterative refrain that declares such social and ecological upheavals to be "warnyng[s] to be ware." With the insistent ringing of this refrain and frequent sonic and syntactic repetitions, the poem circles around the catastrophes, returning the reader again and again both to the world's precarity and to the necessity of appropriate response.

After briefly describing the significance of the 1381 Revolt, the lyric turns to the 1382 earthquake. Focused on exploring the dynamics of human response to the crisis, these central stanzas highlight how the earthquake draws those who experience it into the present, temporarily shifting their values:

> And also whon this eorthe qwok,
>   Was non so proud he nas agast,
> And al his jolité forsok,
>   And thou3t on God whil that hit last.
>   And alsone as hit was over past,
> Men wox as uvel as thei dede are.
>   Uche mon in his herte may cast,
> This was a warnyng to be ware. (33–40)

Rather than describing the earthquake or explaining it in terms of its physical effects, the poem internalizes the tremors, concatenating the feelings and thoughts it generates through a series of "ands," which chart the cognitive and affective shifts from horror (people are "agast"), to solemnity, and finally to meditation on God. Pride and revelry fall away. Suddenly faced with its own mortality, the mind turns from this world. The anaphora of the "ands" also enacts the immediacy of the catastrophe, syntactically replicating the elongated present of the experience of the earthquake, as if all of these internal movements occur in an instant. The lyric thus uses repetition and simultaneity to begin to move toward an expression of both the subjective experience of the disaster and its significance.

In concert with the elongated present created by anaphora, meter here tracks the shift between catastrophic time and "normal" time, paradoxically portraying catastrophic time as regular and noncatastrophic time as metrically irregular. The opening four lines of the stanza pulse in a steady iambic tetrameter. Perhaps strangely to modern ears, their regularity seems to characterize the catastrophe as a time of orderly rhythm, as if attempting

to manage the horror of the disaster, to give predictable form to its chaos. Yet, in the next couplet, when the poem marks the end of the tremors, its meter becomes shaggy, uneven, as it adds an extra syllable to these two lines. The "and" anaphora, brought from the catastrophe itself to its aftermath, is otiose here; it jogs the meter out of pace. As the catastrophe becomes "past" and time returns to normal, that "normal," post-catastrophic time is jarring. This metrical choice points toward the fact that the catastrophe's ruin, and the attendant senses of disruption and terror, can perhaps only be assessed once it is over. Thus, rhythmic disruption marks the shift from the catastrophe's expansive present to its aftermath.[19] The shift to linear time and away from catastrophic "time out of time" is mirrored by the sudden shift from the regular rhythm of the opening four lines, coupled with the hypnotic anaphora on "and," to the much less regular meter of the next three lines. When one is in the catastrophe, its time comes to seem endless—rupture, break, and unraveling become stable, regular, expected. And when the catastrophe is over, post-catastrophic time offers a moment of disruptive reflection, and even, perhaps, conversion and change.

Yet, as the poem points out, any conversion is as short-lived as the geological event itself, as fleeting as the tremors that destabilize the ground.[20] The following stanza reiterates the temporary relinquishment of earthly concerns: the poet remarks that in the astonishment and fear of finding themselves at the edges of life, "Of gold and selver thei tok non hede, / But out of ther houses ful sone thei past" (43–44). Material possessions are made meaningless by the tremors, a point made only briefly before the poem rescales its perspective, from wealth to the interiors of homes, to a more omniscient view of a transformed skyline. Leaving gold and silver behind, people escape only with their lives, as the material world around them crumbles:

> Chaumbres, chymeneys, al to-barst,
> Chirches and castelles foule gon fare;
> Pinacles, steples, to grounde hit cast;
> And al was for warnyng to be ware. (45–48)

This rescaling is matched with sonic intensification. In this stanza, alliteration increases, and stresses fall on the opening syllables—an intensification of form that is characteristic of literary representations of catastrophe, as a number of the essays in this issue demonstrate. The list of destroyed buildings stands in for the immensity of the loss. As the poem catalogues vast material destruction, beginning with homely domestic spaces, and then

moving upward, both socially and spatially, forms become more densely pat-
terned, locking the reader in tight sonic patterns that, paradoxically, repre-
sent the material world's un-patterning. The language emphasizes the force
of the quake: the rooms and chimneys explode or shatter ("to-barst"). The
earthquake throws the symbols of human ambition, pinnacles and steeples,
to the ground. The poem's inventory of devastation recalls the downward
movement of the *ars moriendi* tradition—all that exists will one day return
to the earth from which it came.

　　As spectacular as this ruin may be, the poem next downscales its
perspective, moving from macrocosm to microcosm to insist that the prob-
lem is not only or even primarily a ruined landscape or cosmic instability; it
is that human hearts are unstable:

> The mevyng of this eorthe iwis,
> 　That schulde bi cuynde be ferm and stabele,
> A pure verrey toknyng hit is
> 　That mennes hertes ben chaungabele. (49–52)

As in the earlier stanza, the meter in the last two lines here becomes uneven
just at the moment when the speaker attempts to draw a stable moral from
the catastrophe. Pivoting from horrified wonder to a desire to make mean-
ing out of the event, the poem reads catastrophe as turning, as possible
moment of moral epiphany, implying that the issue here is the gap between
what we think the world *should be* (stable, firm, ordered, consistent) and
the reality we experience, in which the cosmos reveals itself to be always
in motion. Like the earth from which humanity emerged, the individual
human microcosm is unsettled and unpredictable. Our hearts are more
mutable than we may like to imagine. As Chaucer's *Boece* puts it, "swiche
ben the customes of perturbaciouns, and this power they han, that they mai
moeve a man from his place (*that is to seyn, fro the stabelnesse and perfeccion
of his knowynge*)."[21] Insofar as it moves those who experience it, unsettling
them, the earthquake thus carries a double significance, signaling future
events and serving as a metaphor for the variability of the human heart.

　　In its final stanzas, the earthquake lyric swerves again, shifting
from the unrest within human beings to the catastrophic restlessness of the
collective, referencing how two other recent upheavals—the plague and the
Peasants' Revolt—also betoken the world's unsettled nature:

> The rysyng of the comuynes in londe,
> 　The pestilens, and the eorthe-qwake,

Theose threo thinges, I understonde,
 Beoth tokenes of the grete vengaunce and wrake
 That schulde falle for synnes sake. (60–64)

Shifting from feeling and experience to comprehension and explanation, the lyric recasts these three catastrophes within an apocalyptic framework, naming them as tokens of greater catastrophes to come if humans do not heed these events as opportunities for transformation. Because of these coming final catastrophes, though, it is the present moment that ultimately matters most here. For the earthquake poet, these ecological, epidemiological, and social disruptions betray a profound failure of attention and a failure to understand catastrophes as revealing a larger order. As the poem's refrain relentlessly drums, what is lacking is awareness of human complicity in the "plyt this world is in" (74). These refrains rise to a climax in the poem's final stanza, which gathers the warnings into an anaphoric litany of "be wares":

Be war, for I con sey no more;
 Be war, for vengaunce of trespas;
Be war, and thenk uppon this lore;
 Be ware of this sodeyn cas.
 And ʒit be war while we have spas. (81–85)

Even as it moves toward a conclusion, this poetic climax retains a sense of the impossibility of fully articulating the contingent nature of life on a restless planet. "Beware," the poet writes, "because I can't say anything more." Surely the poet has not exhausted this subject matter nor come to the limits of his powers. While this may be little more than a verbal throwing up of one's hands in exasperation, this final turn to clichéd inexpressibility (what can one say in the face of the world's chaos?) in the midst of pounding repetition performs the limits of language in the task of representing catastrophe. Can we do anything but resort to truism, itself a form of deep repetition but also, because of its familiarity, a source of comfort? In the end, what more is there to say than "Pay attention while we still have 'spas' (time and opportunity)"?

  Perhaps we should not take the poet so literally, for there apparently is indeed more to say. The poet next encourages the reader to "thenk uppon this lore." While we might now read "lore" as "story," in Middle English the term is rather more multivalent, indicating instruction, narrative, or profound loss. But how do we make sense of a possible equivalence

between instruction and loss? Attempting to do so, we propose, is the essential and difficult work invited by the medieval and early modern literature of catastrophe. When we attend to the premodern sense of catastrophe, we are reminded that loss and instruction are often two sides of the same coin. Both are moments of change; they transform our relationship to the world and the knowledge we have of it. Moreover, learning is often founded on loss and sometimes results in loss. Conversely, loss can lead to new understanding, new ways of being, or new stories. For instance, in the archetypal biblical example, Adam and Eve lose their innocence in the Garden of Eden, and indeed lose Eden itself, as they "learn" from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This first catastrophe is a "fall," a downturn, but also an education that sets history in motion. In one sense, all other catastrophes are mere iterations of that fundamental transition from innocence to knowledge. Twinning form and event, rupture and closure, clarification and ending, the premodern catastrophe manifests as this double-edged *lore*. And as the lyric so insistently reminds us, when we "thenk uppon this lore," when we attend deeply to precarity, disorder, and loss, we are confronted with that which will always remain somewhat inassimilable, but which also presents itself to us as a moment of possible transformation.

II

Recent studies of the premodern literature of catastrophe have often focused on the challenges of representing moments of rupture or loss like that portrayed in the earthquake lyric. David Coley has explored how even the plague—surely the most devastating catastrophe of the fourteenth century—is usually only referenced indirectly in English literature, even though it clearly shaped the lives of generations of medieval people.[22] D. Vance Smith's book *Arts of Dying* also explores both the difficulty of imagining death and the important work of literary form for doing so.[23] Like the experience of death, the experience of catastrophe is often aporetic; it resists representation and comprehension, even as it can also clarify: the new order cannot (and indeed, sometimes, must not) always be immediately understood. Thus, to write catastrophe is to enter into uncertainty, into what must be said but resists full articulation. It is both to have faith in language's ability to communicate exceptional, horrific, or impossible events and to accept language's inadequacy in the face of trauma or disaster. In a sense, such challenges are endemic to all formal representation. As Thomas Prendergast and Jessica Rosenfeld write of Geoffrey Chaucer's poetry, for-

mal resistance to or subversion of order "happens within form itself, [which has] an inherent tendency to go astray even as it organizes a text in essential ways."[24] Even so, catastrophe and disaster have long been acknowledged as particularly resistant to representation. Maurice Blanchot writes that disaster "is the limit of writing," or put another way, "the disaster de-scribes."[25] Yet, as the romanticist Anahid Nersessian observes, if the trauma of catastrophe is experienced as "phenomenological discontinuity" and manifests in *nescience*, or unknowing, writers still attempt to give voice to it:

> Pulled between an eagerness to produce knowledge and a fear of devolving into abject mimesis or cliché, they organize their ambivalence around what we call tropes and figures: rhetorical devices that, while far from being the exclusive property of literary utterance, nonetheless anchor and exemplify the distance between it and ordinary communication.[26]

So, too, the essays in this issue suggest that attending to the texture of a piece of writing, its tropes and figures, its syntax and sounds, may also open fresh ways of approaching the representational resistances, ambivalences, and paradoxes of the catastrophe.

Each of the essays in this issue approaches the dynamics of catastrophic form in its own way, but they share a set of assumptions about how catastrophe invites formal experimentation (on the part of the author) and reading or listening for form (on the part of both premodern and modern audiences). Not only does catastrophe allow exploration of the nearly unspeakable, but more precisely, often that unspeakable is the unspeakable of excess—of accumulation, too-muchness. Form, these essays generally agree, can serve both a means of managing or containing the chaotic accumulation of catastrophe and a means of expressing that surplus. Catastrophic forms attempt to order, structure, or manage disorder but in doing so, often throw into relief their own fragility, their inability to contain that which they aim to express. As these essays show, modes of literary practice recur across these premodern texts of catastrophe. On the one hand, catastrophe is often expressed through an accumulative aesthetics, though copiousness, surplus, and proliferation, qualities that manifest both at the level of the line (meter, alliteration, and rhythmic structure) and in larger units (lists and catalogues, ekphrastic descriptions of ruin or scenes of suffering). On the other, catastrophe welcomes the precarious dance of paradox and contradiction, especially in relation to two themes: temporality and inexpressibility.

As an event or phenomenon, catastrophe functions as a temporal punctus, a full stop. It ruptures past and present. Catastrophic time divides "before" and "after," decisively severing the way things were then from how they are now: the prelapsarian and postlapsarian; life before plague and after it; in the old world and the new one. As a literary form, the premodern catastrophe is also a shift or pivot, but even as it may appear to be a moment of rupture, it marks orderly change and progression, signaling a necessary, if surprising, turn toward a predetermined end. Yet as the metrical shifts of the earthquake lyric suggested, as forms attempt to navigate rupture, they often push against or complicate the progression of normal narrative time. They show how the catastrophe can render temporal experience as uneven, asynchronous, or multiple. That such nonnarrative, nonlinear moments or rhythms should bring about new knowledge or change is a fundamental feature of premodern catastrophic forms.

As the earthquake lyric's catalogue of ruined buildings suggests, many premodern writers find the form of the list particularly suited to the task of representing catastrophe's inexpressibilities and temporal ruptures, both because it actively resists expectations for narrative time and because it balances the openness and closure so central to the catastrophe. Rather than progressing from start to climax to end, the list asks the reader to hold all its items together in one moment—even as, thanks to language's mechanics, the reader functionally progresses from item to item. Similarly, the catastrophe itself both exists as a single event or moment and can contain within itself many iterations of disaster, as does *Christ III* discussed by both Emily Thornbury and Evelyn Reynolds. The list form can suspend or elongate time, just as does the catastrophe, asking for an impossible fullness, a moment swollen enough to permit attention to every item at the same time, not unlike the catalogue of horrors ekphrastically depicted in the Temple of Mars in Patricia Clare Ingham's analysis of Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*. As William Rhodes points out in his theorization of the apocalyptic aesthetics of the list in *Wynnere and Wastoure*, "The aesthetic antinomies of the list parallel apocalypticism's ambivalent embrace of . . . linear emplotment and chaotic simultaneity."[27] The list seems to be a particularly fitting form for catastrophe—a form of excess, a form that resists storytelling even as it progresses in time down the page, a form that happens immediately and could well go on forever.

If the list represents catastrophic time as excessive, asynchronous, or multisynchronous, other forms seek to contradict catastrophe's temporal discontinuity—to allow us to say "no" to our inner sense that time will

never be the same again. As Netzley and Trilling show, form can persuade us that the catastrophe has an order, an order discernible to humans if not always friendly to them. In Netzley's reading of the country house poem, because the estate is so well managed, the catastrophe cannot happen, and thus the estate simply grows, maintains an ever-fruiting, ever-feasting "now." The future is always near and always like the present. As humans manage the physical world, they manage time as well. Indeed, the catastrophe can become an opportunity for growth. Through listing, repetition, and the counterfactual, nothing is wasted, "not even negation" or "resistance," in Netzley's words.[28] And, as in the four-square balance of the Old English long line considered by Trilling, the vagaries of mortal life can be categorized and, through the organization of language, made less threatening. Through these forms, temporality remains continuous, even in the face of the catastrophe. Either form manages time, as in the country house poem, so that the catastrophic future remains only imaginary; or, as for the *Fortunes of Men*, form manages catastrophic time so that it yet has a discernable pattern, a "normal."

However, form's reassuring persuasiveness about catastrophe's manageability often evaporates in the face of the disaster. In fact, Trilling's argument gestures toward a central theme developed by Ingham, Thornbury, and Reynolds—that the event of each catastrophe "chimes" with other catastrophes. In many cases in these premodern texts, the catastrophe collapses the movement of normal time. As the earthquake lyric implies by its cycling through catastrophe and its aftermath within each stanza, at the site of the catastrophe, instead of past, present, and future, the only temporal distinction is between the time of the catastrophe and noncatastrophic time. In Ingham's view, catastrophic time is layered, mobile, or, perhaps more negatively, expansive and "out of joint."[29] For Reynolds, form in *Christ III* forces the reader to question whether Christ's crucifixion prefigures Judgment Day or whether Judgment Day is simply another iteration of Christ's crucifixion. For Thornbury, this poem's forms—the hypermetric line, repetition, an overall nonlinear structure—move the reader from one catastrophic event to the next even as they also place these catastrophic events as really only facets of a single event.

As the conclusion of the earthquake lyric ("I can say no more!") illustrates, the inexpressibility topos is also a common catastrophic form. In light of catastrophe's excessiveness, on what grounds can human poetry assert an ability to represent catastrophe, and in what forms? What are the limits of this representation? Where does human language have to draw a

line at claiming to depict catastrophe? These questions touch on how poetic representation communicates the ineffable—what is beyond human language, what is unwritable or unsayable—without foreclosing on its ineffability, without making that ineffability fully comprehensible and consumable. Blanchot writes, "[W]e have no words for the extreme. . . . [D]azzling joy and great pain burn up every term and render them all mute," but in some cases, these texts from early medieval to early modern English aim to manage that muteness through forms that suspend the reader before the extremities of loss and suffering.[30]

Indeed, these texts do not so much make meaning of the catastrophe as draw attention to its ineffability or inassimilability. Refusing to foreclose on disaster—to make it fully understandable and therefore digestible, allowing the reader to move on—many of the texts considered in this issue offer representations of the catastrophe in forms that both invite our affective participation and detach us from the event. For instance, Thornbury argues that *Christ III*'s hypermetric verses often constitute a brief crisis of form that leads readers into a "sense of disorientation."[31] Reynolds reads the Crucifixion as an ecological catastrophe in which the transcendent inhabits the immanent. Rhodes and Netzley both describe how forms attempt to communicate situations in which meaning and causality falter. Thus taken together, these essays explore how catastrophic forms are attuned to the precarious balances of order and chaos, scarcity and proliferation, intimacy and distance, and agency and vulnerability.

III

What then can premodern literature say about catastrophe? When we embarked on this special issue, we had expectations for the themes with which a set of essays on premodern catastrophe might grapple: suffering and pain, natural disasters, plague, the horrors of war. But perhaps appropriately, this project's own "catastrophe," its moment of ending and closure, has surprised us. What has emerged is a testament to the delicate dance of catastrophe and survival, disorder and management inscribed within these premodern texts, as they work through representing the challenges of inhabiting and representing a precarious world. Perhaps even more than descriptions of or engagements with suffering, these tensions are at the heart of catastrophic forms as explored here.

Interestingly, the collection's historical span is bracketed by texts that leverage the catastrophe as a way to prevent catastrophe: for *Christ III*

and for the country house poems, to some degree, thinking the catastrophe in literary form allows the reader to reorder one's relationship to the catastrophe that will certainly happen. As Netzley writes, "[T]here is no depicted cataclysm that one cannot redeem via the reader's transcendence of the poem itself."[32] Because the reader exists outside the text, the reader can redeem the catastrophe the text depicts by turning it from sheer ruin into, paradoxically, a means to prevent ruin—a reality check, a wake-up call, a reorientation, a clarification, a "warnyng to be ware," as the earthquake lyric so insistently repeats. As long as the representation of the catastrophe is read, it can transform the catastrophic event it represents. This hopefulness about reading the catastrophe emerges from the nature of catastrophes themselves: the catastrophe may pause time, but, at least for the living, there will be a time after catastrophe. The event recedes. Even so, as Ingham reminds us, catastrophe and survival are not temporally discontinuous. One may survive during and after the catastrophe, but the survivor encodes the catastrophe in the body as the text encodes it within forms; indeed, the catastrophe survives in the survivor, as it does in the forms of these premodern poems. Thus, even as we may read literature of the catastrophe and thereby redeem its destruction as a moment of productive clarification for ourselves, we must be mindful of the indelible suffering the catastrophe may leave behind and, in our productive action, maintain a mournfulness and watchfulness that attend to the catastrophe's cost. As the essays in this issue demonstrate, such doublings—redemption and memory, action and attention, hope and mourning—are an appropriate response to poems whose forms themselves often offer only irreducible dyads as they grapple with the nearly unspeakable realities of the catastrophe.

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Notes

1   For examples, see Rosemary Horrox, ed. and trans. *The Black Death* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), esp. part 2.

2   Even though the premodern world was well acquainted with catastrophe, it did not have a single term for naming cataclysmic events or phenomena. Romance languages sometimes speak of *disaster* (French *desastre*, Italian *disastro*), a term that emphasizes

an event's misfortune or tragedy, or use related terms such as *pestilence*, *calamity*, or *accident* (French *flael*, *calamite*; Italian *pestilenza* and *accidente*) to signal catastrophic events. Middle English writers describe what we might now call a "catastrophe" as a *wonder*, *selcouthe*, *tragedy*, *ruin*, *subversion*, *fall*, *mischance*, or even, as our epigraph from Chaucer's *Boece* implies, a *perturbation*. We are grateful to Akash Kumar and Elizabeth Hebbard for insight into these premodern Italian and French synonyms for *catastrophe*. There do not appear to be many occurrences of the term in the Latin corpus, but for a representative example, see Ambrosius, *Sancti Ambrosii Mediolanensis Episcopi de Elia et Jejunio liber unus*, Patrologia Latina, vol. 14, ed. J.P.-Migne (Paris, 1845), chap. 13, col. 0713A, *Patrologia Latina Database*, at pld.chadwyck.co.uk, which compares the spectacle of feasting to drama, "quaedam protasis, epitasis et catastrophe quam diligentissime describuntur" [as it were, a kind of protasis, epitasis, and a catastrophe, as they are diligently described].

3   Thomas Elyot, *The Dictionary of syr Thomas Eliot knight* (London, 1538), fol. C4v, s.v. *catastrophe*, available at *Early English Books Online* (hereafter *EEBO*), STC (2nd ed.) 7659, at eebo.chadwyck.com. This instance predates the earliest examples provided by the *OED* by over forty years.

4   Gulielmus Gnaphaeus, *Ioannis Palsgravi Londoniensis, Ecphrasis Anglica in Comoediam Acolasti: The Comedye of Acolastus translated into oure englysshe tongue, after suche maner as chylderne are taught in the grammer schole, fyrst worde for worde, as the latyne lyeth, and afterwarde accordynge to the sence and meanyng of the latin sentences* (London, 1540), fol. U3r, at *EEBO*, STC 11470.

5   Randle Cotgrave, *A Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues* (London, 1611), fol. O5r, s.v. *catastrophe*, at *EEBO*, STC 5830. For a brief discussion of this definition, see Ryan Netzley,, "Managed Catastrophe: Problem-Solving and Rhyming Couplets in the Seventeenth-Century Country House Poem," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 52, no. 1 (2022): 147–73, at 170 n. 9.

6   In this sense, it might also be considered as a synonym for *apocalypse*, as William Rhodes discusses in "The Apocalyptic Aesthetics of the List: Form and Political Economy in *Wynnere and Wastoure*," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 52, no. 1 (2022): 119–45, at 121.

7   See, for instance, Marie-Hélène Huet, *The Culture of Disaster* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012). For studies of catastrophe in Renaissance literature and thought, see Ellen MacKay, *Persecution, Plague, and Fire: Fugitive Histories of the Stage in Early Modern England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Steve Mentz, *Shipwreck Modernity: Ecologies of Globalization, 1550–1719* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015); and Gerard Passannante, *Catastrophizing: Materialism and the Making of Disaster* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

8   See the introduction to *The Cultural Life of Catastrophes and Crises*, ed. Carsten Meiner and Kristin Veel (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 1. As this volume explores, the field of disaster studies, once the domain of social scientists (especially in anthropology and sociology) is increasingly populated by those interested in the cultural and aesthetic aspects of catastrophe and crisis.

9   On the "affordances" of forms, see Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2015), 6–11.

10 For studies of the literary and generic dynamics of early modern catastrophe and catastrophizing, see Alan Rosen, *Dislocating the End: Climax, Closure, and the Invention of Genre* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 6–11; and Passannante, *Catastrophizing*. Recent explorations of medieval catastrophes can be found in the essays in *Catastrophes and the Apocalyptic in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, ed. Robert E. Bjork (Turnhout, Belg.: Brepols, 2019). Although not primarily focused on premodern catastrophes, Kate Rigby's *Dancing with Disaster: Environmental Histories, Narratives, and Ethics for Perilous Times* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015) offers a sustained and sensitive consideration of several medieval and early modern disasters.

11 For important discussions of new formalism, see the special section of *PMLA* 122, no. 2 (2007), especially Marjorie Levinson, "What Is New Formalism?," 558–69; Caroline Levine, *Forms*; and Anahid Nersessian, *The Calamity Form: On Poetry and Social Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

12 Renée R. Trilling, "Ordering Chaos in Old English Wisdom Poetry," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 52, no. 1 (2022): 69–92, at 71.

13 An important predecessor to the concerns of this special issue is Maura Nolan's "The Poetics of Catastrophe: Ovidian Allusion in Gower's *Vox Clamantis*," in *Medieval Latin and Middle English Literature: Essays in Honor of Jill Mann*, ed. Christopher Cannon and Maura Nolan (Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2013), 113–33.

14 The lyric is found in the Vernon MS (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Eng. Poet. a.1) on fol. 411r, and in the Simeon MS (London, British Library, Additional MS 22283), on fol. 132v; it is edited in Thomas Wright, *Political Poems and Songs relating to English History, Composed during the Period from the Accession of Edw. III. to that of Ric. III.*, 2 vols. (London, 1859–61), 1:250–52. Subsequent references to this poem by line numbers are cited parenthetically in the text.

15 This information is drawn from Jelle Zeilinga de Boer and Donald Theodore Sanders, *Earthquakes in Human History: The Far-Reaching Effects of Seismic Disruptions* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005), 67–68. See also the brief mention by R. M. W. Musson, "British Earthquakes," *Proceedings of the Geologists' Association*, 118, no. 4 (2007): 305–37, at 323.

16 Margaret Aston, "Wyclif and the Vernacular," in *From Ockham to Wyclif*, ed. Anne Hudson and Michael Wilks (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, 1987), 281–330.

17 For these two differing readings of the council and earthquake, see W. W. Shirley, ed., *Fasciculi Zizaniorum*, Rolls Series (London, 1858), 272–73; and Anne Hudson, ed., *Selections from English Wycliffite Writings* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 18. For another account, see H. Martin, ed. and trans., *Knighton's Chronicle, 1337–1396* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 242–43.

18 A contemporary Latin lyric also takes up these three catastrophes; see "On the Council of London, 1382," in Wright, ed., *Political Poems*, 253–63; and for a discussion of this poem, which is also known by its incipit, "Heu, quanta desolatio," see Katherine Kerby-Fulton, *Books under Suspicion: Censorship and Tolerance of Revelatory Writing in Late Medieval England* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 164–87.

19 Curiously, the problem is caused by the poet's attempt to extend the anaphora (the

device used to signal the eternal present), as the "and" in line 37 is otiose. The line might read better as "Alsone as hit was over past . . . ," where "As soon as" would function as an indicator of a narrative shift, as is common in medieval narratives. Instead, the "and" in line 37 adds an extra stress, which then leads on to the five-stress line 38, which in turn leads to the truncated line 39, which is a "headless" line; it is missing an initial unstressed syllable at the start of the line, leaving the line with an awkward initial stress on "Uche." The passage concludes with a metrically regular final line. We are grateful to Maura Nolan for insight into the importance of the uneven meter of this stanza.

20 This response aligns closely with the findings of disaster theorists, who have commented on how after generating a period of "extreme individuation" following a catastrophe, people focus on a "shared humanity." See Susanna Hoffman, "The Worst of Times, the Best of Times: Toward a Model of Cultural Response to Disaster," in *The Angry Earth: Disaster in Anthropological Perspective*, ed. Hoffman and Anthony Oliver-Smith (London: Routledge, 1999), 134–55.

21 Geoffrey Chaucer, *Boece*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson et al., 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 406, lines 49–53.

22 David Coley, *Death and the Pearl Maiden: Plague, Poetry, England* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2019), 4.

23 D. Vance Smith, *Arts of Dying: Literature and Finitude in Medieval England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 1–10.

24 See the introduction by Thomas A. Prendergast and Jessica Rosenfeld, eds., to *Chaucer and the Subversion of Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 10.

25 Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 7.

26 Nersessian, *The Calamity Form*, 8.

27 Rhodes, "Apocalyptic Aesthetics of the List," 123.

28 Netzley, "Managed Catastrophe," 168.

29 Patricia Clare Ingham, "Infinite Sorrows: Catastrophic Forms in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 52, no. 1 (2022): 93–117, at 98, 110.

30 Blanchot, *Writing of the Disaster*, 106.

31 Emily V. Thornbury, "Form versus Catastrophe in the Old English *Christ III*," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 52, no. 1 (2022): 17–40, at 33.

32 Netzley, "Managed Catastrophe," 61.