

## Middling Through Somehow: Queer Temporality and the Disaster Meme

### FIRST IMPRESSIONS: COPIA AND NON-CORRESPONDENCE

In the first sentences of his sixteenth-century pedagogical text, *On Copia of Words and Ideas*, Erasmus warns readers of the risks inherent in the practice he is about to advocate:

Whence we see it befalls not a few mortals that they strive for this divine excellence diligently, indeed, but unsuccessfully, and fall into a kind of futile and amorphous loquacity, as with a multitude of inane thoughts and words thrown together without discrimination, they alike obscure the subject and burden the ears of their wretched hearers. (11)

Why risk these outcomes at all? Erasmus might answer that copia, when practiced correctly, is the perfect ally of finitude. The fertility he had in mind could result not in chaos but in closure, mimicking the diversity of a natural world that has its origins in an eternal source, a divine creator. Abundance of expression might delay a person from reaching quickly the end of a sermon or speech, a paragraph or page, but it need not prevent his future “consonance with the One” (Parker 525). Copia, in fact, could put him on the path of oneness, for no matter how they accumulated, things need not fall apart, and the center *could* hold.

As inhabitants of a twittering, trolling, tumbling world, we might feel skeptical about any pedagogy that guarantees a complementary relationship between plenitude and order. N. Katherine Hayles writes shrewdly

of the ways in which information (digital or otherwise) can be “equated with randomness as well as with pattern,” the contraries “bound together in a complex dialectic that makes them not so much opposites as complements or supplements to one another” (*How We Became Posthuman* 25), but in the practice of everyday life we may find ourselves too distracted by the noise to perform the necessary synthesis. As *Time* columnist Lev Grossman wrote in 2006, “[s]ome of the comments on YouTube make you weep for the future of humanity just for the spelling alone, never mind the obscenity and the naked hatred.” Indeed, digital copia calls to mind not the solidarity of a common origin but the discordancy of a malfunctioning design. Even relatively inoffensive galleries of image macros suggest expansion unhinged from any complementary contraction. A Tumblr page organized by hashtags has a structure to it, yes, but no real center. We tumble through a series of items organized in a sequence divorced from consequence. If Tumblr could talk, it would stammer and stutter. If it could move, it would fall and keep falling. This is copia misused and mishandled, the kind of abundance that provokes not recognition of shared meaning but anxiety over unruly, outlying positions. Such injudicious expressions, Erasmus might say, ought to be disciplined back into consonance.

Like many early modernists, Erasmus put his faith in a belief Foucault elucidates in *The Order of Things*: that “[i]n the vast syntax of the world, the different beings adjust themselves to one another” (20). The good humanist worked to recognize the “*similitudes* that bound all things and beings together in an endless series of hidden and secret relationships” (Martin 38). This belief that any seeming fragmentariness is bound to “the vast syntax of the world” remains attractive, but just as in Erasmus’s era, copia is as likely to rupture the theory of correspondences as uphold it. This chapter discusses copia—in both the early modern period and today and in several expressions beyond the textual—as an impossible project and in fact a queer project: impossible because it positions the writer/creator/subject outside of the teleological history whose all-inclusiveness it purports to celebrate; queer because this instability permits a suspension of chronological distinction in favor of anachronistic encounters between subjects and history—or, to be slightly more precise, a variety of historical debris. Specifically, I will examine visual memes as a twenty-first-century expression of copia, a remnant of the Renaissance humanist’s habit of gathering and framing fragments from a common reservoir of wisdom; early modern students of humanist pedagogy

learned that speaking well meant acknowledging one's correspondence with other (better) speakers, and that "authentic discourse depend[ed] not on inspiration, imagination, or creative imitation, but on the ability to recognize fragmentary traces of a shared cultural code in other texts, and to frame those fragments into a reordered whole" (Crane 38). Indeed, to frame this examination of memes—artifacts which, like the sayings dutifully collected by early humanists, exist "in the public and private sphere not as sporadic entities but as monstrosly sized groups of texts and images" (Shifman 30)—it makes sense to consider first the ways in which early modern readers and writers (those early enthusiasts for abundance of expression) read, collected and shared textual fragments. As Cave explains, pagan authors such as Homer, Virgil and Ovid

were explicitly presented by their humanist editors as encyclopedic treasure-houses (*copiae*) of knowledge and of rhetorical or poetic ornament, each containing a quintessence of the whole range of classical literary insights and styles ... [O]ne episode of the *Iliad*, the making of Achilles' shield, embodies the notion of a complete microcosm. (174–175)

Thus Homer could be brought into alignment with Christian humanism, for, in theory, texts were self-sufficient, joining "the notion of infinite fruitfulness and that of closure" and thus "achiev[ing] a *telos* ... which conserve[d] the energies deployed in [their] textual transformations" (Cave 179). *Copia*, in other words, always gave way to control, expansion to reduction, for the ideal reader contemplating one part of one text could conceivably read the world.

Ideal readers, however, are not mortal ones. As Cave goes on to explain, to imagine time and texts as part of the same closed circle means that any artist interested in combining his own work with the discourse of ideal models is placed "outside the circle, in the postlapsarian space and time of his own composition. His project necessarily begins with a transgression: his desire to write challenges the ideal, presupposes the necessity of its replacement; his materials will be fragments of its dismembered corpse" (179). Crane sounds similar warnings when she writes about humanist educators' failure "to imagine a safe way for texts to be assimilated into the mind and to transform it. If texts are only memorized, then their pedagogy remains superficial. If, however, they are more deeply absorbed and transformed, the imagination must come into play" (71). As I argue later, although memes are less rhetorically

complex than the epic poetry and classical prose celebrated in the early modern era, they position writers and readers in the same no-man's land that Cave identifies for Renaissance humanists, and then inspire the same imaginative manipulation of closed models that Crane detects. Memes prepare us to contemplate our position outside a history that is divine or designed and inside an "unhistoricism" that is untimely and queerly accidental. Jonathan Goldberg and Madhavi Menon have called for an "unhistoricism" within queer studies that would "violat[e] the notion that history is the discourse of answers" and present queerness as "resisting the strictures of knowability itself" (1609). The queerness of memes has its roots in the unknowingness that Goldberg and Menon wish to attach to queer projects. Thus memes are suitable models of stupid humanism, occupying established knowledge systems with their ostentatious displays of preoccupation; meme subjects, we will see, are always absorbed in other times, other affects, other ways of knowing and making history.

A resistance to knowability can first be spotted in the fact that the content of memes can be tracked, but not sequentially. That is, while their primary material may derive from an historical moment (a picture taken at a specific time, in a specific place), this material functions queerly, working "against the dominant arrangement of time and history" and instead "fold[ing] subjects into structures of belonging and duration that may be invisible to the historicist eye" (Freeman *Time Binds* xi). Human beings turn time *into* history by accepting "the promise of sequence as the royal road to *consequence*" (Edelman in Dinshaw et al. 181), but the subjects of memes ignore this promise; they never come to *know* their history, never assimilate its fragments as part of a fixed system. Memes thus make room for a queer critique of the "teleological linearity" that means looking ahead to "revealed truth at the end of time or as the meaning of all time" (Dinshaw in Dinshaw et al. 186). Recognizing the queer time of memes is thus one way to violate traditional notions of history, to oppose theories of correspondence, and—as the second half of this chapter suggests—to discover a middle ground between ignorance and advancement.

We can see queer time particularly well in a genre of image macros that I call disaster memes: some looming threat or scene of catastrophe occupies the background of a disaster meme; the subject of the meme, meanwhile, might occupy the foreground or be dropped into the midst



**Fig. 2.1** “Disaster Girl, Image #130 [Original].” *Know your meme*, 30 December 2008. Photo used with permission from Dave Roth

of the misfortune (Fig. 2.1).<sup>1</sup> Disaster Girl, for example, became a meme after Dave Roth submitted to a contest a photo he took of his daughter Zoe “smiling devilishly” at the camera while a house burns to the ground behind her (*Know Your Meme*, “Disaster”). As Disaster Girl, Zoe assumes sly responsibility for everything from the Titanic to 9/11, from alien invasion to oil spills to the collapse of the housing market. In Fig. 2.2, she smiles the same devilish smile in front of the exploding Hindenburg. Zoe appears in black and white, complementing the

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<sup>1</sup>Notable examples include Disaster Girl, Chubby Bubbles Girl, Nana Gouvea, Mo Farah, Batman and Robin, and McKayla Maroney. I define disaster broadly, including memes that incorporate historical tragedies, accidents or brutalities (shipwrecks, oil spills, acts of war); fictionalized menaces and monsters (dinosaurs, zombies); even living people who are threatening only, or mostly, in the context of the meme (Prince Charles, John McCain, Honey Boo Boo).



**Fig. 2.2** “Disaster Girl, Image #17,725 [Hindenburg].” *Know your meme*, 10 September 2009

coloration of the original photo from the day of the disaster in 1937; it’s an amusing attempt at boosting authenticity, but it reinforces both the adaptability and the durability of Disaster Girl as a subject.

As flexible as Disaster Girl is Chubby Bubbles Girl, who we can see fleeing from dinosaurs, zombies, Hitler, Prince Charles and many others. Indeed, the subjects of disaster memes are both flexible and static—portable emblems to embellish any crowd shot or film still, always ready to be dropped into a scene, so that every disaster might be Disaster Girl’s doing, and every threat imaginable might threaten Chubby Bubbles Girl. In their portability and repeatability, subjects of disaster memes relate to time queerly, for they refuse the “logic of time-as-productive” (Freeman *Time Binds* 5). Elizabeth Freeman explains the “novelistic framework” demanded by normative historiography, where “having a life”—having meaning—“entails the ability to narrate it ... as event-centered, goal-oriented, intentional, and culminating in epiphanies or

major transformations ... [T]he past seems useless unless it predicts and becomes material for a future” (*Time Binds* 5). While even disaster can be normatively productive when it fits inside a novelistic framework—for catastrophe culminates necessarily in the major transformation of an end (death, loss, extinction, apocalypse)—disaster memes refuse to produce the future each one predicts. Or, to put things more precisely, they produce *all* their possible futures, so that each new meme is haunted by the end(s) of the memes that came before. If Chubby Bubbles Girl is doomed to anything, it is not to death by zombie or grope by John McCain, but to a narrative that denies normative temporal progress—one that haunts instead of hastens, echoes instead of ends. Indeed, each threat she faces is equally threatening. Help! TORNADOS! ACK! Roman Catholic Cardinals! Yikes! Militarized Police!

The loop that Chubby Bubbles Girl is caught in is thus distinct from the closed circle that early modern defenders of copia imagined, for the Chubby Bubbles Girl neither “achieves a telos” nor “connotes ... self-sufficiency” (Cave 179). Closure isn’t merely delayed in a Disaster Girl’s gallery; it is denied in favor of a new (and queer) time and space. I have been calling Chubby Bubbles Girl (and others like her) the “subject” of a meme, but it is more appropriate to see her as *deject*—“[t]he one by whom the abject exists,” as Julia Kristeva defines the term—and to see the disaster meme as illustrative of the abject:

For the space that engrosses the deject, the excluded, is never *one*, nor *homogeneous*, nor *totalizable*, but essentially divisible, foldable, and catastrophic. A deviser of territories, languages, works, the *deject* never stops demarcating his universe whose fluid confines—for they are constituted of a non-object, the abject—constantly question his solidity and impel him to start afresh. A tireless builder, the deject is in short a *stray*. (8)

Disaster memes deal in the abject and deject rather than the object and subject. Consider the template or “paper doll” versions of Disaster Girl or Chubby Bubbles Girl. Always and already they are engrossed in a space of fluid catastrophe—a white background is enough to inspire Chubby Bubbles Girl’s flight. She is “affected by what does not yet appear to [her] as a thing” (Kristeva 10). This is the abject, “a well-spring of sign for a non-object” (Kristeva 11), so powerfully unstable that it produces the effect of the sign before the sign is constituted (the reaction to the disaster before the disaster appears). Like the sublime,

the abject “is a *something added* that expands us, overstrains us, and causes us to be both *here*, as dejects, and *there*, as others” (Kristeva 12). Something similar could be said about what it is that makes disaster memes more instructive than other visual memes; they offer “a productive disbelief in the referential object, a disbelief strong enough to produce some kind of pseudo-encounter with it that isn’t worried about the pseudo” (Freeman *Time Binds* 14). Chubby Bubbles Girl encounters a string of annihilations—destruction of innocence, property, life, limb, even the whole world; she is a looping, loopy character, “on a journey without a telos” (Halberstam *Queer Art* 81). But as we tumble our way through a Chubby Bubbles Girl gallery, we might see that though she doesn’t appear to be getting anywhere, she is nevertheless making her own way—a queer way, in fact. For as deject, Chubby Bubbles Girl strays into and out of time and history; with her in its midst, history *itself* seems astray—something that might be led, after all, in a different direction, something that might veer off after the right sort of bait, something as interested in pseudo-encounters as with legitimate ones.<sup>2</sup> While the obvious purpose of many disaster memes is to comically substitute verified history with an absurd version (No iceberg sunk the Titanic! It was a seven-year-old girl!), their more obscure and insurgent purpose has to do with history as the domain of answers. Comically but challengingly, disaster memes paint history as fragmentary and unknowable when they suggest that *anyone* might have been there, in the midst of an event, her experience left unrecorded, or that *anyone* might stray into our textbook summaries of the past, (re)making them incomprehensible. More importantly, the incongruously placed meme deject not only invalidates the authentic history that the undoctored visual serves to represent, but also floats the possibility that our histories invalidate themselves, that every element in every history “lesson”—be it a photograph, news

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<sup>2</sup>See Yasmin Ibrahim’s “Self-Representation and the Disaster Event: Self-Imaging, Morality and Immortality” for a related discussion of the peculiar “politics of visuality online” that develop in response to what she calls “disaster selfies”: snapshots taken at funerals, sites of natural disasters, war memorials and other solemn locales. For Ibrahim, the self within the selfie is a flaneur rather than a stray, who/which “appropriates the trauma and abject as performance without embedding itself in the tragic event” (218); it is outside the scope of this chapter, but I wonder if the selfie subject, like the subject of a meme, might in fact be operating as deject—not appropriating the meaning of a given context to proclaim survival or immortality, as Ibrahim emphasizes, but challenging the very concept of givenness to proclaim something unintelligible, in order to get and stay lost.

article, lecture, textbook chapter, etc.—might already be a rogue element, one that resists correspondence with the larger design into which it has been placed.

Indeed, in the gallery of 352 images of Chubby Bubbles Girl available on *Know Your Meme*, the lack of correspondence is conspicuous. Here pop culture mingles with public record; we move from the moon landing to the Waco siege to the sci-fi program *Ghost Hunters*. No coherent historical narrative can be articulated from this material, regardless of Chubby Bubble Girl's presence. It is an inconvenience that becomes a critique, because looking beyond Chubby Bubble Girl to the incoherent grid, the queer loop, in which she is caught can trigger in gallery viewers a suspicion of historiography as a process—might even *serious* historical narratives come out of such undisciplined, amateur scrapbooking? How different is history *as we know it* from history *as we don't*? Might all history—all time, “wondrous, marvelous, full of queer potential” as it is (Dinshaw *How Soon* 4)—be better described as that which we (don't) know? Thus a gallery of memes becomes an extreme illustration of the best history we can do.

That historical narratives could ever approach authenticity—this is the conviction being mocked in a disaster meme. But under the gag is also a queer way of doing history, where the point of queer “may be to trail behind actually existing social possibilities: to be interested in the tail end of things, willing to be bathed in the fading light of whatever has been declared useless” (Freeman *Time Binds* xiii). Though disaster memes deal in fiction and fantasy as much as “actually existing social possibilities,” they nevertheless suggest that history—whether the history of popular culture, technology, twentieth-century American politics, etc. —is never something we *know*; matters of public record, archival material, reports, photos and testimonies are declared useless for that purpose. And yet we can still immerse ourselves in what we fail to gain complete knowledge over. Freeman's description of an “erotics of hauntology” corresponds with the process at work in disaster memes, for erotics, as she explains, deal “less in belief than in encounter, less in damaged wholes than in intersections of parts, less in loss than in novel possibility” (*Time Binds* 14).<sup>3</sup> The subject/deject of a disaster meme, given so much material for encounters, given every disaster (real or imagined)

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<sup>3</sup>See Carla Freccero, who writes of the “willingness to be haunted, to be inhabited by ghosts” as “an ethical relation to the world” (*Queer/Early/Modern* 75).

feel[s] a encounter with what looks like a historical index not as a restored wholeness but as a momentary reorganization or rezoning of parts, even of the part-whole relation (will this part of a collective past fit into my present, remake it in some interesting way? how does this part of my personal past estrange a collective present?). He or she would refuse to write the lost object into the present, but try to encounter it already in the present, by encountering the present itself as hybrid. And he or she would use the body as a tool to effect, figure, and perform that encounter. (*Time Binds* 14)

In picturing *encounters* with parts over *belief* in the whole, disaster memes reflect a perception of history as non-totalizable and ultimately unknowable.<sup>4</sup> Copia, from this perspective, never gives way to control; the center no longer holds. It is significant too that the bodies used to imagine these encounters are so often female. The problematic relationship between women's bodies and theories of correspondence has a long history, one I will trace (partially, of course) in the next section to further expose copia as an inevitably transgressive project.

## SECOND IMPRESSIONS: INCOMPREHENSION AS INSPIRATION

Though “put in the position of passive objects,” Kristeva writes in *Powers of Horror*, women are nonetheless imagined to threaten the masculine with “an asymmetrical, irrational, wily, uncontrollable power” (70). Women thus represent the abject at the same time as they must encounter it; their “experience of abjection” is thus “intensifie[d] and pluralize[d]” (Moran 35). Returning to the early modern theory of correspondences lets us track the tensions produced by inconsistent constructions of women as both submissive and uncontainable, for believers in this theory “conceptualize[d] the body in relation to the order of the universe” (Albano 89). Seventeenth-century poet John Donne wrote that “in the body of man, you may turne to the whole world” (“Sir William Cokayne” 526). What about the body of

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<sup>4</sup>Dinshaw explores this perception of time and history in *How Soon is Now?*

In my theorizing of temporality I explore forms of desirous, embodied being that are out of sync with the ordinarily linear measurements of everyday life, that engage heterogeneous temporalities or that precipitate out of time altogether—forms of being that I shall argue are queer by virtue of their particular engagements with time. These forms of being show, in fact, that time itself is wondrous, marvelous, full of queer potential. (4)

woman? Though the influential one-sex model of human anatomy depicted women's bodies simply as inferior (colder, wetter, less reliable) versions of the male, though Aristotle had conceived of men (and male sperm) as active agents and women (and women's bodies) as passive receptacles, these theories did little to prevent early modern writers from seeing in the female body not feebler but still interpretable signs of the macrocosm but something of the asymmetry and threatening irregularity of the abundant, the copious object.<sup>5</sup>

Male early modern poets responded to this anxiety by following the example of Petrarch, the Italian poet whose Laura "is always presented as a part or parts of a woman," never a whole woman; "[h]er textures are those of metals and stones," writes Nancy Vickers; "her image is that of a collection of exquisitely beautiful disassociated objects" (266). Blazoning—the term for this poetic tradition—ultimately denies female embodiment, for the subject of the blazon "is not woman's body at all, but the male poet's power to appropriate that body and manipulate it in language to create delicious fantasies for himself" (Moira Baker 17). For Vickers, every blazoner is an Actaeon who dismembers his goddess before she can do the same to him, but the result of this prescience "is ultimately no more than a collection of imperfect signs, signs that, like fetishes, affirm absence by their presence. Painting Laura in poetry is but a twice-removed, scripted rendering of a lost woman" (275). So blazons emphasize female vulnerability but simultaneously suggest that women are never accessible enough to be entirely susceptible to control. Representations of woman are thus precarious, as Luce Irigaray explains: "She finds herself delineated as a thing," used "as an *envelope*, a *container*, the starting point from which man limits his things" (11). But this means, problematically, that

since her status as envelope and as thing(s) has not been interpreted, she remains inseparable from the work or act of man ... If after all this, she is still alive, she continuously undoes his work—distinguishing herself from both the envelope and the thing, ceaselessly creating there some interval, play, something in motion and un-limited which disturbs his perspective, his world, and his/its limits. (11)

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<sup>5</sup>For a discussion of the othering of the female body in textual and visual documents of the early modern period, see L.E. Brasseur and T.L. Thompson, "Gendered Ideologies: Cultural and Social Contexts for Illustrated Medical Manuals in Renaissance England," in *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, vol. 38, no. 4, 1995, pp. 204–215.

It is thus not difficult to see the ways in which female bodies are primed for the queer work of queering history. Unpredictably expressive, women seem to exist, semi-permanently, outside of the macrocosm, the ideal model, the closed circle. Long before disaster memes, early modern artists registered the questionable correspondences between (scattered) woman and (unified) world. Perhaps no early modern poem better illustrates the contradictory process by which a woman is defined as a thing and yet continues to live as something other, than John Donne's "An Anatomy of the World" (1611). Written to commemorate the death of a young girl, Elizabeth Drury, the daughter of one of his patrons, Donne's poem is also, importantly, about disaster, and Drury is his Disaster Girl. Reading closely this early example, we can see more clearly the links between femaleness, queerness, unhistoricism and stupid humanism.

Donne's conceit is that the world has responded to the death of Drury by sickening and dying, leaving behind a (mostly dead) corpse. "Sicke World," the speaker says,

yea, dead, yea putrefied, since shee,  
Thy 'intrinsicke balme, and thy preservative,  
Can never be renew'd, thou never live,  
I (since no man can make thee live) will try,  
What wee may gaine by thy Anatomy. (56–60)

The speaker credits the "shee" of the poem with preserving the world—giving it form and frame (37)—and, in dying, killing the world, but the world hasn't realized it is dead: "thou wast / Nothing but shee, and her thou hast o'rpast" (31–32). As Marshall Grossman puts it, "Donne's anatomy hovers between postmortem and vivisection" (176). "For there's a kinde of World remaining still" (67), says the speaker, a world reanimated by the "glimmering light" that reflects from the ghost of the dead girl (70). This new world, though, is nothing compared to the old. Donne is adamant about this: "If man were any thing, he's nothing now" (171); "as mankinde, so is the worlds whole frame / Quite out of joynt" (191–192); "Tis all in peeces, all cohaerence gone" (213). The world is a disease-ridden body (240–245), an ugly monster (326), a wan ghost (370), a dried-out carcass (428). Scenes of disaster keep tumbling, tumbling by, prompting readers to wonder, what is the use of a world that dies but pathologically insists on *not* ending? It is the poem's unanswered question, for Donne's speaker can only go through

the motions of making himself, and the world's corpse, useful: "This new world may be safer, being told / The dangers and diseases of the old" (87–88), he says, though establishing the boundaries between new world and old proves difficult. According to Grossman, the poem is a lament for the world's lost correspondence; it "dissects the corpse of meaning, identifying and marking the pathological insistence of a world that has begun to present sensuous images full of resistant details," a world in which "the link between the macrocosm and the microcosm becomes instead the site of an impasse where 'quick succession' fails to 'make it still one thing'" (182–183). Donne believed in the theory of correspondences, that "Gods work is perfect" and that "he hath established an order" (qtd. in Ettenhuber 75). While he acknowledged that fallen human beings "cannot read from the perspective of eternal providence," Donne "clearly recognized the importance of reading ends into beginnings" (Ettenhuber 54, 66). In the *Pseudo-Martyr* he declares that no man "might well and properly be called a Reader, till he were come to the end of the Booke" (qtd. in Ettenhuber 49). And in his sermons he reminds his congregation that the scriptures are like a "Mosaick work," inside which can be found

limbs taken from other bodies; and in the word of God, are the words of other men, other authors, inlaid and inserted. But, this work is onely where the Holy Ghost is the Workman: It is not for man to insert, to inlay other words into the word of God. (qtd. in Ettenhuber 54)

The speaker of Donne's "Anatomy," however, seems boldly inspired—by a very different holy ghost—to be a reader of this world's non-end, to translate the mess left behind by his Disaster Girl into some kind of "due measure" (467). He claims a divine inspiration, declares that in choosing to memorialize the dead girl in verse over chronicle, his model is no less than God, who composed and presented

To *Moses*, to deliver unto all,  
That song, because hee knew they would let fall  
The Law, the Prophets, and the History,  
But keepe the song still in their memory. (463–466)

God delivers his song "because hee knew" its place in time; providence drives its creation. The speaker, despite his diligent anatomy, lacks such

providential, ordered knowledge of past, present and future time. Indeed time, like everything else, is out of joint throughout his song. Thanks to the speaker's "shee," history itself has become incomprehensible.

Drury, it is true, does not fit easily into chronicled history for the obvious reason that her untimely death left her unmarried and childless—unable, that is, to contribute to conventional time-as-productive logics. Moreover, the "kind of world remaining still"—the one she generates—is one that operates according to non-normative models of time, life and death. It is out of all measure, a mess, a disaster zone. Imagine her smiling devilishly in the corner of this wasteland. "Shee, shee is dead; shee's dead," the speaker repeats as he describes the world's terrible decay, so that we can never separate this "shee" from the disastrous state of things. And yet the poem also makes it impossible to separate this same "shee" from the world in its undecayed state. While alive, "shee" gave the world its beauty, its proportion, its virtue. "She ... was best, and first originall / Of all faire copies, and the generall / Steward to Fate" (227–229); "souls were but Resultances from her, / And did from her into our bodies goe" (314–315); the world was "the Microcosme of her" (236). When she lived, she "had all Magnetique force alone, / To draw, and fasten sundred parts in one" (221–222). Dead, her force diminishes, dooms the world to disassembly (411–412). Hence the speaker mourns her great loss. The timing of this linear living–dying–mourning process is muddled, however, almost as soon as the anatomy begins, for humankind, we are told, was always doomed to decay. "Wee are borne ruinous," the speaker laments early in the poem (95), and so "importunate / Upon mankinde" is ruin that

It labor'd to frustrate  
Even Gods purpose; and made woman, sent  
For mans reliefe, cause of his languishment.  
They were to good ends, and they are so still,  
But accessory, and principall in ill.  
For that first marriage was our funerall:  
One woman at one blow, then kill'd us all,  
And singly, one by one, they kill us now. (99–107)

So the speaker praises woman for giving life and value to the world *and* condemns her for killing it. How much, then, could the death of the

speaker's "shee" have doomed a world already doomed to die—already dead?

The body of Donne's "shee" is not dismembered as in a typical blazon, but still the effect of disembodiment—a lack of integrity, a state of disassociation—is felt as "shee" is ported from scene to scene and from time to time. We see her in her grave and out of it, and if we can imagine her healing the world we can also imagine her destroying it, possibly at the same time. She is incomprehensible, as the speaker remarks when he says, "Nor could incomprehensiblenesse deterre / Mee, from thus trying to emprison her" (469–470). After his allusion to God's eternal song, this statement may read as a typical expression of poetic ambition, but it is in fact the most honest, humblest assessment of the speaker's readerly/writerly experience. Who knows if his song will, like God's, stand the test of time, if it is in "due measure" or in fact in excess of measure—way *un-* or *overdue*?

Grossman reminds us that "Donne lived in and complained about a world in which a developing technology [non-Ptolemaic] was *de-sign-ing* a 'natural' world that had seemed to have been, from time immemorial, *designed*" (180) and perhaps "An Anatomy of the World" is Donne's most bitter complaint. Still, the poem's queer temporalities, its *unhistoricism*, make the speaker's queerness as vivid as the author's bitterness. By anatomizing an (un)dead girl and a (dis)ordered world, the speaker makes himself into a queer subject inhabiting a queer time, behaving just the way Freeman says queer subjects behave, "feel[ing] an encounter with what looks like an historical index not as a restored wholeness but as a momentary reorganization or rezoning of parts," and testing the various ways those parts might cohere (*Time Binds* 14). "An Anatomy of the World" deals in parts. Instead of one world finally adding up to a deferred meaning, we encounter overlapping worlds, scenes of beauty and decay—a hybrid present. Can these parts fit together? Can they compel readers to look forward not (only) to the future as they've learned to imagine it—as long-awaited restoration produced by endorsed behaviors—but also "backward to prior moments, forward to embarrassing utopias, sideways to forms of being and belonging that seem, on the face of it, completely banal" (Freeman *Time Binds* xiii)? It is, after all, the banal space of the grave that compels the speaker to compose his song:

Nor could incomprehensiblenesse deterre  
Mee, from thus trying to emprison her,

Which when I saw that a strict grave could doe,  
 I saw not why verse might not do so too.  
 Verse hath a middle nature: Heaven keeps Soules,  
 The Grave keeps bodies, Verse the Fame enroules. (469–474)

It's a familiar trope, the words of a poem granting longer life to the dead, and it may be tempting to read these lines as some limp attempt to resolve the poem's complaint, as the speaker perfunctorily reminds himself that his own verse can reinscribe order to everything he's just blown apart. If he can't be an ideal reader standing outside of time that has met its end, he'll settle for being a writer who has found his way into the middle of things. But, in fact, by emphasizing the "middle nature" of verse the speaker reaches beyond his feebly reorienting commonplace to mark, again, his anatomy's asynchronous, unknowing relationship to eternity.

#### INTERMISSION: QUEER TIME AS STUPID (GOOD) TIME

In general, anatomization takes place so that "something can also be constructed, or given a concrete presence ... so that, in lieu of a formerly complete 'body', a new 'body' of knowledge and understanding can be created" (Sawday 2). His own anatomy of the world, Donne's speaker tells us, he conducts for the benefit of posterity—"the kind of world remaining still." And yet he chooses to situate his anatomy in the queerly middle time of verse—no kind of space for concrete presences to take shape. Wondering the possibilities of the term "middle" in the Middle Ages, Jeffrey Cohen notes the ways in which to be in the middle is to be outside of linear, progressive time and thus inside a queer time. He asks, "What if the medieval were not middle to anything" ("In the Middle" 131), and what if "the Middle Ages as a formal effect of their very middle-ness could ... be located as extimate to the modern: intimate and alien simultaneously, an 'inexcluded' middle at the pulsing heart of modernity" (*The Postcolonial Middle* 5). Donne's use of the middle is, like the middle of the Middle Ages, a "nontemporal designation" (Cohen "In the Middle" 131). As readers we can ask, what if the "middle nature" of verse were not the middle to anything? Rather than merely give us an alibi for making sense of the poem's inconsistent claims (the world is dead / alive; "shee" dooms the world / saves the world), concentrating on the poem's

“middle nature” helps us perceive the poem’s unhistoricism, helps us see its hybrid present as a space for meaningful confrontations not with history as chronicled or the future as providentially determined but with the past, present and future as “a knot, thick with possibility” and “impossible to fully untangle” (Cohen “In the Middle” 131). This knotty, queer time is felt throughout Donne’s poem, but especially in those final lines, where providential history is recalled (“because he knew”) as a model but immediately challenged by an incomprehensible, hybrid present; driven by both, the speaker responds with a boldness that is both due—because there is precedent for his song—and undue—because no-one can be sure of the temporal logics in which this song is embedded, about where, when or to whom it belongs. At home in its middle nature, whom will it reach, touch, impress?

According to Cohen, the “ontological ambivalence” of the term middle—its untimeliness—“does not mean that the Middle Ages are all things to everyone, an empty vessel rather than a point of friction and queer contiguity. Rather ... the Middle Ages in their mediacy confront the modern with powerful trauma conjoined to the possibility of trans-historical alliance and mutual transformation” (*The Postcolonial Middle* 5). He recalls a park near the White House called both Meridian Hill (because Native Americans designated the hill’s summit a meridian) and Malcolm X Park, which contains a statue of Dante and one of Joan of Arc. For Cohen, the “strange alliance” formed by these figures of the past is also a forceful argument against teleological history as “inadequate to the task of thinking the meanings and trauma of the past, its embeddedness in the present and future” (*The Postcolonial Middle* 2). To be in the midst of the park is to stray into the middle as a non-temporal zone in which it is possible to feel intimately connected to pasts that are also inaccessible. For Freeman, this kind of contact with not fully locatable times and places is queer: “we gather and combine eclectically and idiosyncratically, dragging a bunch of cultural debris around with us and stacking it in eclectic piles ‘not necessarily like any preexisting whole,’” and in doing so we experience “a genuinely erotic friction among various genres, modes, literary techniques, allusions, and so on in any given cultural event or object. And this erotics is itself a kind of historicism, a way of confronting the historicity of subjects and politics that finds its queerness in method rather than in object” (“Still After” 31). As does Cohen’s

park, Donne's "Anatomy" fosters this erotic historicism, this queerness in method. So do disaster memes.<sup>6</sup>

Consider the popular "McKayla is Not Impressed" meme, created after an imperfect dismount robbed gymnast McKayla Maroney of the gold medal at the 2012 Olympics. While standing on the awards platform, a photographer snapped a picture of Maroney pointedly scowling, arms crossed tight across her middle. The photo went viral, eventually evolving into a version of a disaster meme, although instead of fleeing (Chubby Bubbles Girl) or gloating (Disaster Girl), the meme version of Maroney displays a comical indifference to catastrophe—indeed, to any emotionally charged event, from the sinking of the Titanic to the killing of Osama bin Laden. McKayla is not impressed by normative displays of masculinity (see Image #388,168 on *Know Your Meme*, in which Russell Crowe as the title character of *Gladiator* bellows, "Are you not impressed?" while Maroney indifferently looks on). She is not impressed by faith-based parables or religious mythos (one image on the *mckaylais-notimpressed* Tumblr puts McKayla in the middle of all of Jesus's disciples, the only one not impressed by the miracle of walking on water). She is not impressed by romance and heteronormativity (inserted into a frame from the film *The Notebook* she is unresponsive to Ryan Gosling's sentiment; inserted as a guest at the royal wedding, she coolly looks away from William and Kate's kiss). She is not impressed by iconic moments from US history (see her standing by indifferently while marines raise the flag at Iwo Jima) or world history (see her just as indifferent to the fury of South Vietnam police commander Nguyen Ngoc Loan).

Nothing impresses Maroney: not atom bombs or double rainbows or trips to the Oval Office. A deject always already rejecting the histories that enfold her, Maroney is the face of middleness, an exemplum for what it is to be in a middle that is not middle to anything. A stray leading history astray—like Donne's "shee," like all our meme dejects—she transforms her viewers into queer subjects, positioned to encounter copious amounts of cultural and historical moments as dispersed parts that do not add up to a whole. And Maroney is a perfect mascot for middleness precisely because she is so resolutely unimpressed; her apathy

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<sup>6</sup>And so, I hope, does this essay, which is full of its own eclectically and idiosyncratically gathered debris.

communicates something more deviant than Disaster Girl's cunning or Chubby Bubbles Girl's alarm. Maroney can stand in the middle of a crowd and not be a part of it. Her position is lonely, unenviable and *powerful*, for to stand where Maroney does is to stand in an unassimilable, non-temporal zone, not just out of place but out of *touch* with time. Out of sympathy with it. As Kate Thomas writes, "[i]f communication is about getting in touch, it is also very much about being pleasurably, desiringly out of touch," a position that, in turn, "form[s] a methodological bridge toward a ... quite different project, one about being out of time" (71). This is the kind of radical break with time and relationality that Lee Edelman endorses in his work on queerness, which he understands as excessive and irreconcilable to optimistic anticipations of any less insistently consonant future:

we should expect it [queerness] to refuse not only the consolations of reproductive futurism but also the purposive, productive uses that would turn it into a 'good.' We're never at one with our queerness; neither its time nor its subject is ours. But to try to think that tension, to try to resist the refuge of the 'good,' to try to move ... into the space where 'we' are not: that is a project whose time never comes and therefore is always now. (Dinshaw et al. 189)<sup>7</sup>

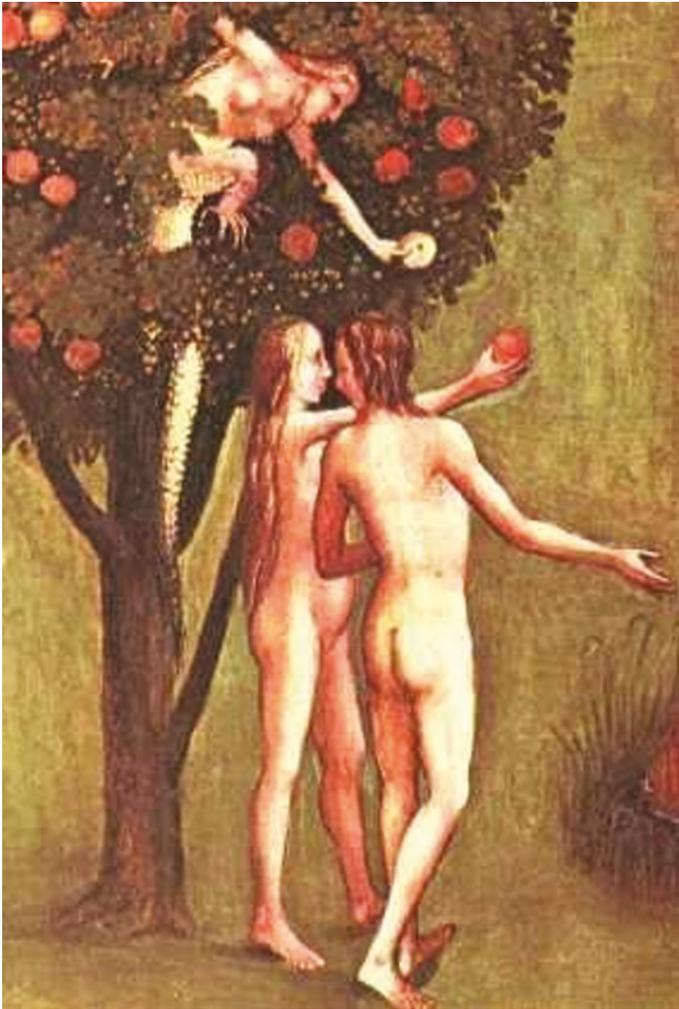
Certainly Maroney seems to embody the paradoxical position Edelman outlines, in that every space she inhabits is a space where she is not. Unlike Edelman, however, I do see purposive—if not future-oriented—uses for disaster memes and disaster girls, uses that one more early modern example can elucidate (Fig. 2.3).

In the fifteenth-century oil painting above, Eve (one of the earliest disaster girls) walks unconcernedly as a creature with her face

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<sup>7</sup>Edelman outlines his perspective in detail in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*:

the queerness of which I speak would deliberately sever us from ourselves, from the assurance, that is, of knowing ourselves and hence of knowing our 'good.' Such queerness proposes, in place of the good, something I want to call 'better,' though it promises, in more than one sense of the phrase, absolutely nothing. I connect this something better with Lacan's characterization of what he calls 'truth,' where truth does not assure happiness, or even ... the good. Instead, it names only the insistent particularity of the subject, impossible fully to articulate. (5)



**Fig. 2.3** Hieronymus Bosch, “The Last Judgment [Detail],” c. 1450–1516

looms from the tree behind her; that the disguised Satan looks identical to Eve suggests some unmappable (in time or space) previous contact between them. Indeed, portraying Eve more as accomplice than victim was a familiar trope in medieval and early modern

art.<sup>8</sup> In *Paradise Lost*, Milton too registers the potential affinities between Satan and Eve in the moment Satan discovers her in the garden and is, for a moment, paralyzed: “That space the evil one abstracted stood / From his own evil, and for the time remained / Stupidly good, of enmity disarmed” (9.463–465). It is only a temporary pause, but a momentous one—disaster creeps close behind this “desiringly out of touch” body, strays into the space into which Eve has strayed (it is her idea to walk separately from Adam) and finds itself stupidly good.<sup>9</sup> Eve lures Satan into a queer time and place, a non-temporal middle, where they are not so much *in* cahoots as *out* of sympathy with the poem’s timely march toward the inevitable.<sup>10</sup> I am wondering, if it is naïve to turn queerness or queer time into a good, what about a stupid good? While Milton makes it clear that this isn’t a teaching moment in the poem—it is *only* a stupid one, for Satan exits still hell-bent on destruction—he permits us to dwell inside this stupid time, to wander into its midst and wonder its possibilities. One of those possibilities is that Satan’s goodness is not merely a false or passive goodness but a queer goodness—one that could open more doors into non-relational space. This isn’t a missed opportunity but a midst one.

Of course, before Satan enters this space, Eve is there already. As we have seen, women have historically been moved into the space where “we” are not—the space of abjection. Milton, however, makes it easy to imagine Eve moving into a non-relational space volitionally rather than inertly: when she separates from Adam; when she and Satan separate themselves from the poem. What every Disaster Girl performs is this kind of “antisocial femininity,” what Halberstam describes as a “shadow feminism” working against the grain of progress-focused activism, historicizing and self-fashioning (*Queer Art* 129). More specifically, Halberstam responds to the imperialistic moves of Western feminists

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<sup>8</sup>Examples include *Adam and Eve* (1425) by Masolino da Panicale; *The Fall Of Adam And Eve* (~1520) by Jacopo Pontormo; *The Fall of Adam* (~1479) by Hugo van der Goes; the *Haywain* triptych (*circa* 1516) by Hieronymus Bosch; the eleventh-century *Enluminure illustrant la scène de la Tentation (Le Jeu d’ Adam)*, and many others.

<sup>9</sup>Book 9, 205–384.

<sup>10</sup>Milton scholars often discuss Eve in terms of transgression, chaos, imagination, generation—in a word, copia. See especially John Rumrich’s *Milton Unbound: Controversy and Reinterpretation* (Cambridge UP, 2006).

to prescribe “the form that agency must take,” supporting the call for “another version of womanhood, femininity, and feminism, indeed for any kind of intellectual who can learn how not to know the other, how not to sacrifice the other on behalf of his or her own sovereignty ... a feminism that fails to save others or to replicate itself, a feminism that finds purpose in its own failure” (*Queer Art* 127–128). Eve might be one face of this alternative version of feminism. Maroney is certainly another: unimpressed with everything—even the worst historical tragedies—Maroney in meme-form is the very picture of failed, stupid knowing.<sup>11</sup> It is not that she offers an excuse to remain ignorant about the material conditions that surround the real-life events she appears in the midst of; rather, her non-response articulates a refusal of the kind of knowledge that is *worse* than ignorance when it becomes less about learning and more about constructing an imperialistic, providentially aware perspective. The Maroney meme reminds us how often to be impressed is more about the self than the scene; to be unimpressed, then, is a way to refuse the problematic collapse of any or all historical circumstance into one and only one specific articulation of selfhood: “the self-activating, self-knowing, liberal subject” (Halberstam *Queer Art* 126) for whom history—despite sympathies with and enthusiasms for non-normative lifestyles—ultimately falls in line with teleology. “[T]he emphasis on progress,” Heather Love summarizes, “has made it difficult to approach the past as something living—as something dissonant, beyond our control, and capable of touching us in the present” (9–10). Being caught in history’s queer loop can mean being stretched and scattered in many more directions than forward.

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<sup>11</sup>Four years after the 2012 Olympics, gymnast Gabby Douglas dared to show disappointment over her performance in the 2016 games. Like Maroney, she faced backlash on social media—some Twitter users gave her the nickname Crabby Gabby. Unlike Maroney, Douglas encountered racist microaggressions targeting everything from her hair to her posture during the national anthem to her thoughtful and serious demeanor (generally and in comparison to her teammates). No Douglas facial expressions have been widely shared in meme-form, but it is worth imagining the impact of her image in a disaster meme; a black woman refusing to be impressed with teleological history might be a more powerful refusal than the one embodied by Maroney.

## FINAL IMPRESSIONS

In a gallery of McKayla memes this distension is on display, as it is in a poem like Donne's "Anatomy," as it is, perhaps, in any copious display in which women are the source and symbol of abundance. Is Erasmus's Folly, for example, another early Disaster Girl? She certainly shows herself as a figure astray, asserting near the end of her speech that happiness, the fulfillment of the human soul—which is also, in a way, its undoing—will only arrive when "the whole man will be outside himself, will be utterly happy at being outside himself" (*Praise* 85). When precisely is this future? Folly cannot or will not or forgets to say, perhaps because she is already in the midst of this non-temporal moment. Her performance, like the performance of any Disaster Girl, is profuse, disruptive, and ultimately masochistic, for masochism "represents a deep disruption of time itself ... the masochist tethers her notion of self to a spiral of pain and hurt. She refuses to cohere, refuses to fortify herself against the knowledge of death and dying, and seeks instead to be out of time altogether, a body suspended in time, space, and desire" (Halberstam *Queer Art* 144–145). She is a figure astray, unsexed—somehow—by the forward momentum of the stories into which she is dropped, but at the same time seducing us, her queer subjects, into the belief that perhaps the only way to be good at history—or indeed any kind of knowledge—is to be stupidly good.

## UNFINALIZABLE IMPRESSIONS

As I was finishing an earlier version of this chapter, which appeared in the journal *Rhizomes*, members of US Congress were busy impressing themselves with knowledge of ongoing violence in Syria. No McKayla/Syria memes came out of that news cycle, yet at the time I could easily imagine a "McKayla is not impressed with President Assad's chemical weapon attack" meme, right alongside a "McKayla is not impressed with the US leadership's blatant attempts to use Syria to secure conventional definitions of US sovereignty and to aggressively remind the world that America wrote the book on democratic nation-building" meme. That book needs a rewrite (as do my less-than-pithy meme titles) and to do it, we can neither look back at the consoling myths of America's founding nor look forward to (pipe)dreams of worldwide democracy. A disaster meme would lead us, instead, into an untimely middle. It would instruct

us that to be inexcluded and unimpressed is not the weak and powerless position it seems to be in comparison to the familiar position of supremacy and foresight the US is comfortable inhabiting as a “superpower.” Perhaps our leaders will one day entertain the possibilities of inexclusion, and perhaps they / we will do so in time. Until then we’ll have to muddle through somehow.



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