

## Wendy Wall



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### Public Lecture Offerings

#### **Blasting into Space in Renaissance Poetry**

Sick and confined to her bedroom after giving birth to her fifteenth child, a seventeenth-century woman named Hester Pulter sought solace in an unusual way: she wrote poems about soaring through space to explore planets and to confirm Galileo's ideas about the heliocentric universe. While many intellectuals of the day feared that the new astronomy undermined cherished religious beliefs, Pulter exhilarated in incorporating cutting-edge ideas about space into her religious meditations. After exploring stargazing poetry by Shakespeare, Donne, and Milton, this talk will ask: How can a relatively newly discovered female poet enlarge our understanding of how early modern poets interconnected religion, astronomy, and the imagination? How might early modern women have engaged in intellectual production and the mapping of the heavens, even from their remote estates or bedrooms?

#### **Doing Science in the Early Modern Kitchen: Women, Recipes, and Knowledge Making**

We might be surprised to discover that England was one of the most important sites in Europe for recipe collections between 1570 and 1750, and the only country where these books were written specifically for women. English recipes reveal more than the history of puddings and pies: they expose the rich creative, literate, and experimental culture of the early modern English home. This talk explores ways that culinary and medicinal recipe writing wrestled with the metaphysical puzzles at the center of both traditional humanistic and emerging scientific cultures. What counts as knowledge? What is the relationship between art and nature? How do theory and practice

connect? Investigating handwritten and published recipes in the context of literary works by Shakespeare and Cavendish allows to appreciate how women across the social spectrum engaged weighty intellectual questions--without ever leaving home.

### **Discovering New Poets, Discovering New Worlds: The Strange Case of Hester Pulter in Seventeenth-Century England**

The boundaries of the world exploded in early modern England. With telescopes aimed at the stars, microscopes revealing unseen elements of life on earth, and colonial encounters reconfiguring what Europeans knew about cartography and ecosystems, writers and artists grappled with uncertainty on many fronts. Shakespeare and Donne, for instance, offer rich meditations demonstrating the exhilaration and fear involving in imagining brave new worlds. How do newly audible literary voices in the early modern archive alter our understanding of this time of political, scientific, and religious transformations? The discovery of a seventeenth-century poet named Hester Pulter--a writer fascinated by Galileo's findings, dancing atoms, and natural philosophy-- offers an occasion to reflect on what it means to push the limits of the known world, both in early modern terms – and our own.

### **Faith Under the Microscope: The Poetics of Religion and Science in the Renaissance**

How can a poem be an experiment? In seventeenth-century England, writers sought new ideas about physics to worry an age-old Christian theological issue: How might God resurrect and reassemble a human body scattered into atoms when, at the end of time, bodies and souls were supposed to be united in heaven? Hamlet addresses part of the conundrum of the constantly evolving matter of the body when he meditates on how a king can rot into earth, be eaten by worms that are eaten by fish, before becoming dinner for beggars. It was this puzzle that motivated scientists of the day, such as Robert Boyle, to undertake experiments to prove the specific ways that physical matter could survive seeming annihilation. This talk will explore how poets used literary resources to join early modern natural philosophers in theorizing the material basis of life.

## Classroom Discussion Topics

1. Teaching Shakespeare in Prison: a workshop about the experience of teaching "Justice, Politics and Mercy in Shakespeare's Plays" in a maximum-security prison, where all students were serving life sentences. How might Shakespeare read differently in the context of the prison institution?
2. Queer Shakespeares: a workshop about how Shakespeare's plays and other early modern texts speak to gender fluidity and issues currently taken up in trans communities today. What did "gender" mean in the early modern period, in medical and religious texts? How did literature test different ways of conceptualizing sexual desire, the fluidity of gender, and queerness?
3. Shakespeare and Race: a workshop on the instability of racial categories in the early modern period. What was "race" in the age of Shakespeare? How was it connected to ethnicity and/or religious difference? How did Shakespeare address controversial issues about the precarity of race in his plays?
4. Discoveries in the Archive: a workshop using case studies of new discoveries in the early modern archive to explore a central question: What do we get wrong about the early modern period when we ignore women's literary contributions? How must we change conventional stories about the Renaissance as we expand the type of texts we read?