

CENTRE FOR SENSORY STUDIES

TALKING SENSE LECTURE SERIES 'Boys that play with watry Bubbles': Innocence and Sensory Experience at the Infancy of Science

Elizabeth L. Swann

Thursday 19 May 2022

9:30-11:10 AM EDT, Virtual Registration: <https://bit.ly/35M66js>



Detail from Pelagio Palagi's
*Newton's Discovery of the
Refraction of Light*, 1827
Oil on canvas

In her *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* (1666), Margaret Cavendish disparages the work of the Royal Society as puerile and unprofitable play, comparing its members to 'Boys that play with watry Bubbles, or fling Dust into each other's Eyes.' Reading the work of Bacon, Boyle, and Hooke alongside poetry by Cavendish, Traherne, and Cowley, this paper shows how both advocates and detractors of the Society described the practices of experimental philosophy in terms of traits associated with childhood, framing youthful innocence, exuberance, and sensory clarity either as crucial components of, or as antithetical to, scientific experience. I probe in particular how these experimentalists, writers, and thinkers conceptualised the relationship between transient, intermittent, and often artificially-orchestrated moments of sensory experience as a source of experimental knowledge about the material world, and 'experience' in a looser sense, as the gradual, cumulative process of acquiring the forms of understanding and skill which constitute adulthood.

Elizabeth L. Swann is Assistant Professor of Interdisciplinary Literary Studies at Durham University. For the 2021-22 academic year, she is a Research Fellow on the project *Sensing the Truth: Changing Conceptions of the Perceptual in Early Modern and Enlightenment Europe*, at the Israel Institute of Advanced Studies. Her research focuses on literature, natural philosophy, and theology in England, circa 1500-1700; she is particularly interested in the sensory and embodied dimensions of knowledge practices. Her publications include a monograph, *Taste and Knowledge in Early Modern England* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), and a co-edited collection, *Sensing the Sacred in Medieval and Early Modern Culture* (Routledge, 2018). She is currently working towards two new books, provisionally titled *Knowledge and Power: A Polemical History*, and *Error and Ecstasy: The Ends of Knowledge in Renaissance England*.