

**The Period of Cosmography:
An Internal and External Reflection**

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Born in 1576, Thomas Weelkes was an organist and composer and by his early 20's was well established in the field of music. Born in Elsted, England, Weelkes grew up around the cities of Chichester and Winchester - both of which he worked in - exposing him to sailors who had travelled around the world during a time of exploration. This essay will map the context of Thomas Weelkes' "Thule, the Period of Cosmography," an English madrigal about the external cosmography of the expanding world and internal cosmography of self-discovery. It will also explain some terminology used in the poem that is less common in modern English, summarize and explain the text of the poem, and analyze how musical devices are used to word-paint within the piece.

Written in 1600, at the age of 24, Weelkes arranged a poem by an unknown author, "Thule, the Period of Cosmography." At the very start of the scientific revolution and around 100 years after Christopher Columbus's discoveries, the common sense of the world was being challenged; the world was in an age of expansion and colonialism. As Weelkes would have understood it, cosmography is "the science that maps the general features of the universe or describes both heaven and earth (but without encroaching on geography or astronomy)."¹ This age of discovery, or "the period of cosmography," was the beginning of a whole new world in which new continents were being discovered and colonized by Europeans. These ideas manifest in the poem with mentions of a travelling merchant of foreign goods and descriptions of various places across the world. This understanding of cosmography is centred around the expanding human world and focuses on the inner cosmography of human emotions rather than a focus on the stars and space like it would be understood in the current day.

¹ *English-Word Information*, "cosmography," <https://wordinfo.info/results?searchString=cosmography>

Demonstrating people's broadening understanding and thoughts about the expanding known world and universe, the poem contrasts the external world with the internal feelings and self-reflection on love and fear. The poem starts by referencing the mystical location of Thule, the idea of the northernmost island of the world; the location of which is generally understood to be some northern island in Scandinavia. The idea, as originated by the ancient Greeks and Romans, signifies the cold island at the edge of the world². Fleshing out the map, the poem visits the volcanoes of Hecla³, Trinacrian Etna⁴, and Fogo⁵, a tropical ocean, and a travelling Spanish merchant selling dishes from China and luxurious dye from South America⁶. While on one hand, this shows the expansion of the known world at the time, it also demonstrates an inward-looking exercise where they are questioning their own place in the world and their sense of identity, redefining their sense of self in the context of the ever-changing external world.

This poem, "Thule, the Period of Cosmography," is about the persona's complex feelings. Not to be mistaken for an over-romanticized story about love, this humanistic approach to love and the world leads the persona to describe their own feelings and thoughts with metaphors. The cold and desolate climate of Iceland or Thule are not as cold as the fear in the persona's heart. Conversely, the hot and destructive volcanoes of Iceland, Sicily, and Cape Verde thaw the frozen lands as the love in the persona's heart burns away the fear. The poem also shows how the two feelings, love and fear, can exist at once. The warm volcanoes of love erupting in the cold climate of fear is not a duality, but instead, a consonance of feelings. Rather

² Geller. "Thule" *Mythology.net*, accessed 7 Dec. 2021, <https://mythology.net/greek/greek-concepts/thule/>

³ A volcano in Iceland

⁴ A volcano in modern day Sicily

⁵ A volcano likely in the Cape Verde islands

⁶ Cochineal is a red dye made from a South American

than a typical wondrous loving view of a partner, the focus of the poem is on the person's awe of their own intense feelings of love. "These things seem wond'rous, yet more wond'rous I."

Weelkes paints every unique phrase and word with music according to the context of the line and the word on its own. His arrangement uses a syllabic text setting until the flow of notes, starting in measure 27⁷, where there is a melismatic breakaway, mirroring the lava's flow of Hecla. Also representing Hecla and the other two volcanoes is the brief time change found in measure 41, from common time to $\frac{3}{4}$. At the end of each of the two parts of the poem, the repeated phrase "Whose heart with fear doth freeze, with fear doth fry" is recited. "Whose heart with fear doth freeze" has a cold feeling to it because of its bare voicing combined with short - almost staccato-like - notes and the high intensity required in performance. In contrast, "with love doth fry" has a warmer feel from the fuller and more legato voicing.

In the second part of the poem, "The Andalusian Merchant" there is a minor section starting in measure 99, reflecting the strangeness of Fogo burning until the resolution on beat 2 of measure 110 back to major. In contrast to the fire of Fogo, the text follows with the water in the "ocean full of flying fishes." To imitate the movement of flying fish, all the vocal parts use diatonic ascending and descending scales, starting in measure 113, and continuing until coming back to the same phrase of "These things seem wond'rous, yet more wond'rous I, whose heart with fear doth freeze, with love doth fry" at measure 118.

The period of cosmography reflected in the poem is not one of a literal sense. The poet explores the external expansion of the known world as a metaphor for the internal humanistic cosmography of the common person. Highlighting these ideas using musical embellishments,

⁷ All references of measure numbers refer to Thomas Weelkes, *Thule, the Period of Cosmography* (Winchester)

Weelkes is able to weave together the motivations and feelings of awe and wonderment of the growing world and self-reflection into a compelling and deeply story-driven madrigal.

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