

**2017 SAA Seminar: Mystery in Early Modern Drama Abstracts**  
**Leaders: Karen Britland, University of Wisconsin**  
**and Marshelle Woodward, Canisius College 1**

**Paul Cefalu, Lafayette College**

**Paper Title: “King Lear and Divine Hiddenness: Revisiting the *Deus Absconditus*”**

As many critics of Shakespeare’s *King Lear* have remarked, Lear eventually moves away from a naturalistic understanding of “pagan” Gods and toward a more Christian understanding of grace once he is reconciled, if only momentarily, to the Christocentric Cordelia. The traditional stumbling-block is the difficulty of explaining not only the death of Cordelia but also the question of Lear’s redemption. While the Bradleyans argue that, however mitigated, Lear does come to redemption by the play’s end, more recent criticism has argued that Lear remains unredeemed -- both to himself and within a Christian framework -- and that divine providence cannot order the chaos that Lear’s fateful decisions set in motion.

In this paper, I argue that the post-Reformed understanding of God’s hiddenness (God’s status as a mysterious *deus absconditus*) helps to explain why the play’s ending is thoroughly Christian-Protestant precisely because God’s presence recedes and remains mysterious at the moment of Lear’s redemption. Reformed notions of God’s hiddenness (as articulated both by Luther and Calvin) held that God’s revelation of himself is simultaneous with his concealment in Christ. The paradox here is that God enhances his mysteries by showing himself *via* the *kerygmatic* emptying into his Son. Cordelia in the play is indeed an embodiment of Christ/grace, understood properly by Lear, but the inexplicable quality of Cordelia’s and Lear’s demise -- and the unmitigated suffering at the end of the play -- is or should be cathartic precisely because this is the moment at which God both shows and hides himself to the enfeebled king.

**Jason Crawford, Union University**

**Paper Title: “King Lear and Tragic Assumption: Taking on the Mystery of Things”**

In his last exchange with Cordelia, Lear promises that they together will “take upon’s the mystery of things / As if we were God’s spies” (5.3.16-17). Take upon us: what are the implications of this language? Why not invite Cordelia (in the formulations Shakespeare uses elsewhere) to “see,” “discover,” or “pluck out” mystery? The mystery of things seems here to beckon God’s spies not toward acts of apprehension but rather toward acts of assumption. In this paper, I will work to make sense of the lexicon of assumption Shakespeare cultivates in *King Lear*: not just “take upon” but also “bear,” “burden,” “suffer,” and “sacrifice.” These terms all intersect with “mystery” in late medieval and early modern discourses. All are associated with theologies of incarnation and atonement. And all of them have long associations with ritual practice: with, for instance, the mysterium of the Eucharist, or the taking upon oneself of a monastic habit. The concept of mystery might, then, open up for Shakespeare a peculiar and participatory language of suffering. And it might, for us, suggest some generative ways of approaching Shakespeare’s tragic forms and affects.

**Alan C. Dessen, University of North Carolina**

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**Paper Title: “Staging “Mystery” on the Early Modern Stage: Invisibility, Visions, Heavenly Intervention, and the Playgoer’s “Imaginary Forces”**

As a theatre historian my goal has been to recover what the original playgoers actually saw in those first performances as opposed to what they had to conjure up with their “imaginary forces.” Shakespeare and his contemporaries crafted their plays with the resources available, a situation that led to the development of an onstage vocabulary shared by playwrights, players, and playgoers easily missed today (an obvious example is how to present night and darkness without variable lighting). What has received less attention is the role of the playgoer’s imagination and the role of that original theatrical vocabulary in staging mystery and the mysterious: ghosts, devils, gods, magic, invisibility, and vanishing.

My focus in this paper is on the staging of 1) invisibility, 2) dreams and visions, and 3) divine intervention from a heavenly thunderbolt. In each case I supply a fake version to shed some light on the usual configuration. I end with my favorite scene in *The Alchemist* that involves a duped Epicure Mammon and a non-existent thunderbolt, a moment that may seem to move far away from the “mystery” focus of this seminar but, at least in my reading, calls attention to a true mystery in the connection between powers above and events below.

**Daniel Gibbons, Catholic University of America**

**Paper Title: “Desire for Apocalypse in *King Lear*”**

Readers have long observed the mysterious character of Shakespeare’s tragedies. They all seem to conceal depths of meaning under the cover of action which refuses to settle into pat moral or political messages. The lack in *King Lear*’s world of any apparent supernatural realm to give order to the fragments of its collapse leaves us with a particularly intense sense of the hiddenness or absence of the divine. In *Shakespearean Negotiations*, Stephen Greenblatt famously followed one influential line of criticism (that goes back at least to 1944) in arguing that the play is not redemptive, but rather represents human life in the utter absence of a supernatural order. Is this the end of the mystery in *Lear*, then? That there is no supernatural order, no mystery other than the unplumbable depths of our own desires as they are conditioned by mostly-inscrutable social and material forces? Perhaps, but this notion of the mysterious supernatural order as something fundamentally unknowable (either because it is not accessible to us, or simply is not there at all) is not the whole story of mystery in Shakespeare’s culture and thus, I would argue, fails to fully illuminate the place of mystery in *King Lear*.

In the Christian scriptures, a *mysterion* is generally not something hidden away from our understanding, but rather something that was once hidden away but now revealed by God. So, for example, Jesus tells his disciples, “To you it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God” (Mark 4:11). St. Paul affirms that “we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hid wisdom, which God had determined before the world, unto our glory... but as it is written, The things which eye hath not seen, neither ear hath heard, neither came into man’s heart, are, which God hath prepared for them that love him. But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit; for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God” (1 Cor 2:7-10). For Christians, then, the veil has been lifted (*apokalupsis*) from the deep mysteries of creation and the divine plan,

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and so mysteries are things that have finally been revealed after countless generations of unfulfilled human longing to understand. These revealed things are the very things which are hidden from the pagans depicted in Shakespeare's play, as Paul imagined them to have been concealed from humankind before the incarnation of Jesus.

This paper argues that *King Lear* was written with a Christian audience in mind, and so ought to be read in light of a Christian understanding of mystery. I will examine the structure of absence in the play, that which is missing from the world of the play but longed for by its protagonists: the "promised end" that can unveil what seem like inscrutable mysteries to make sense of the horrifying events of the play. Reading *King Lear* through its characters' desire for apocalypse may then be a historically-grounded way of accounting for its mysteries, or at least deriving some sense of how a Jacobean audience might have understood what now might seem like a starkly anti-religious play. I argue that the play's stark vision of tragic eternal recurrence in a cryptic universe where the gods are either cruel or simply not works upon a Christian audience as, in a sense, a simulated experience of the pre-Christian world longing for apocalypse, revelation. Such an experience might be imagined as fertilizing the affective ground for a faith that claimed to reveal the mysteries that would fulfill the longings of Lear's pagans. Thus, if this reading of the play is true, the absence of the divine from Shakespeare's play is a veiled provocation to desire for the Christian God, rather than a secularist evacuation of religion.

**Ani Govjian, University of North Carolina**

**Paper Title: "Wonder as Cure: The Recuperative Power of Visual and Metatheatrical Tricks"**

My work examines tricks that act as tests of faith in the context of religious and scientific negotiations between credulity and experiential evidence. This paper, and its intervention in how Shakespeare's plays explore, test, and modify ideas about mystery, stems from a chapter titled "Wonder as Cure: The Recuperative Power of Visual and Metatheatrical Tricks." Notable as an instance in which the audience is kept in the dark regarding Hermione's death and seeming resurrection, *The Winter's Tale* offers a spectacle at once arresting and curative for both Leontes and the audience. While the revelation of Hermione's miraculous second life elicits wonder, it underscores Leontes' compromised fidelity, which lingers even as plot threads are tidied up in the troubled comic ending. I begin my argument examining Leontes' bad faith and faulty evidence-gathering in service of his jealousies, and move through the various trick-testing he must undergo in order to correct his sight. Ultimately, I argue, Hermione's resurrection scene doubles as the communion sacrament in a moment where tricking, testing, artifice, and faith collide.

**Brian Harries, Concordia University Wisconsin**

**Paper Title: "'Magic's Mystery';  
Hidden Knowledge in Greene's *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*"**

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In Robert Greene's play, *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, the other Oxford scholars describe Bacon as someone "read in magic's mystery." Yet, unlike other magician figures in early modern drama, such as Marlowe's Faustus or Shakespeare's Prospero, his main distinction lies in his ability "to discover doubts, / to plain out questions." Even when he does perform efficacious magic, it is most often done in order to reveal knowledge that is otherwise unknowable. Greene's play puts an emphasis on occult knowledge as power unto itself, rather than as a means to obtain greater power. Bacon's rise and near tragic fall both come about through his skill at knowing the unknowable. He crosses the line between knowledge of natural order and knowledge of the Divine mysteries, which are, by definition, forbidden to humankind. This paper explores the ways that this play uses its farcical plots to probe the edges of licit and illicit knowledge as understood by an Elizabethan audience.

**Paul Harrison, University of Toronto**

**Paper Title: "Mystery and Magic as Destructive Forces in Jonson's *The Alchemist*"**

My paper argues that Jonson uses the dramatic form to create mystery by unmaking mystery in *The Alchemist*. Thus, by depicting crafty cozeners and their gullible victims, Jonson's *Alchemist* reveals mystery to be mere charlatanism. Of course, this charlatanism has far deeper consequences than simply duping fools of their wealth and time. Jonson depicts mystery – even false, illusory mystery – as far more damaging than the magic of Doctor Faustus; whereas Faustus' magic only damns his own soul, the magic and mystery employed by Subtle, Face and Doll has very real societal effects, in spite of its utter falsehood. In other words, the cozeners not only drag themselves towards hell, they willfully participate in the corruption of the credulous fools around them – and in *The Alchemist*, almost everyone is a credulous fool. I therefore argue that in the structure of the play, though impotent, mystery has the power to undermine societal structures, religious belief, and even knowledge itself. In this sense, I suggest that Jonson's conservative reactionary stance is comparable to Francis Bacon's; both men should be seen as similar figures, who helped to unmake magic out of a distrust of its cant and fear of its wild epistemic claims.

**Adam Hembree, University of Melbourne**

**Paper Title: "The Dark Art of Drama"**

Early modern English stage playing, I argue, was conceived of as a kind of magical practice. The "magic word" is an action; its utterance is a remarkable physical change in the world. Plays that heavily feature magic emphasize its theatricality and problematize the fraught semiotic exchange that underwrites it. The twin processes of discovery and concealment are recurring concerns in these texts, which traffic liberally in occult relationships between and among humans, nature, and super-nature. My paper explains magic's theatricality, and theatre's magic, with a theory of "action" that is grounded in English writings about stage playing. In doing so, it embraces action's equivocal status between theatrical and metaphysical registers. English theatre's proponents, practitioners, and detractors may disagree about stage playing's

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moral status, but they are remarkably consistent on its mechanics. Understanding these mechanics—what play-makers do—nuances our reading of play texts as artefacts of a rapidly developing commercial theatrical praxis. The history of magic offers us a framework through which to articulate that praxis: a conscious manipulation of bodies in a bounded space by the power of secret knowledge and the aid of superhuman forces.

**Gillian Murray Kendall, Smith College**

**Paper Title: “Transcendence and Resurrection in *The Winter’s Tale*”**

The great Tudor and early Jacobean Mystery is the one contained in the Book of Revelation—the Mystery of Apocalypse, of that which lies behind the veil. The Tudors knew they were approaching End Times—they were, after all, regaled with convincing signs and sermons. They prepared in practical ways, as for a material event. Martin Luther hurried his exegesis of Daniel, worried it wouldn’t be finished in time; some shrouds were tied loosely to make it easier for the dead to emerge from the grave at the Last Judgment.

Throughout his career, Shakespeare explored the swirl of belief and tradition underlying the Eschaton through imagery of resurrection and judgment—and the quality of “horror” clings to that exercise. My paper on the morphology of resurrection in *The Winter’s Tale*, however, explores the transformation of such eschatological tropes when exposed to the pressure of desire: desire for forgiveness, desire for transcendence, desire for life. The insult of rotting flesh pulled from the grave and the fearful awe of Judgment, both tropes of the great tragedies, utterly give way in *The Winter’s Tale* to an incarnate woman and the image of an empty grave, to judgment deferred and the meaningfulness of secular redemption. This paper shows Shakespeare’s undoing of the Apocalyptic motifs so prevalent in his greatest tragedies and so queasily rendered in the Comedies.

**Elizabeth Mathie, University of Michigan**

**Paper Title: “Mysterious and Mundane: Domestic Rule and its Discontents in *The Tempest*”**

Building on the work of critics like Frances Dolan, this paper argues that *The Tempest* is in conversation with contemporaneous English prescriptive texts about domestic forms of rule. Specifically, I read the play alongside contemporaneous manuals that prescribe cultivating mutuality and love among one’s subordinates as an important step in securing and maintaining authority. *The Tempest* initially presents Prospero as a powerful master who derives his mysterious art from reading. Ultimately, however, it becomes clear that Prospero has failed as a reader of important publications about mastery from the period. By relying on artful shows of affection rather than learning from experience and responding to the individual nature of his subordinates (as prescriptive texts advise), Prospero creates problems within his household that limit the success of his magical schemes. Shakespeare undercuts the significance of Prospero’s mysterious powers, in other words, by subtly drawing attention to his failure to attend to a body of literature that would allow him to wield the equally mysterious, if less glamorous, power of domestic authority.

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**Josie Schoel, SUNY Albany**

**Paper Title: “The Ritual, Royal, and Effigial Bodies in Thomas Middleton’s *Second Maiden’s Tragedy*”**

This paper investigates the tensions surrounding the contested site of the corpse as it appears on the early modern stage. I ground this exploration of the signifying function of such inanimate materiality in an examination of the polychrome effigial body as it appears in Thomas Middleton’s *Second Maiden’s Tragedy*, where I read the cosmeticization of The Lady’s corpse, which happens in full view of the audience, as an uncanny return of the dual repressed Catholic sacraments of mourning and saint worship. In the play, face paint is used as a vehicle to stave off death by containing the otherwise transgressive status of the corpse, transforming the lifeless body into a kind of commemorative effigy, one that creates a spectacle of the artificiality of the ideal, commemorative body by pointing to the putrefying corpse under the mask of paint.

**Jessica Tooker, Indiana University**

**Paper Title: “Love Mysteries in *Othello*”**

In their conversation by the water at Cyprus, Desdemona remarks to Iago, “I am not merry, but I do beguile / The thing I am by seeming otherwise” (2.1.122-123). Her comment shows how Shakespeare utilizes *Othello* as summa test case offering us the proof of drama as stimulating mysteries, most remarkably the divine love between Desdemona and Othello. Like Cressida, Desdemona is, and is not, what she seems. Desdemona claims herself to be a mystery because she knows the words others use to describe the true mysteries of love (of lovers, friends, etc.) are often inaccurate. And of course, since Shakespeare tells the lovers’ story as a series of divulged secrets bespeaking what others think and as importantly, say of them, Desdemona is perceptive to “seem otherwise.” The constant hum of words surrounding the lovers (and those connected to them: Cassio, Bianca, Iago) illumines why *Othello* is a tragedy—for words in this play are not only beautiful but often wounding and cruel. My paper is a study of how words clarify four “mysteries” with which Othello and Desdemona evidence their love: passion, pain, heaven, hell. The play’s secrets are never fully disclosed, and yet they are almost...so.

**Michael West, Columbia University**

**Paper Title: “That that is, is”: Tautology, Mystery, and the Clown in *Twelfth Night***

In my paper I explore how a sense of mystery is created in *Twelfth Night* by means of tautology, a mode of speech that lacks (in Wittgenstein’s terms) any “representational relation to reality.” I argue that in this play, Feste the clown’s tautological speech reveals and constructs him as simultaneously open and mysterious. As the player who is both the closest to and the most hostile toward the audience, the clown alternately positions the playgoing collective as part of the theatrical event and as its antagonist. From Feste’s “That that is, is” to Richard III’s “I am

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I” to Iago’s “What you know, you know,” tautological utterances on the early modern stage tended to come from the mouths of clowns and villains, who mediate between the world of the play and the event of performance. These characters who tend to be the most intimate and open with playgoers are at the same time the most mysterious, closed-off and reserved, performing and emphasizing their remove by using language that semantically means nothing at all. Tautological speech thereby helps to generate a sense of theatrical character not by minimizing the actor’s connection to the live playhouse audience, but by generating a paradoxical mixture of intimacy and disengagement.