

2019 Seminar Abstracts: Occult Agents in Shakespeare, Part Two
Mary Floyd-Wilson, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

***Professor Charlotte Artese**
Agnes Scott College
cartese@agnesscott.edu

The Cauldron in Macbeth and in Traditional Narrative

Three folk narrative motifs combine in *Macbeth* 4.1, the scene in which the Weird Sisters compose a noxious brew and three Apparitions prophesy: the army disguised as a forest, a magic cauldron, and metaphorically, the reanimation of dead soldiers. Folktale scholars know these motifs as K1872.1: *Army appears like forest*, E64.2 *Resuscitation by magic cauldron*, and E155.1 *Slain warriors revive nightly*, as catalogued in the standard reference work, Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk Literature*. These three narrative elements are similarly conjoined in a medieval Welsh collection of stories and an ancient Danish cauldron, suggesting a matrix of myth that Shakespeare uses to shape the materials he found in Holinshed's *Chronicles*. In the play, however, these folk motifs are devoid of the life and hope they promise in traditional narratives. In both the medieval Welsh *Mabinogion* and the ancient Danish Gundestrup Cauldron, a cauldron restores fallen soldiers to life, whereas the Weird Sisters' cauldron contains only death. While Macbeth believes the Apparitions prophesy his victorious life, they actually foretell his ignominious destruction—Birnam Wood will indeed come to Dunsinane. Two other story traditions can be brought to bear on the Weird Sisters' cauldron. In classical mythology, Medea's cauldron of alarming ingredients offers reanimation for an old ram and Jason's father, although it only serves death to another man. In Irish hero-tales, a "cauldron of cure" often restores the hero, but sometimes only after he has been dipped in a cauldron of venom. Shakespeare has emptied the hope from the cauldron motif as found in these narratives as well, as the cauldron in *Macbeth* contains only death and no life, only venom and no cure.

***Professor Pompa Banerjee**
University of Colorado, Denver
Pompa.Banerjee@ucdenver.edu

Crediting Witches in The Witch of Edmonton and Macbeth

My essay will read two early modern plays, *The Witch of Edmonton* and *Macbeth*, as test cases for the way the stage dually profited from the audiences' varying attitudes towards the supernatural. In *The Witch of Edmonton*, the authors William Rowley, Thomas Dekker, and John Ford demystify the power of the invisible world by embedding the witch in economic and market forces. The witch's power is tied to her credit, her worth, in the global financial marketplace driven by other invisible forces such as credit. *The Witch of Edmonton* appears to discredit the idea of witchcraft as it exposes the social contradictions in a rapidly changing England. Repeated uses of the word "credit" in its different meanings draw attention to the way belief systems are related to the financial and the economic, not the invisible and irrational. Yet, the play does not fully embrace

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the new intellectual currents sustained by scientific queries and rationalism. Witchcraft beliefs remain with an added layer of meaning. In contrast, *Macbeth* invites audiences to credit the witches. A close reading of the witches' equivocation might tarnish their credit but the audience, like Macbeth, may believe, if they wish. The play deploys the fear of the unseen to fortify belief in the power of the invisible world. Metaphor, brilliantly employed, pulls the audience into the nightmarish theater of disembodied spirits. While both plays appear to project very different attitudes towards the supernatural, neither fully repels the power and agency of the spectral. To a certain extent, then, both plays enable the terrible drama of witch-hunting and witch-persecution in early modern Europe.

***Professor Kent Cartwright**
University of Maryland
kcartwri@umd.edu

THE OCCULTISM OF DOUBLES AND TWINS IN SHAKESPEAREAN COMEDY

The purpose of this essay is to identify the multiple forms of association between, on the one hand, twins and doubles in Shakespearean comedy and, on the other, magic, enchantment, and the occult. Comedy as a genre has always been interested in doubleness: of puns, of twins, of deception, of plot lines, of parody and impersonation, of mind and body, of marriages, of clown and straight man, and, , as Alexander Leggatt describes it, of the overall “double-edged” “tendency” of comedy “to question its own premises.” Mary Floyd-Wilson has recently connected twinship in *Twelfth Night* with theories of sympathetic magical attraction, especially the magnetic power of the womb (discussed in relation to lodestones and iron), which she traces convincingly through medical and magical treatises. The approach of the present paper will be more scattershot, in that it attempts to assemble a range of occult associations for ideas of doubleness and twinness, using various hints in Shakespeare’s comic texts. The occult associations that I have in mind include: the classical idea of the ‘genius’; ghost figures and thus demonic doubles (perhaps analogous to figures in Spenser); magical ‘perspective’; Circean beast/ humans; Platonic androgynes; and the alchemical power to multiply. My thinking is simply that instances of doubling or twinning in the comedies may evoke a multiplicity of occult ideas, so that an aura of magic hangs over the device.

***Mr. Jeremy Wayne Cornelius**
Louisiana State University
jcorn15@lsu.edu

Poetic Contagion and an Ecology of Witches in Macbeth

In *Macbeth*, once the witches utter their prophecy and Macbeth’s desire for power motivates him toward his ambitions to be king, it begins to radically alter the entire environment of the play—horses begin dying, birds’ flight patterns alter, and eventually even Birnam wood is set ablaze. In this paper, I return to a lingering question that haunts early modern scholarship: how to interpret the witches and Lady Macbeth’s role in

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Macbeth? While this question has been posed countless times, I offer an ecocritical reading of *Macbeth* along with early modern understandings of the occult's connection to contagion. As Lady Macbeth's diseased mind manifests in her body by the end of the play, misused power affects the entire ecosystem of Scotland. I investigate how ecocritically interpreting the witches' prophecy as a form of infection and disease against the bodies politic and natural demonstrates Jacobian understandings of the occult and its ecological relationship to the environment.

I specifically turn attention toward circulatory systems, air, and contagion in *Macbeth*. In her book *Imperfect Creatures*, Lucinda Cole aptly describes *Macbeth* as an "epidemiological horror." Scholars have written on the biological dimensions of Renaissance literature and politics such as Jonathan Gil Harris in *Sick Economies* and *Foreign Bodies and the Body Politic*, and additionally, Marjorie Garber in *Shakespeare After All* briefly mentions the frequent language of disease by the end of the play. *Macbeth* turns into a political outbreak narrative where medical discourses entangle with the occult, sovereignty, and the environment. The play discursively aligns contagious spreading with prophetic poetics, sourced from the witches' tongues and transmogrifying bodies. The porosity between the bodies politic and natural begin to erode and influence one another as Lady Macbeth's corrupt ambition for power corporeally manifests through her body and circulates throughout the political and physical landscape of Scotland. Discussing early modern medical diagnoses such as scrofula and conceptions of illness and disease in *Macbeth*, I aim to demonstrate the ecological relations between humans, environments, and power in Renaissance tragedy.

*Ms. Emily Carole George
 University of Washington
emilycgeorge1@gmail.com

*Men “made of waxe”:
 Angels, Idols, and the Power to Turn in The Virgin Martyr*

What did it mean to 'convert' in seventeenth-century England? What role did people play in converting themselves? For largely Protestant Jacobean audiences, these were urgent questions with perilous stakes: salvation, or damnation. While complex notions of conversion were hardly unique to the early modern era, the intense and conflicted reformations of the sixteenth century challenged traditional methods of enacting and understanding inward transformations—and posed challenges to drama's ability to represent such changes. Criticism of conversion scenes in early modern drama has focused on false conversions that use theater (costumes, spectacle, performance) to imply that any conversion might be mere performance. However, drama also depicts turns meant to be authentic, and in doing so confronts the problem of representing invisible turns in ways that are tangible and legible to audiences.

This paper focuses on one example of 'turning' and its relation to invisible supernatural agents: the sudden conversion to Christianity of Antoninus, the war hero in love with

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Saint Dorothea in *The Virgin Martyr* (c. 1620). Antoninus possesses uncertain control over his own turn, compelled by an angel at Dorothea's dying request. Yet he also asserts a degree of choice in his final moments, longing for his soul to follow Dorothea's. What role do occult powers play in transforming Antoninus into a Christian? How important to successful conversion is the consent of the convert? I suggest that through the presence and agency of its angel, *The Virgin Martyr* dramatizes, and explores ways to reconcile, the uncertainty and contradictions of predestinarian conversion doctrines and suggests that theater could represent conversion as a confounding force that may not need to be understood in order to be experienced and recognized.

***Ms. Stephanie Howieson**
Longwood University
howiesonsa@longwood.edu

“Led on by heaven”:
The Will of God in Shakespeare’s Trag comedies

In Shakespeare's tragicomedies divine providence actively directs the circumstances of characters using their suffering to bring them to a happy end. When in 1606, *An Act To Restraine Abuses of Players*, forbade on the stage the use of the name of "God, or of Christ Jesus, or of the Holy Ghost or of the Trinity", the playwright turns to the classical figures of Apollo, Diana, and Jupiter, or sometimes referring to the more generic "gods" or "heavens". Shakespeare's audience, however, understood them to be a thinly veiled representation of the Christian God. The early modern audience recognized the guiding force behind the orchestration of circumstances in Shakespeare's tragicomedies as God exercising his sovereign will over the characters' (and by extension) their own lives. In these plays characters experience suffering which is intended for their good and ultimately accept and embrace a divinely ordered world. The plays offer reassurance to the early modern audience that their lives too are being controlled by a benevolent God; they are "led on by heaven" to be "crowned with joy at last." But the shared biblical perspective early modern audiences brought to the theatre is something today's playgoers have largely lost. It may be difficult for our postmodern audience to understand just how thoroughly theocentric the lives of the early modern audience were. How then may 21st century productions make clear the important religious implications in these plays?

***Professor Katie Kadue**
University of Chicago
kadue@uchicago.edu

The “Inchanting Ravishment” of Chastity in Shakespeare and Milton

Early modern ideas about female sexuality often indexed a fear of the violence that women's bodies and desires could do to the world and the social order. Even when women deemed sexually deviant weren't persecuted as witches, their power was seen as in need of urgent containment, often dramatized on the early modern stage. As Mary

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Floyd-Wilson shows in her reading of *Twelfth Night*, women's wombs were thought to have a magnetic force of attraction that required male governance, and Valerie Traub argues that in Shakespeare, the only safe female sexuality is a dead one.

But the cultural obsession with chastity, while related to anxieties about excessive sexuality, was fixated precisely on what women (and sometimes men) *didn't* do. Chastity—whether in the sense of virginity or in the sense of fidelity—functioned to keep people, and things, apart, maintaining the borders of individual identities and marital units and preventing disruptions to social organization. This paper will argue that chastity's invisible capacity both preternaturally to preserve and, when perceived to be compromised, to unmake the world entirely is understood in Shakespeare and Milton as a form of witchcraft, all the more surprising because of its fundamental passivity and all the more insidious because of its fundamental illegibility. Reading *Othello*, *Measure for Measure*, and *Comus* alongside alchemical understandings of the occult qualities of virginity, I will show how chastity, though impossible to represent on stage, nonetheless structures early modern drama's conceptualizations of gender, sexuality, epistemology, the natural world, and dramatic action.

***Dr. Aaron Wells Kitch**
Bowdoin College
akitch@bowdoin.edu

“Masters of Their Fate”:
***Divination in Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar*”**

Renewed interest in divination in Shakespeare's England derived from several sources, including both stoic and epicurean revivals in Europe beginning in the fifteenth century and works on astrology and divination by Protestant theologians such as Melanchthon and Calvin. For Stoics, divination confirmed the benevolent will of the gods as revealed through nature and opened up the possibility for those skilled in the arts of discernment to anticipate (though not necessarily to change) the future. Epicureans acknowledged a role for the gods in originally creating the universe, but argued that they were largely indifferent to its continuing operation. Many protestants regarded astrology and other efforts to anticipate God's will as highly problematic, but acknowledged that God's will could be discerned using proper methods. They also insisted on a place for human will, in spite of Calvinist predetermination. All three positions can be found, to varying degrees, in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, which produces divination as an unseen force of political agency.

My specific claim is that Shakespeare emphasizes divination in the first three acts of his tragedy in order to heighten the moral and political ambiguity surrounding the plot to assassinate Caesar. The difficulty that both Caesar and the conspirators have in interpreting a range of natural and supernatural signs—from the soothsayer to the tempest dropping fire to Calphurnia's dream of Caesar's statue spouting blood—underscores the ambivalence of Caesar as a political figure. Shakespeare's strategic additions to some of

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his sources—particularly Plutarch's *Lives* and a section from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* that details the ascension of Caesar into the heavens—raise broader questions about the role of the theater in relation to divination, especially in the way that it worked to stage some of the hidden or occult forces that were thought by many to shape events in the everyday world. The play thus establishes divination as an unseen force of political agency even while questioning that force in many acts of misperception. Ultimately, *Julius Caesar* establishes the theater itself as a forum of both cosmological and preternatural discernment, even if it also ultimately ironizes such discernment.

***Dr. Justin Barnes Kolb**
American University in Cairo
Justinbarneskolb@gmail.com

**“Sterile Promontory”:
The decay of nature and paranoid natural philosophy**

This paper will examine the literary legacies of "the decay of nature" a set of theological and natural- philosophical ideas common in the first half of the 17th century which posited that human original sin affected all of nature. Sin leads the earth and its creatures to slowly shrink, cool, decay and, erode, only to be relieved when God burns the world in an act of fiery euthanasia. George Herbert's poem "Decay" offers a concise summation:

I see the world grows old, whenas the heat Of thy great love once spread, as in an urn
Doth closet up itself and still retreat,
Cold sinne still forcing it, till it return,
And calling Justice, all things burn

I see resonances between the decay of nature discourse, which saw human action and sin in every grain of sand and blade of grass, and the modern geologic and ecologic idea of the Anthropocene, our epoch, in which human action has marked the natural world down to the molecular level. The Little Ice Age, the centuries-long cool period in which included the Tudor and Stuart eras, was also possibly an Anthropocene era, in which the depopulation of the Americas after 1492 led to reforestation and lower atmospheric carbon dioxide levels. I'm interested in how the decay of nature discourse prompted a paranoid reading of nature for signs and portents of humanity's failure of creation, and the of the unmaking, the anti-*poesis*, that original sin had set in motion. This discourse turned natural things into a series of occult signs, through which the hidden larger decline of the world could be seen.

I am interested in how the works of Shakespeare and other writers use natural portents to described a fallen, and falling world. I'm currently looking at examples from *Hamlet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but the paper will likely address others as well.

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***Dr. Laura E. Levine**
New York University
levine@nyc.rr.com

'Truely and Guiltily Learned':
Wicked Mysteries and Notorious Conjurors

At the beginning of “A briefe Description of the Notorious Life of John Lambe,” the pamphleteer introduces a dilemma: Was Lambe a fraud and charlatan or “truely and guiltily learned in those wicked mysteryes” of witchcraft? The pamphlet, thus, begins with a need for certainty: what was Doctor Lambe? Such anxieties are rife in both pamphlet literature and scholarly demonological texts and are complicated by the ways in which categories like “witch” and “charlatan” often fuse.

How do anxieties about certainty shape depictions of conjurors like Lambe or the “notorious conjuror” Doctor Fian, described in the pamphlet *Newes From Scotland*? How do such anxieties manifest themselves in Shakespeare’s magicians and witches, in other characters skilled in the occult? My paper will address such questions in one or more of these texts.

***Ms. Melissa Pullara**
Carleton University
melissa.pullara@carleton.ca

Memory of a Maiden:
Ghosts and Gender in The Second Maiden’s Tragedy

The early modern relation to the figure of the ghost was complex—Protestant theologians denied the idea that a human soul could return to wander the earth, even as people continued to encounter, what they supposed were, the ghosts of loved ones throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth-centuries. The figure of the ghost in Elizabethan and Jacobean England embodies the ultimate undermining force—a presence that is adamantly denied and yet somehow cannot be escaped. The dramatic ghost often seems to capitalize on this distinct position between existing within systems of belief and being ostracized from them. They do this, I argue, by prompting characters with whom they interact to consider possible truths which extend beyond those dictated by the more influential socio-political and/or cultural powers. In other words, they bring to the psychological forefront thoughts that resist popular belief—the intentionally unacknowledged ideas that haunt the margins of it. My seminar paper will explore this representation of the ghost in Middleton’s *The Second Maiden’s Tragedy*. I seek to explore how the Lady’s Ghost is not merely a signifier of the need for revenge. More significantly, it uses its memorial power—yet another unseen significance of the ghost in

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Renaissance drama—to force the Lady’s lover to confront his failure to embody the masculine ideal, while nonetheless challenging the criteria of that ideal as being specifically masculine. In so doing, the ghost upsets normalized visions of gender by prompting Govanius to occupy a space in between—neither wholly effeminate nor conventionally masculine, neither outside patriarchal norms nor fully invested in them, thereby de-solidifying contemporary ideas about masculinity, and destabilizing the gendered assumptions which underlie the socio-political hierarchy.

***Professor Katy Reedy**
Lake Forest College
Katyree@gmail.com

Suspected Plagues and Sealed Up Doors in Romeo and Juliet

Nowhere else in Shakespeare, and almost nowhere else in the period, does the plague so directly interrupt dramatic action as it does in *Romeo and Juliet*. Suspected of fleeing a shut-in household, one where the “infectious pestilence did reign,” Friar John cannot reach Romeo in time because of the common plague-time practice of quarantine. Stuck in a house with “sealed up doors,” Friar John’s delay is one of the many “accidents” and forces of contingency within this “star-crossed,” generically-mixed play. This moment of quarantine has been taken to reflect the various and complex temporalities afoot in the play, or as another medical detail in a play filled with stores of ambivalently-charged drugs, like the heaps of potions and poisons that blur the line between life and death like the play’s own generic irresolution, in Tanya Pollard’s account. Less favorably, the offstage outbreak has been read as an imported plot device, an ostensibly crude narrative move in Arthur Brooke’s source material, where quarantined friars “Charged to kepe within theyr covent gate” and “shunned” by the “townefolk,” are detained thanks to the “magistrates appointed for the health and visitation of the sick,” only so that the tragic accidents can unfold. This essay in contrast reads the “sealed up doors” not as a plot device or a marginal medical practice of note, but as a critical part of the occult and transformative forces of the play: a remedy that ultimately stands at odds with Shakespeare’s own larger theatrical enterprise itself. I examine this unseen scene of suspected plague alongside the play’s other fear-inducing contagions and plague-cursed households to show the disparate meanings of contagion at work in this story, from Queen Mab’s imagined blisters to the eyeball infections of love. By examining how Shakespeare subtly repurposes Brooke’s quarantined Friar, my essay thus exposes the challenges of containment and the dangers of infection. Upending boundaries between his fictional characters and theater-house audiences, Shakespeare suggests the potentially infectious power of the stage in the earliest, and one of the only, dramatized moments of plague outbreaks on the early modern stage

***Ms. Courtney Naum Scuro**
University of California, Riverside
cscur001@ucr.edu

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"I do move everywhere/Swifter than the moon's sphere": Imagining Time's Magical Matter in Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream

A Midsummer Night's Dream is a very time-attentive play, as scholars have long observed. However, previous readings tend to presuppose a juxtaposition between fairy and “real” world at the core of the play’s temporal program. But what about the many places, moments, and relations in which we see paradox suspended? What happens to the play’s timescapes when we read attentive to its many instances of binary refusal instead? And shifting our attention out to the city lying beyond the edges of the stage (to London), what sorts of connections might we draw between the play’s magical timekeepers and the changing time-practices affecting English society at the moment of this play’s conception? In this essay, I undertake to explore these questions and the possibility that Shakespeare’s conceptualization of *fairy-time* in *Dream* imaginatively investigates a time-practice of preternatural power unlike our own, yes, but which is heavily invested in remaking views of our very *human* relations to time, as well. On the one hand, Shakespeare’s *fairy-time* works like many of the other occult capacities given life on stage in *Dream* by seeking to move us beyond mere mortal apprehensions of natural world; on the other, it represents a timesense provocatively aligned in language and form with that of human manufacture: invoking associations to horological advancements reshaping English engagements with time at the start of the seventeenth century. In other words, time in *Dream* bespeaks a sort of occult aspirationalism, one might say. Especially through Oberon and Puck’s competing methodologies for quantifying time, *Dream* works to draw out epistemological parallels between the natural oversight, intervention, and control exhibited by the fairies and newly emergent horological practices. Thus, *fairy-time* in *Dream*, I will argue, quite purposefully and productively confuses distinctions between mortal and magical times to imagine what sorts of agentializing capacities--like those displayed by the fairies in, with, and through time--may potentially lie within an expanding scope of human capacities.

*Ms. Christina M. Squitieri
 New York University
cms531@nyu.edu

***The Occult Agent of Disguise:
 Clothing as Character in The Revenger's Tragedy***

In this paper, I argue that disguise acts as an “occult agent” in Thomas Middleton(?)’s *The Revenger’s Tragedy* (1606). In the play, Vindice disguises himself in the costume of a bawd and calls himself Piato in order to get revenge on the wicked Duke who poisoned his beloved. When his revenge is complete, Vindice removes the disguise and attempts to return to his identity as Vindice, discarding Piato with the costume. Yet his plan is unsuccessful: instead, Piato, described in almost exclusively sartorial terms, continues to exist in the play in two ways: both through Vindice’s voice, which is recognized as Piato’s, and as clothing that maintains an identity and agency. Analyzing concepts of resurrection and its connection to clothing and identity, I argue that disguise is able to

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create Piato as an individual who, though signified by clothing and voice, can exist without a body—to become something between ghost and person—that is not seen in the flesh but is nevertheless still able to *act*. I also suggest that the connection between clothing and personhood is more powerful than Jones and Stallybrass's well-known claims in *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory*, but that, at least in the play, there is something “occult” created by the fabric and the body that allows divested disguise to claim an identity all its own.