

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

*Professor Caroline Bicks
 University of Maine
caroline.bicks@maine.edu

Spirits, Sorcery, and the Adolescent Brain in Milton's Comus

My paper focuses on the mysterious operations of the imagination (with its attending spirits) and, in particular, on the powers of the adolescent female brain that harnessed them. After a brief discussion of puberty, and some of the ways in which early moderns depicted the cognitive transformations that the “change of fourteen years” initiated, I turn to John Milton’s *Comus*, and the battle of the spirits he stages between a teenage girl and a sorcerer. In 1634, fifteen-year-old Alice Egerton performed the role of the Lady in Milton’s masque, commissioned in honor of Alice’s father, the Earl of Bridgewater. The entertainment features the attempted seduction of the Lady by an evil sorcerer, Comus, who lures her to his forest den and uses his magic to immobilize her. The stand-off Milton crafts between the Lady’s “youthful fancy” and Comus’s magic figures the occult dimensions of the early modern imagination while also negotiating the particular powers of the female adolescent brain. Milton (assisted by the fifteen-year-old Alice) stages the dynamic and mysterious experience of embodied cognition, and puts the adolescent female imagination, kindled by the change of fourteen years, at its epicenter.

*Ms. Beatrice Bradley
 University of Chicago
bbradley@uchicago.edu

“A young and sweating devil”: Perspiration, Touch, and Effort in Othello

In 3.4 of *Othello*, Othello demands that Desdemona “give” him her hand, and he observes, “This hand is moist, my lady” (3.4.36). In Shakespeare’s own poetry (*Venus and Adonis*) as well as elsewhere in seventeenth-century literature (i.e., Donne’s “The Ecstasy”), the clasping of sweaty palms is suggestive of erotic interplay: the fluidic mingling makes sexual activity and particularly its intimate moments—the exchange of fluids—visible. Desdemona’s response that her hand “yet hath felt no age, nor known no sorrow” opens the door to flirtation, as she emphasizes her youth and happy disposition (3.4.37). Yet that which elsewhere in the seventeenth century appears as alluring—the smooth and moist hand brimming with youthful vitality—Othello interprets as malevolent. He instructs his wife that she should turn herself to “exercise devout” because “here’s a young and sweating devil, here” (3.4.42).

This paper explores just what Othello means by “sweating devil,” a phrase unique to Shakespeare, and it considers the implications of calling audience attention to sweat produced by bodies on the stage. Just as the clasping of hands makes legible the mechanisms of sexual activity, here *Othello* underscores the mechanisms of otherwise invisible theatrical effort. Sweat reveals the physical demands of performance and, I

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

suggest, the actors themselves beneath the stage makeup. Critical accounts have noted early modern discourse surrounding makeup's capacity to stain, but I attend in this paper to depictions of makeup as smudged, running, or generally soluble. For example, Ben Jonson's *The Devil Is an Ass* cautions that women who "earn / Their living with their sweat" disturb their makeup, for "any distemper / Of heat and motion may displace the colours" (4.3.40-42). Sweat, ultimately a marker of exertion, holds the potential to disrupt the very categories of gender and race that makeup seeks to construct.

*Ms. Jessica Hanselman Gray
 University of California, Davis
jhgray@ucdavis.edu

"this strange intelligence": Maternity and Occult Knowledge in Macbeth

Early modern discourses of both maternity and occult knowledge share a preoccupation with contagion, corruption, sympathy, permeability, and secrecy. In early modern literature, discourses of occult knowledge and childbirth often appear side by side or even overlap, often with the shared implication that power is most threatening when its mechanisms are not visible. This paper will focus on such a juxtaposition in *Macbeth*, where occult knowledge and human reproduction—which might be lumped together as "exercising power over forces that operate in secret"—are figured as co-agents. In reading these two forces beside each other, I hope to explore the way that the play's reproductive metaphors express anxieties about methods of knowledge production and intellectual authority.

This paper focuses especially on the ambiguous provenance of one transformative piece of knowledge in the play: the prophecy that "none of woman born shall harm Macbeth" (4.1.91). Famously, Macbeth interprets "none of woman born" to mean "none," failing to recognize its broader possible payload of meaning, leaving him vulnerable to harm from Macduff, who slips through a loophole in the prophecy by having been "from his mother's womb untimely ripped" (5.8.19-20). Macbeth fails to see and recognize the alternative interpretation that the phrase was "pregnant" with, so to speak—the possibility that a man who came into the world unconventionally might exist, turning the prophecy into a warning rather than a promise. His is a failure, in part, to fully understand not only the vagaries of childbirth but also the fecundity of language. Following the convention of association among discourses of knowledge, maternity, and hiddenness, I hope to bring the early modern "fantasy image of the huge, controlling, scattered, polluted, leaky fantasy of the maternal body of the Imaginary" to bear on the economy of intelligence/knowledge in *Macbeth* and explore the multiple ways in which this bit of intelligence, as well as other knowledge circulated within the play, is figuratively generative, secretive, and threatening (Purkiss, 119).

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

***Dr. Gina M. DiSalvo**
University of Tennessee
gdisalvo@utk.edu

The Blazing Star on the Renaissance Stage

The postmedieval, professional theatre of Shakespeare's time regularly addressed the supernatural. After the appearance of the Great Comet of 1577, writers of all genres, including dramatic literature, increasingly alluded to comets or blazing stars, as they were more commonly known. For example, in the anonymous *Taming of A Shrew* (c.1590), a husband who obeys his wife is described as "Worse than a blasing starre, or snow at midsommer/ Earthquakes or anything vnseasnable," in *All's Well That Ends Well* (c.1603), the "blazing starre" is invoked as a metaphor for an uncommon occurrence, and in *The School of Complaint* (c.1625) by James Shirley, a woman's "[r]esplendent" face is "like a blazing Starre/We mortals wonder at." These dramatic references mirror discussions of blazing stars as rare, wonderful, and ominous in sermons, poetry, and chronicle history. More interesting than these verbal/textual references, however, are the appearances of blazing stars as theatrical devices in six plays: *The Battle of Alcazar* (c.1589), *2 If You Know Not Me, You Know Nobody* (c.1605), *The Revenger's Tragedy* (c.1606), *The Bloody Banquet* (c.1608), *Thorney Abbey* (c.1615), and *The Birth of Merlin* (c.1622). In this paper, I'm interested in exploring how these plays frame the interpretation of the blazing star within overlapping epistemologies of magic, theology, and/or science (natural philosophy). I will argue that the blazing star figures as an outward sign of a supernatural world, but does not function as an efficacious sign, like a sacrament. Rather, its primary function in/as theatre is to confirm otherwise undetectable agents. That is, the blazing star is not, itself, supernatural phenomena, but it acts as a fleeting, momentary meteoric speculum that decodes hidden supernatural phenomena already and always at work.

***Dr. Molly M. Hand**
Florida State University
m.molly.hand@gmail.com

Familiar pursuits: Shakespeare's bear and other ursine familiars

The object of the preposition in that most famous of Shakespearean stage directions, "Exit, pursued by a bear," has been the subject of much critical inquiry. Scholars have illuminated relations to bear-baiting, classical myth, biblical texts, contemporary news, and dramatic precursors and intertexts. Historians and literary critics have debated whether an actual tame bear may have appeared on stage, or if the bear – if presented at all – was played by an actor in a suit made of bear skins.

The Winter's Tale, like other Shakespearean drama, displays a marked fascination with questions of occult influences. Amid multiple references to external forces acting upon the humoral dispositions of the characters and guiding their actions and passions, the question of the bear merits consideration with regard to the framework of the occult, and particularly, with regard to the question of witchcraft and the figure of the animal familiar

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

– a spirit in the shape or likeness of an animal. Though some scholars read familiars strictly as embodiments of the demonic, numerous contemporary accounts paint a more complex picture. For familiars were sometimes agents of divine retribution, and though they often worked with or for a witch, they are also described as acting of their own accord in several accounts.

This essay considers the implications of reading the bear within the broader discourse of early modern witchcraft. Part of a larger study of animal familiars at the intersection of early modern habits of “thinking with animals” and “thinking with demons,” this reading situates the bear as an agent of divine justice within the contemporary dialogue around familiar figures.

Shakespeare’s bear is not the only ursine familiar in early modern culture. At least one spirit in the shape of a bear preceded the play, and one appeared after. Thus, among the play’s intertexts are two sensational accounts of ursine familiars, both of which occur in texts popular or vendible enough to appear in multiple editions. How does reading Shakespeare’s bear as an animal familiar enhance our understanding of the play, of bears in early modern spectacles of violence, and of animal familiars in witchcraft accounts more broadly? In responding to such questions, this essay locates new ways of addressing the familiar figure of Shakespeare’s bear.

***Dr. Brian J. Harries**
Concordia University
brian.harries@cuw.edu

***“The Spirit I’ve Seen May be the Devil”:
 Luther and the Power of Angels and Demons in Hamlet***

The German Reformers in 16th-century Wittenberg were particularly troubled by questions of occult influences like demons, spirits, ghosts, and even the existence of Purgatory as an intermediate step between the mortal world and the afterlife. On the one hand, these had all the earmarks of Catholic superstitions that they needed avoid to and eschew to reestablish a right Christian faith. On the other hand, these were potent ideas where a lot was at stake—they couldn’t afford to dismiss an occult element if there was a chance it might pose a real danger.

The English protestant public at the end of the 16th century shared many of these uncertainties. In addition to the formal German training that early English Reformers like Thomas Cranmer brought with them to questions of church doctrine, many works by Luther and Melanchthon were available in English translation for the average reader. This paper seeks to understand what they knew and thought about people like Martin Luther and Philip Melanchthon, and how plays connected to Wittenberg, like *Hamlet* and *Dr. Faustus* in particular, build upon that knowledge. Demons and devils (or the threat thereof) certainly play a big part in *Hamlet*, in particular, and the dynamics of what is seen and unseen has some grounding in the well-known ideas of the Wittenberg

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

Reformers. In this way, the Elizabethan audience may be using these plays to explore uncomfortable uncertainties about the unseen influences in human life.

***Professor Phebe Jensen**
Utah State University
phebe.jensen@usu.edu

“Fatal Loins”: Astrology in Romeo and Juliet

At the end of *Romeo and Juliet* Romeo defines his suicide as an act that will “shake the yoke of inauspicious stars / From this world-wearied flesh” (5.3.111-12). That metaphor articulates the nature of astral influence as it was understood in early modern Ptolemaic astrology. In this understanding, astrological influence is physical. The stars imprint their influence on bodies in the sublunar world; that physical imprint can influence “the passions, and affections of the minde, as they follow the good or evill temperature of the body” (Heydon, *Defence*, fol. 27v). But there is give in this system. As centuries of Christian defenders of astrology had argued, Ptolemaic astrology clearly established that the will can resist (or enhance) the inclination imprinted by the stars. The stars incline; they do not compel. In keeping with these assumptions, Romeo’s metaphor identifies the corporeality of astrological influence—as a yoke that bites into human flesh—but Romeo also insists on the ability of his will to resist that influence.

This paper will trace the hidden astral influences that operate through the material sublunar bodies in *Romeo and Juliet*, including the “plants, herbs, [and] stones” that owe their “true qualities” (2.2.16), at least partly, to the influence of the stars. To be “star-crossed,” I’ll suggest, does not involve subjection to an abstracted fate. Rather, it is to be subject to the invisible, corporeal astral influences that begin at the crucial moment of nativity, invoked in the “fatal loins” from which the lovers “take their life” (Prologue 5-6).

***Dr. Amy Kenny**
University of California, Riverside
amy.kenny@ucr.edu

***The “venom boiling in my veins”:
The Humoral Agency of Poison in The White Devil and The Devil’s Charter***

Poisons, doctor of physic Daniel Sennert claims, have “occult qualities, because their force is known only by their operation and effect.” While poison was often considered illusive in the early modern period, it is rendered visible on stage through the materiality of stage properties. This paper explores how John Webster’s *The White Devil* and Barnabe Barnes’ *The Devil’s Charter* stage poison and its aftermath by focusing on the humorality of the objects that administer the corrosive toxins. In *The White Devil*, Isabella is “poisoned by the fumed picture” after repeatedly kissing the portrait’s perfumed lips as a sign of religious devotion to her husband, Brachiano (2.2.26). Her

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

death is dramatized in a dumb show which emphasizes the poisonous spectacle and silences her response. *The Devil's Charter* also focuses on the stage properties used to apply Lucretia's poisonous cosmetics: "a table, two looking glasses, a box of combs and instruments, and a rich bowl" (4.3.11-12).

In both of these plays, the objects (vial, box, comb, rich bowl, looking glass, portrait, perfume) become humoral agents by delivering scorching contaminants to the permeable body. Their presence on stage mediates the occult nature of poison by exposing its destruction for the audience. Although this is undoubtedly part of the mechanics of dramatizing the occult in a visual medium, it blurs the boundary between human subject and inanimate object by endowing these props with a humoral agency over the body of the actor. While now assumed passive, everyday objects were typically bestowed with a quasi-sentient power in early modern texts, which drew on *scala naturae*, the notion that all forms of being exist in a continuum of virtues, motion, and action. This paper will explore how poisonous properties overpower the body when staging the occult by examining the humoral agency of the props themselves.

***Professor James A. Knapp**
Loyola University Chicago
jknapp3@luc.edu

Thinking "Spirit" in Cymbeline

This paper addresses the multiform ways in which early modern writers thought with, through, and about spirits. Taking Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* as my literary example, I examine connections among a range of early modern conceptions of spirits including but not limited to: the animating principle in living things, material bodily substances, the mind or intellect, and third person of the trinity. By attending to these distinct but overlapping senses of the term "spirit" I explore how early modern writers deployed spirits as liminal substances poised on the dividing line between the material and immaterial, but also importantly occupying both realms. As the interlocutors of the visible and invisible, the known and unknown, the material and immaterial, spirits existed across a seemingly unbridgeable conceptual divide. Standing between thought and thing, spirits resemble Theseus's "airy nothing," a compound that is both nothing and something (air) and something that resembles nothing (air). Considered in this way spirits can be seen to serve as an index to some of the most pressing early modern debates in theology and natural philosophy, creating powerful opportunities for the poetic imagination.

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

***Professor Jesse M. Lander
University of Notre Dame
jlander@nd.edu**

***Spectacular, Spectacular:
Staging Invisibility in The Tempest***

The relationship between the occult and the stage presents an immediate puzzle. What accounts for the strange attraction between a medium dedicated, in good part, to visual spectacle and a category designating the unseen? I address this question by looking at *The Tempest*, a play that is preoccupied with the problem of staging invisibility. While I will spend some time on Henslowe's famous "robe for to go invisible," the major focus will be on the appearance of Ariel and other spirits. Theater historians have argued convincingly that Ariel's water nymph costume was inherited from a sea-pageant celebrating the investiture of Prince Henry in 1610, but surprisingly little attention has been paid to Ariel's appearance upon first entrance. The initial encounter with Prospero recalls the moment when Mephistopheles and Faustus first meet. In the earlier play, the monstrous devil that first appears is told to go put on the form of "an old Franciscan friar" (3.26). Prospero also wants Ariel to put on a pleasing form: "Go make thyself like a nymph o' th' sea. / Be subject to no sight but thine and mine, invisible / To every eyeball else" (1.2.302-4). But, in this case, the additional stipulation that Ariel remain invisible complicates the situation. Within the play world, the water-nymph costume is otiose, it serves only as an opportunity to display Prospero's taste and power, and remind the audience that spirits are shape shifters. However, within the theater, it serves to recruit the audience to the position of Prospero: like him, they are able to enjoy the spectacle of Ariel's appearance. This moment initiates the play's extensive staging of the invisible and, I will argue, indicates that the theater could, and often did, operate as a technology for making invisible spirits visible.

***Ms. Alexander Lowe McAdams
Rice University
alexander.l.mcadams@rice.edu**

***Air, Magic, Spirit:
Occult Agents and Pythagorean Doctrine in Shakespeare's Tempest***

While literary critics and artistic directors have focused on the proto-colonial interpretations of Shakespeare's *Tempest*, this paper argues that certain environmental factors, such as "airs" and "spirits," suggests the playwright's flirtation with alternative models of cosmologies. Indeed, as scholars have frequently noted, it is nearly impossible to untangle the characters from the environmental factors that subsume them. This paper pays particular attention to the airy spirits that flit around Prospero's island and aligns their ontological status within the Pythagorean doctrine of the world-soul made popular by heterodox iconoclast Giordano Bruno. By suggesting that the spirits in *The Tempest* function as cosmological links between the physical world and the platonic ideals of the

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

universe, this paper ultimately proposes that *The Tempest* is a prime example of the Bard's philosophical meditation on the narrow epistemological boundary between reality and "thin air" (4.1.151).

***Ms. Sara Schlemm**
Cornell University
sara.schlemm@gmail.com

Ophelia's Flowers and Goetic Magic in Hamlet

This paper argues that the mad Ophelia's botanical allusions in Act 4 of *Hamlet* express a particular kind of natural magic at work in the play and in early modern England. This kind of natural magic is goety, often known as necromancy or black magic, but more broadly as daemonic magic in a more neutral sense. In early modern England many writers misspelled "goety" as "geocy" or "geotie," which suggests that goety has important affinities with the earth and the environment. In her madness, Ophelia distributes flowers to Claudius, Gertrude, and Laertes while reciting these flowers' names and folkloric meanings. For example, Ophelia tells her interlocutors that pansies mean thoughts and that rosemary signifies remembrance. But in the period of *Hamlet's* composition, this kind of botanical legibility was rapidly becoming a discredited superstition. I show how the goetic aspects of Ophelia's flowers join other idolatrous discourses as an occult influence over *Hamlet* itself. I demonstrate why Ophelia's flower distribution has a goetic power over her audience. It is no coincidence that this earthy natural magic is to be found in *Hamlet*, a play whose medieval elements (both occult and overt) complicate its affinities with theological and scientific modernity. This paper engages with scholarship that reveals the entangled relationship of flowers and texts in early modern literature and culture. I argue that accounts of goety exploit this relationship in rich ways. I also discuss Ophelia's floral interlude alongside accounts of goety by Pico della Mirandola and Agrippa as well as other supernatural episodes in *Hamlet* that have a goetic charge. In conclusion, this paper argues that Ophelia's flowers bridge words, things, and uses in a magical manner redolent of goety as well as of pre-Reformation culture.

***Ms. Tanya Schmidt**
New York University
tk256@nyu.edu

"Lest Your Fancy Think":
Thinking about Fancy in Shakespeare's The Winter's Tale

As increasingly detailed anatomical diagrams of the body became available in the 16th century and impacted ideas about how the brain receives and perceives sensory input, questions about where the imagination comes from and how it operates also became increasingly vexed. The many varied portraits of "fancy," "fantasy," and "imagination" throughout Shakespeare's plays register some of this capaciousness. In *The Merchant of*

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

Venice, as Bassanio considers the riddle of Portia's three caskets, a song begins: "Tell me where is fancy bred, / Or in the heart or in the head?" (3.2.63). While "fancy" here is typically glossed as desire, also at play is the meaning within faculty psychology of fancy as a cognitive faculty of image-making.

Thinking about the question of where fancy originates and grows, my paper rehearses some of the debates in early modern cognitive theory surrounding the location of fancy and then focuses on moments in *The Winter's Tale* to show as an example how this science unveils in Shakespeare's plays. My paper argues that attending to early modern debates about faculty psychology, which never reached definitive consensus on locating fancy, illuminates how the early modern theater self-consciously encourages not only speculation about how the imagination functions but also cultivates an acceptance of the limits of epistemology. In an age of increasing scientific precision of the anatomy of the human body, mental faculties in general, and "fancy" in particular, remain occult forces that nevertheless wield great power over human characters, sometimes against their wills. The early modern theater attempts to make this power visible through dramatic action, and fancy appears to occupy a liminal space not quite separable from a person's body but also not necessarily originating from the body either.