Abstracts for SAA 2025 Seminar: "Early Modern Underworlds"

"All the devils are here": Prospero's Island as a vision of hell in *The Tempest*
Catherine Canino

Early Modern Christians, at least those who actually turned their thoughts toward religion, had an obligatory interest in heaven but an obsessive fascination with hell. Heaven was their ultimate goal, but it was a vague place, and there was a hesitancy to portray it in art or literature. Hell, on the other hand, was a favorite subject of artists and writers and from the early Middle Ages, visions of hell permeated the culture. Although Shakespeare never openly portrays hell in the manner of some of his fellow playwrights, he nevertheless does insinuate hell like settings and atmospheres in his plays. The hellscapes of Macbeth, Titus Andronicus, and King Lear have been discussed at length by critics. However, I would like to leave the genre of tragedy and explore the possibility of hell in a more unlikely place. Specifically, Shakespeare's The Tempest, alternately seen as a dramatization of travel narratives from the New World or an allegory of Western imperialism, has more than a passing resemblance to the portrayals of hell that were circulating at the time.

Pastoral and the Underworld in Sannazaro's Arcadia (1504)
Nicholas Jones

Jacopo Sannazaro's *Arcadia* largely inhabits a utopian pastoral world of shepherds, picturesque and gently elegiac. But in the final chapter, the pastoral mood shatters as the narrator is swept home from Greece to Naples via an undersea river. He sees the cavern where all the rivers of the world begin, feels the underground volcanic fires of Vesuvius, and views the buried city of Pompeii (unexcavated at that time). The shift to a mood of sublime terror brings into focus the book's growing attention to political collapse, referencing the crisis of late 15th-century Naples, invaded and ransacked by both France and Spain. The chapter draws on Pliny's description of Vesuvius's eruption, as well as Virgil and Dante, and is later echoed in politically tinged underground/undersea passages in Shakespeare (Clarence's dream) and Milton (*Lycidas* and Books 1 & 2 of *Paradise Lost*).

"A Language Towght in Paradise:" Cryptography and John Dee's Angelic Language
Josiah Lamb

In the private diaries of John Dee, the Elizabethan mathematician and natural philosopher, we find evidence of a language that Dee referred to as "Adamical" or the "Language of Angels." This language, recorded as a series of tables of symbols that detail the angelic alphabet used during Dee's supposed conversation with angels, bears a striking similarity to characters used in cryptographical methods of communication. Cryptography, or the science of codes, uses special characters (numbers, letters, or symbols) to conceal messages—often political or sensitive in nature. However, as evidenced by Dee's work, these special characters could "also be used to provide a channel of communication with the spiritual world" (Láng 136). Thus, I will explore

how cipher can function in the early modern period not only as a method of concealed communication but also as a linguistic bridge between the human world and other worlds: both demonic and angelic.

Interpreting Clarence's Dream with Contemporary Texts
Amani Liggett

The power of dreaming reaches its apex in *Richard III*, with Richard telling the audience in his opening soliloquy that he has learned how to weaponize dreams and the culture of dream interpretation against his family. After Richard has his brother George, Duke of Clarence sent to the Tower of London, Clarence has a dream of the underworld, which he then narrates to the Tower guard with exceptionally rich language and imagery. Clarence's dream warns of his ensuing death, making the dream a vehicle for action, but it falls dramatically flat by coming far too late to do Clarence any good. Instead, Shakespeare uses this dream as a technique of recapitulation, judgment, and shame in *Richard III*. Clarence's dream illustrates this beautifully, using pageantry, history, and rhetorical power to enhance the dream's true dramatic point, the burden of remembrance. The dream reminds Clarence and Shakespeare's audience of his bad behavior from the previous two plays in the first tetralogy series (*2H6* and *3H6*). As the dream passage illuminates, this current Clarence has done some growing and is deeply haunted by guilt over his duplicitous actions during the wars of York and Lancaster.
The visceral response that Clarence has to his nightmare echoes the foundational belief of most early modern dream theory, which defines a dream as a reflection of one's complete inner self—both the body and the soul. If the body and soul are tainted through committing murder or perjury, then one's dreams will show the consequences of those actions. Using the early modern dream theory texts, *The moste pleasuante arte of the interpretacion of dreames* (1576) by Thomas Hill, and *The terrors of the night* (1594) by Thomas Nashe, I argue that the uncertainty around early modern dream interpretation in Shakespeare's time fuels the play's world of the role of supernatural belief in courtly politics; the dreams in this play shows that the errors of the past are the driving force behind the key choices characters make. Thomas Nashe held the skeptical view of dream interpretation, most dreams to him were products of superstition and an over-active imagination hearing outside noises during sleep, such that "if a dogge howle, we suppose we are transported into hell, where we heare the complaint of damned ghosts."1 Hill's dream text *The moste pleasuante arte* takes the opposite view of Nashe, and would confirm the devils and fiends that torture Clarence in the dream as "sometymes those bee trewe deuilles, whiche shewe themselues sodeinlye, beefore the soule departethe out of the mans bodye."2 I conclude that these two competing theories behind the source and nature of Clarence's dream are part of a wider conversation happening in the first tetralogy to define this period of English history as either a man-made disaster or a dreamlike providential punishment.

First-Person Speech in Bridewell Minute Books 1559-1610
Alan H. Nelson

The Bridewell Minute Books contain transcripts of accusations and confessions made before the Bridewell Court by suspect persons, their accusers, and witnesses. While most cases are

presented in indirect speech ("She said she lodged at such-and-such a place"), some contain first-person speech. Example of both (quotation marks added):

> The said Hall and his wife did both of them move [*i.e.*, encourage] [a sexual encounter] to this examinate, and she was unwilling, and both Hall and his wife said to this examinate: "Thou art a very fool! He is a goodly gentleman, and will give thee such a reward as may both do thee and us good!"

Such speeches may be as authentic as if they had been captured by a tape-recorder; but caution is necessary, as recorded speeches are mediated through the scribes who wrote down what they thought they heard. Whether authentic or mediated, we are here relatively close to original speech of the period.

To some extent this essay will be a fishing-expedition, a hunt for everyday speech, which may eventually be compared to speech as represented by, for example, playwrights of the same period. The London "Cockney" dropping of the initial "h" may also be detected, as also historical pronunciations of names like "Water" for "Walter", "Penbroke" for "Pembroke". The Bridewell manuscripts may also contain examples of what has been called "Thieves' cant".

***King Lear* and the Squatters' Movement**

Scott Oldenburg

While several scholars have noted *King Lear*'s engagement with the unhoused as Lear, the Fool, Kent, Edgar, and Gloucester wander the landscape. This approach frames the unhoused as passive, helpless figures calling out to the wealthy and powerful to aid them. But Lear and his cohort also find shelter, occupying a hovel on the countryside. Today we would call them squatters. While it wouldn't be deemed an underground movement until the late 1940s, squatting's long history points to human ingenuity, the ability to create a spontaneous order that spawns new social relationships that escape mediation and surveillance by the state or capital. This paper thus focuses on Lear's relation to squatting in the early modern period as well as performances that have seen squatting as an important context for the play, in particular the relationship between the Unity Theatre and Glasgow Citizen's Theater performances.

"A Voyage Made to an Infernall Iland": Carceral Underworlds

Charlotte Thurston

Early modern pamphleteers frequently figure prisons as hell and jailors and arresting officers as monsters (Cerberuses, devils, fiends). In the poet/actor/rogue William Fennor's *Compter's Commonwealth,* the narrator describes entering the Counter as a "voyage made to an infernall Iland*"* and Geffray Mynshul, imprisoned in the King's Bench, avers, "As soone as thou commest before the gate of the Prison, doe but thinke thou art entring into hell…thou shalt be sure not onely to finde hell, but fiends & ugly monsters." In *The Black Dogge of Newgate*, a supernatural legend (of a hellhound haunting Newgate) is repurposed to explore the social and material horrors of imprisonment: the black dog stands in for the keepers, jailors, and officers that tricked, exploited, and "devoured" people who were imprisoned or at risk of it. In a time where many people were imprisoned, often for debt, these texts point to hell as always close at hand, underworlds-as-hell entangled with criminal underworlds. City comedies and other plays in the

period, including *The Puritan Widow* (attributed to Middleton), represented the unsettling proximity of these underworlds while also revealing the networks and wit by which characters avoided, survived, and navigated them.