Abstracts
Seminar 31, Preternatural Shakespeare

The Blackening of *The Witch of Edmonton*

Vanessa R. Barcelos

This essay is a section of the second chapter of my dissertation, entitled "Race and Gender in Representations of Witches and Fairies in Early Modern English Literature." I argue that the play's witch, Elizabeth Sawyer, is symbolically blackened. The accusation of witchcraft, added to Elizabeth's vulnerable and intersectional position in the community as a poor, old, yet shrewish woman, together rendered her as dispensable and subhuman in the eyes of others. I read the play as one exemplary case of how racial optics allows for color-coded ideologies to develop even within communities that do not include a single person of color. I focus on otherness in white-skinned bodies, demonstrating that anti-blackness sentiment is not only manifested against phenotypical blackness. Instead, it extends to an imaginary where blackness, alongside other signs, could code someone as less-than-human even if they shared the same (white) color of skin. I suggest that, while in Macbeth the witches are represented in a way that approximates them to the supernatural creatures feared by demonologists, in Edmonton, the witch is closer to the figure of the poor old woman who falls victim to such accusations in community feuds, as described by Reginald Scot in his *Discoverie of Witchcraft*. I thus aim to explain how witchcraft and racialization intersect in *The Witch of Edmonton,* reminding us that witches – whether Shakespeare's weird sisters or Ford et al's Mother Sawyer – are performed contemporarily with the witch-hunts in Britain *and* the rise of British involvement with the Atlantic slave trade.

The Folklore of Fairy Names in Early Modern Literature

Kaitlyn Culliton

In folklore, names often carry supernatural power—in some traditions, the names of supernatural beings reveal something about their nature; in other cases, knowing something's name is to have power over it. In Spenser's epic poem, *The Faerie Queene,* England is reimagined as "faerie land" and its characters' names, pulled from Classical course texts and romance heroes, contribute to an allegorical decoding. In Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the fairies (Cobweb, Moth, and Mustardseed) readily give their names to the Athenian actor Bottom who puns on their culinary and medicinal namesakes. The call-and-response pattern of puns on fairy names that Bottom and his fairy servants participate in is prevalent in several early modern stage plays including Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1597) and Lyly's *The Mayde's Metamorphosis* (1600). Fairy names, and the decoding of meaning that they allow, ranges from practical culinary advice, to lewd jokes, and allusions to mythology. This paper examines the names given to fairy characters in early modern drama, poetry, and folklore as a means of reconstructing early modern uses of fairy belief and its practical function in daily life.

Wyrd, Witchy, or Wise? The Afterlives of Shakespeare's Weird Sisters

Jordan Ivie

Shakespeare's Weird Sisters have long been the subject of a scholarly discussion that debates the witches' agency in the larger world and their influence on the events of *Macbeth*. This paper enters this conversation by situating the Sisters in the larger context of wise women. Wise women, unlike witches, used their affinity with the powers and influences of the natural world for neutral purposes, or even for the good of their communities. However, they were situated on the margins of those communities, treated with a wariness that became more pronounced as the period progressed and they became more and more conflated with the unquestionably evil and supernatural witch. This paper argues that the Sisters, with their distance from other people, their hands-off approach to Macbeth, and their affinity with the natural world, resemble wise women as well as witches. The Sisters are a moment of cultural transformation trapped in amber, illustrating how women with preternatural characteristics were shifting from accepted to shunned.

This ambiguity is clear in the vast variety of modern theatrical interpretations of the Weird Sisters. I will draw on examples from popular film and stage productions, as well as productions that I have been involved with personally, to show how even modern directors and audiences are caught between viewing the Weird Sisters as neutral vessels of information and as malicious twisters of fate. The Sisters' physical locations on stage, their dress and appearance, and their involvement in other aspects of the play, all of which are left open-ended in Shakespeare's text, have enormous impact on whether the Sisters shift backward in time towards the wise woman or forward in time towards the evil witch. This versatility, the greatest of any character in the play, mirrors the ambivalence that many early moderns felt towards "magical" women.

Supernatural Soliciting, Equivocation and Absolutism in *Macbeth*

Jesse Lander

Since Henry N. Paul's *The Royal Play of* Macbeth made an argument, in 1951, that the Scottish play was a deeply meditated compliment to Shakespeare's new royal master, scholars have debated the play's politics and its religion. Frequently understood as supporting King James's incipient absolutism, the play came to be seen as skeptical of an overreaching monarchical power in the late-twentieth century. In these debates, more often than not, religion, reduced to providentialism, is understood to function as an ideological support for monarchy. However, the precise way that these arguments connect to claims about both witches and Jesuits remains complicated. As demonic inversions of proper religion, witches and Jesuits seem to confirm the very order that they assault, and the disordered language that is such a prominent feature of the play appears, from the outset, to be the result of malign supernatural interference. At the same time, the play presents an alternative secular account, derived from Roman history, of the linguistic corruption that attends tyranny. Together these two perspectives force the audience to grapple with the slippery distinctions between the supernatural, natural, preternatural, and unnatural.

Reading Shakespeare in Jewish Theological Frameworks: the Flaming Amazement of Ariel

Caroline Lion

Jewish thought in Shakespeare studies was once deemed anathema. Janet Adelman was told she was "praying at the wrong shrine." Today, Shakespeare is one shrine for everyone, a giant melting pot within which are so many theories and religions that Jewish theological thought might readily be included. My new project, *Flaming Amazement in the Tempest*, builds on *Shylock Beyond the Holocaust* (Routledge 2022). I am dedicated to an analysis that demonstrates character epiphanies (otherworldly realizations) as illuminated by Jewish theology and mysticism. The Introduction first reviews *Tempest* critical history. Then, it expands *Tempest* conversations from the subjugation of Caliban to an exploration of Tempest otherworldly/ preternatural beings. Such sublime characters, silenced and subjugated, empower the epiphanies of characters such as Prospero who can then choose to act on the epiphany (and the connected moral agency) instead of fear-based backstories.

This seminar paper will be taken from this piece of the Introduction that discusses the otherworldly and preternatural beings in *The Tempest*.

Ultimately, my Introduction argues that Shakespeare in *Tempest*, focuses on the mystical to remediate the withering of the epiphany and the degradation of the otherworldly, not during the rise of fascism as we see in postmodern twentieth-century philosophy, but during the often-violent earlymodern colonial enterprise. Now, we have new challenges. The illumination of the epiphany in Shakespeare is one way to negotiate present challenges and make our questionable world a better place.

"Murder Will Out"?:
True Crime Plays and the Marvelous in Early Modern England

Jennifer Lodine-Chaffey

Early modern English writers often alluded to the common belief "murder will out," or that God ensured murderers would be brought to justice by whatever means necessary, be that through the detective work of individuals and communities or through seemingly supernatural occurrences such as cruentation, ghosts, or the inability of the guilty to remove blood stains. References to such marvelous incidents appear in several true crime plays and while these happenings are typically attributed to Divine Providence, they may have also suggested the preternatural, or wonders that seemed like miracles but were actually linked to the intrinsic but invisible abilities of natural entities. Indeed, two different understandings of marvelous events are present in several surviving true crime plays composed during this era. An examination of *Two Lamentable Tragedies* (c. 1601), *A Warning for Fair Women* (c. 1599), and *Arden of Faversham* (1592) reveals that while some playwrights unambiguously upheld a belief in God's miraculous use of the natural world both to punish and to bring murderers to repentance, others never defined the marvelous events they depicted as either preternatural or supernatural. This uncertainty about wonders and marvels in true crime plays, I argue, reflects a broader cultural anxiety about the veracity of miracles and the prevalence of God's interventions in human affairs.

“Unseen to any but thyself”: Preternatural agency in *The Witch of Edmonton*

Nova Myhill

Like many early modern domestic tragedies, *The Witch of Edmonton* bridges the everyday lives of the people of early modern England and the preternatural world of demonic influences, dramatizing the dual experience of the natural and social world implied by religious texts of the period. This structure raises questions about the limits of human agency—to that extent are the perpetrators of domestic crime responsible for their own actions and to what extent are they captives of demonic influences? *The Witch of Edmonton* embodies these preternatural influences through the form of the black dog that unites the three plots of the play; involved to a greater or lesser extent in all of the fatal desires and decisions of the plot, the dog serves as a stage technique to externalize murderous thought. In so doing, he also potentially distances the actors from their actions. Of the three characters who are most affected by the dog, Cuddy Banks, who insists that he has “entertained you ever as a dog, not as a devil,” survives the play no worse for wear. However, Elizabeth Sawyer, whose physical and emotional dependence on the dog gives her the only chance she has of impacting those around her, and Frank Thorney, who never sees the dog but seems to decide on his crime through physical contact with it, are both led to crime, execution, and confession. I am particularly interested in the way this theatrical externalizing of demonic influence intersects with the play’s focus on Sir Arthur’s moral responsibility for Frank’s crimes and Elizabeth Sawyer’s insistence that England is full of witches who thrive because their magic is invisible. The play suggests that the preternaturally visible Dog is less a sign of demonic influence than a limitation on its unseen power.

Theater and Enchantment

John Parker

My paper will begin with some ancient views on rhythmic sound as a means of influencing gods, demons, and other humans. We owe to Greek religion the idea that a cosmic *rythmos* governs our destiny, hence that prophecies written in meter not only predict but occasion future outcomes: the way the formula is pronounced has the power to bind the fates. Pythagorean-Platonic theory similarly assumes a correspondence between human physiology and the harmony of the spheres, such that medicine and magical incantation can both capitalize on the power of sound to heal or, in the case of a curse, to harm; either way rhythm is a chief means of influencing the body and thus a person's future prospects. The paper will end by addressing the sonic effects in *Macbeth*, with special attention to the commingling of prophecy, incantation, and bewitchment. I am interested in the influence of music and rhythmic language on both characters and the audience: to what extent did spectators find themselves in the same position as the characters they watched whenever players used instruments and metrical verse to create a physiological response? My sense is that these plays highlight sound as a technique shared by magicians and actors to create preternatural effects — potentially miraculous, potentially demonic — within the body (and mind) of an auditor.

Cruel Stepdame Nature

Peter Remien

Against the transcultural commonplace of a benevolent mother nature who perfectly accommodates human needs and desires runs the ancient countertradition of nature as a cruel and indifferent stepmother. While the nature-as-stepmother trope has many iterations, classical, medieval, and early modern, its most influential formulation comes from Book 7 of Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*, which positions humankind as uniquely unprovisioned in a hostile world, lacking the fur, feathers, scales, and claws of nonhuman animals. As Laurie Shannon points out, Pliny's unaccommodating vision of nature informs the bleak cosmology of *King Lear* and offers a vantage point though which to question pretensions of human preeminence. In other examples, however, Shakespeare strikes a balance between nature's benign and malevolent functions, as when in *Romeo and Juliet* Friar Lawrence views the Earth as both "nature's mother" and "her tomb" and marvels how a single plant can be both poison and medicine depending on its use (2.2.9). In this essay, I explore how the nature-as-stepmother trope shapes two of Shakespeare's cruel stepmothers—the Queen from *Cymbeline*, stepmother to the princess Imogen, and Dionyza from *Pericles*, co-ruler of Tarsus and foster mother to Marina. Jealous of their stepdaughters, both characters utilize poison in their murderous plots: The Queen attempts to poison Imogen, and Dionyza uses poison to cover her tracks by dispatching her servant Leonine, Marina's would-be murderer. As a potent symbol of natural malevolence, poison signals the need for both ethical virtue and intimate knowledge of the natural world.

Identifying with the Preternatural in Early Modern Drama

Joel Slotkin

Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* begins with the ghost of Andrea and the personified spirit of Revenge, who provide a moral and theological framework for understanding the rest of the onstage action. However, the nature of that framework differs strikingly from official religious views. Although the characters call out to heaven for justice, the only supernatural responses come from chthonic beings who inhabit an underworld that syncretically combines Classical and Christian elements.

Many other dramatic works of the period (including *Grim the Collier* and Dekker's *If This Be Not a Good Play, the Devil Is In It*) follow the same pattern, in which a syncretic underworld becomes both the origin for characters with whom the audience is expected to identify, and the source of the moral judgment which closes the play.

Making these chthonic figures the effective moral arbiters of the universes that these plays present calls into question the ideological systems of the plays, and of Renaissance English society. At the same time, the theological and cosmological flexibility of these plays allows us a more nuanced understanding of early modern belief systems, and the potential complexity of religious belief in general.

“Ne’er was dream / So like a waking”: Preternature, Dreams, and the Early Modern Imagination

Khristian S. Smith

As Antigonus abandons Perdita on the shores of Bohemia, he recounts to the newborn the strange apparition that visited him in his berth the previous night. Explaining that he “[has] heard, but not believed, the spirits o’th’dead / May walk again,” he admits that the experience felt too genuine to be imagined, for “ne’er was dream / So like a waking” (3.3.15-16, 17-18). Curiously, however, the courtier frames this speech with language that questions the validity of that experience. Antigonus concludes that he must “be squared by” the legitimacy of this haunting, but “superstitiously,” while admitting that he relents his rational faculties because the supposed ghost “[a]ffrighted [him] much” (39-40, 36). He determines that “[t]his was so and no slumber,” arguing that Hermione has died and that Apollo wills Perdita to be laid in the homeland of her natural father, Polixenes (38, 40-45). Yet, he actually challenges this verdict when he admits that “[d]reams are toys,” although he’ll elect to believe this one anyway (38). The play also rejects his conclusions. Unless the oracle was a forgery, audiences can safely presume Leontes is Perdita’s natural father. Moreover, Hermione has not died. If the creature is truly Hermione’s spirit, then Hermione has defied accepted medicotheological opinion and separated her soul from her body.

Nevertheless, the apparition’s claim that Antigonus will never see Paulina again complicates this credibility debate because Antigonus does die (57). How does he acquire this foreknowledge? If the creature is simply the product of Antigonus’s sleeping or waking imagination, then Antigonus has prefigured his death, a horrific fancy that comes true. Interrogating the relationship between *The Winter’s Tale* and other plays and period theories of the imagination, this paper considers how early modern people questioned, anticipated, or feared the indeterminacy between dreams and reality. It explores how dreams (and the sleep often necessary for them) might be understood as preternatural phenomena subject to and deriving from the everyday, cosmic, and spiritual forces believed to affect and infect the imaginative faculty.

Paulina and Prospero: Gendered Magic, Gendered Knowledge

Mackenzie Tomlinson

Shakespeare’s late romances are distinct for both their fantastical elements and their concern with reconciliation and redemption. These threads coalesce in *The Winter’s Tale’*s Paulina and *The Tempest*’s Prospero*,* who orchestrate crucial events and enable rehabilitative justice through their engagements with magic, though this magic differs ontologically and ethically. Prospero’s magic is overtly supernatural and intellectual, and prioritizes control and domination, while Paulina’s is preternatural, grounded in grace, empathy, and instinctual knowledge. While *The Tempest* famously ends with Prospero vowing to “drown his books", *The Winter’s Tale* ends with a preternatural miracle that is “as lawful as breathing.” Prospero is a magus who exemplifies ideals of Renaissance humanism, yet his patriarchal magic cannot sustain true grace and reconciliation and must be renounced. In contrast, Paulina’s preternatural

revivification of Hermione's statue proves to be the crucial event that enables restoration and harmony, and is not condemned, but lauded.

This paper will consider forms of gendered power and knowledge in the context of early modern accounts of hermeticism and "natural magic", investigating relations between gender and preternatural magic. It will engage with feminine forms of knowledge and accounts from the margins, including female practitioners of folk magic, who were often unjustly labeled as witches (as Leontes labels Paulina). However, Paulina's feminine preternatural skill has a greater capacity to reconcile and restore harmony than Prospero's solely intellectual, masculine magic. Prospero and Paulina's engagements with the super/preternatural as the "directors" of their respective plays will serve as a framework for navigating popular conceptions of magic and its often gendered connotations.

How Far Beyond is the "Past" of Preternatural?

Christine Varnado

The concept of the "preternatural" (*praeter*: beyond, past, exceeding, besides) both draws boundaries (there's some limit point to the natural, and this is beyond it), and calls those boundaries into question (in its distinction from "unnatural" or "supernatural") as it resonates through historical time.

My current book project on *Macbeth*, abortion, infanticide, characterization, and what counts as "life" begins with the spectral child hanging in the play's textual crux, between Lady Macbeth's "I have given suck…" and Macduff's "He has no children." The cosmological problem of what a human is and who counts as one, I argue, is conjured through the proliferating host of preternatural apparitions, of different statuses and causalities, staged in *Macbeth*, and in seventeenth-century pamphlet literature, poetry, childbirth manuals, and memorial art. As I write this book, I am constantly encountering the boundaries drawn around the "natural," and what is posited as…something else, on the other side of the natural, in both early modern texts and historical literary criticism ("How many children had Lady Macbeth?").

Often (but not always), disturbances in the category of the "natural" are linked to the non-identical yet related binary between material and immaterial phenomena: sometimes articulated as a distinction between the physical or observable and the fantasmatic or imaginary, or between the bodily and the spectral. Preternatural phenomena often involve immaterial actants. I argue in the book that literary language itself is inescapably lodged athwart this binary, as both reading and performance depend on fantasmatic, imaginative (immaterial) components. One of my aims is to develop a reading practice that acknowledges the mind and the psyche as parts of the body and the larger material universe, and acknowledges preternatural or apparitional experiences as part of what exists, because perception and meaning-making are material, embodied processes.

So as I debate what terminology to use in this project, I'm intrigued by the possible implication, in preternatural's spatial figure of speech: that the preternatural differs from the natural by degree, not kind; that it exists on the same cosmological plane somehow as the natural, just at a different, outer location. Just how beyond, really, is the *praeter* of preternatural?