

## SAA 2025 SEMINAR 14

### ECOFEMINIST APPROACHES TO SHAKESPEARE AND HIS CONTEMPORARIES

**Seminar Leaders: Aurélie Griffin (Sorbonne Nouvelle) and Claire Hansen (Australian National University)**

**Respondent: Tiffany J. Werth (University of California, Davis)**

#### ABSTRACTS

**Mary Adams (Western Carolina University) “Meteorology, Gender, and Spontaneous Generation”**

Banquo: It will be rain tonight.

First Murderer: Let it come down.

Rebecca Totaro’s recent book coined the term “meteorophysiology,” which treats weather not as a metaphorical disturbance in the body politic but as a force that shares the same material existence as bodies. Aristotelian theory linked weather by its “accidental” or “imperfect” nature to both women and to spontaneous generation--the generation of life from rot or excrement, among other things--for which female matter was thought to be a cause. Aristotle’s term “*ateles*” or “imperfect” as applied to these phenomena meant unfinished, unpredictable, mysterious, lesser, and female, but also sterile and without purpose. This paper will examine this cluster of materially linked phenomena in some of Shakespeare’s later plays before considering them in more depth in *King Lear*. These gendered forces preoccupied Shakespeare throughout his later plays, challenging masculine characters’ sense of potency and control and showing how the human and inhuman coexist as loci of meaning.

**Shaul Bassi (Ca’ Foscari University of Venice), “Ophelia and the Drowned Partisan: Reading *Hamlet* in Venice”**

This paper presents an ecofeminist reading of Ophelia, drawing on pedagogical practices and student projects developed within Italy’s first Masters of Arts in Environmental Humanities, established at Ca’ Foscari University of Venice. I begin by examining the iconic image of John Everett Millais’ Ophelia through the lens of Adriana Cavarero’s philosophical interpretation of Hamlet in *Stately Bodies. Literature, Philosophy, and the Question of Gender* (2002). I then juxtapose this ecofeminist Ophelia with *The Partisan Woman*, a unique monument created in 1969 by Augusto Murer to commemorate the role of women in the Italian Resistance against Nazi occupation and Fascist rule. Positioned at the edge of the Venetian lagoon, this bronze figure rises above or submerges below the water’s surface with the changing tides, uncannily evoking the most famous representation of the drowned Ophelia. Both figures, through their fluid connection to water and their entanglement with the vegetal world, emerge as unexpected yet compelling allies in exploring how works of art can be read ecocritically. These works

underscore the vital role of cultural artifacts as we confront the challenges of sea-level rise and climate change.

**Catherine Rose Evans (University of Exeter), “‘The chicken in the shell lies still’: Animals, Motherhood, and Hester Pulter”**

In seventeenth-century England, to be a mother was to be morally and ontologically suspect. Protestant preachers and lawyers argued that original sin passed down through the generations through Eve’s maternal body, and that of the women who followed her. As Phylliss Mack and Pamela Hammons have discussed, miscarriage and early child death were often interpreted as the result of parental sin.

Lady Hester Pulter (1605 – 1678) had fifteen children, although only one would survive her. Her manuscript poetry often focuses on her pregnancies, emotions as a parent, and the loss of her children. She turns to animals as models of motherhood: the calculating cuckoo foisting their young on others, the “sea fox” who is so endued “with love and wisdom” that she “swallows” her cubs to protect them from danger, and the foolish overprotective ape “which doth her love attest by hugging that she loves until it die”. This paper will examine how Pulter makes use of these models of animal parenting to denaturalise maternal instincts and interrogating the state of motherhood both aesthetically and metaphysically. In poems written whilst pregnant, Pulter uses her own body to draw moral lessons and envisage relationships with the wider cosmos.

**E. Rose Grant (University of Toronto), “Wandering Ways and Digressive Desires: Inclusive Spaces for Female Sexual Desires in John Fletcher’s *The Faithful Shepherdess*”**

In sixteenth-century England, there was an increase in mapmaking due to legal conflicts resulting from un-enclosed spaces with multiple-use rights becoming spaces which were exclusively held by individual owners, and which restricted access to, and activities performed, within these lands and bodies of water. Considering this historical context of the enclosure of space, narrowing of rights, and exclusion of unwanted people, it is interesting to explore a play from the century that followed, John Fletcher’s *The Faithful Shepherdess*, which features striking descriptions of lands and bodies of water, and which are inhabited by female characters with diverse occupations and sexual desires. In this paper, I explore the degree to which the natural environment of *The Faithful Shepherdess* fosters spaces for female sexual desires that are considered ‘out of bounds’ of early modern social norms. I argue that Fletcher’s Cloe initially views the open fields, and shaded woods as hospitable to articulating and pursuing her sexual desires. She fails to recognize that the land and water are in fact governed by figures of authority who enforce gender and sexual norms that limit her ability to pursue non-monogamous, pre-marital sexual relationships. By contrast, Fletcher’s Clorin is successful in practicing celibacy because she can couch this desire as an expression of chastity and/or romantic constancy. Her ability to navigate gender and sexual norms, while articulating her desires, is symbolized by her occupying liminal spaces, situated between nature and society, and her choice to live in human-made dwellings which are emblematic of these societal values, namely a memorial dedicated to a deceased lover, which shields her from unwanted suitors.

**Nicole A. Jacobs (California Polytechnic State University), “Hester Pulter’s *The Unfortunate Florinda* and the Logic of Domination”**

In Hester Pulter’s (1605-78) two-part romance of the mid-seventeenth century, *The Unfortunate Florinda*, kingdoms are both built and destabilized through the exploitation of bodies, particularly those of women, enslaved individuals, and animals. Pulter’s romance focuses on the narratives of two young women: Fidelia, who prevents her own rape by plotting with her brother and her lover to murder the African king Mully Hamet, and Florinda, who responds to her rape by the Spanish tyrant Roderigo by devising with her family a plan to raise a revolt. Pulter’s heroines challenge the conventions of sexual violence by engineering revenge plots that empower them to usurp not only tyrants, but also the logic of domination that emboldens their exploitative plunder of people and the natural environment. Pulter, then, represents both the oppression and acts of resistance by Fidelia, Florinda, and their conspirators as they challenge the so-called right of conquest of kings and counsellors. This essay will call upon contemporary theories of ecofeminism, gender, race, and sexuality in order to explore how Pulter contributes to larger understandings of consent, bodily autonomy, and sexuality among the earlier writings of Shakespeare and his contemporaries.

**Erin K. Kelly (California State University, Chico), “Gender, Race, and the Natural World in Elizabeth Cary’s *The Tragedy of Mariam*”**

Elizabeth Cary’s *The Tragedy of Mariam* may seem like an odd choice for a seminar on ecofeminism since Cary observes the classical unities of time, place, and action in her play; the events occur in the city of Jerusalem on one day, and there are no scenes that occur in the natural world. Despite the urban setting and lack of onstage action of this closet drama, the natural world nonetheless pervades the play, particularly in language used by women and about women. Cary designs a series of binaries in her work – Mariam vs. Salome, Mariam vs. Doris, Mariam vs. Cleopatra, Mariam vs. Alexandra – and frequently uses language about the natural world to explore the hierarchies and complications of these binaries. Race and gender are explored and constructed through Cary’s natural discourse, with much of this language serving as a warning that the natural order must be preserved and rapid change avoided at all costs. That warning is belied, however, by aspects of the plot and by sympathy generated at various times and for various reasons for female characters like Salome.

**Kyle M. Labe (University of Connecticut), “Cosmetics and Race in *The Tragedy of Mariam*”**

The nature of cosmetics in early modern English culture was fundamentally contradictory. Anticosmetic debates, kindled by masculinist theological tracts, castigated the practice as a willful blemish on a natural feminine “fairness.” Yet English people, from Queen Elizabeth I down to boy actors, made use of cosmetic paint to “blanch” already white skin. Cosmetic whiteness was regarded as a disfigurement of a culturally fetishized feminine beauty and a *hyper*-whiteness, or, a whitening of white skin.

My paper draws on Elizabeth Cary’s *The Tragedy of Mariam* (1613) as a dramatization of this cultural teleology. Cary’s drama hinges on a dramatic discourse of cosmetics in the period that sought to discriminate between “natural” and “artificial” whiteness. In particular, the play apposes the “fair,” unpainted beauty of its titular protagonist against the dark, painted skin of her sister-in-law, Salome. In effect, Cary develops a racial *topos* of cosmetics that associates its

application (or, as the paper will examine, even the *allegation* of using facial paint) with a blotting or a darkening of white skin. To “whiten” white skin is also, and paradoxically, to “darken” it.

My argument considers Cary’s racial formulation of paint with reference to cosmetics’ origins: the earth. Because cosmetics like ceruse were extracted and fashioned from a myriad of natural resources, they posited their wearers in a direct and contiguous relationship with the earth. Of value to Cary’s drama, then, are the consequences of such an affiliation. I argue that *The Tragedy of Mariam* produces a correlation between the female body and a distinctly postlapsarian earth wherein cosmetics becomes a racial and figurative pollutant. Rather than accentuate and amplify an English fetishization of white skin, cosmetics threaten to bring whiteness “down to earth,” that is, to associate whiteness with a polluted earth and, consequently, racial contamination.

### **Gretchen E. Minton (Montana State University), “Ecofeminist Adaptation in *No Winter’s Tale*”**

In *A Thousand Acres*, her 1991 novel based on *King Lear*, Jane Smiley boldly adapted Shakespeare’s story in a way that emphasized the agency of the female characters and the natural world alike. Over the ensuing decades, many other adaptations have likewise embraced ecofeminist storytelling, demonstrating that the very act of adaptation enables us to give an active voice not just to characters, but to “all that exists” (Plumwood).

In this paper I will be discussing my practice-as-research project: an eco-adaptation of *winter’s Tale* that is entitled *No Winter’s Tale*. This adaptation is about the disappearance of snowpack in the Rocky Mountain West and how this will impact ecosystems in the mountains, as well as the downstream implications for food security and vulnerable communities. My objective in writing this adaptation is to use theatre as a vital form of storytelling that helps audiences to understand more about snow science, mountain ecosystems, and sustainable farming practices during our current and future era of climate change, especially given the inevitable increase in the frequency and severity of natural disasters.

My specific focus will be upon who Hermione and Perdita become in the transformed world of *No Winter’s Tale*. The ecological wisdom of both women implied in Shakespeare’s play is embraced and amplified, thus Hermione becomes a snow scientist and Perdita an organic farmer. The knowledge that each possesses is precious, for they are the ones equipped to solve problems at this time of environmental upheaval. Reimagining the characters in this way, I argue, recovers a sense of eco-being that is based upon variability, flux, and embracing apparent contraries.

### **Q. Ostendorf (Occidental College), “Shakespeare, Lanyer, and Queer Desire in the Natural World”**

This paper explores the connections between queer desire and the natural world in Shakespeare’s *Sonnets* and Aemilia Lanyer’s poetry collection *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*. The *Sonnets*, especially the first 17 poems, are famously concerned with procreation, with the male speaker urging the addressee, often figured as a beautiful young man, to have a child in order “that thereby beauty’s rose might never die” (1.2). In a less obvious way, Lanyer’s collection is also about queer desire: her speaker, difficult to distinguish from Lanyer herself, fawns both socially and erotically over her patron and dedicatee, Margaret Clifford, Countess of Cumberland, and continually inserts herself into an imagined female family tree through which

she is by turns heir, daughter, and mother to Clifford. For both Lanyer and Shakespeare, the speaker stands outside the system of reproductive futurism, governed by marriage, human procreation, and bloodlines. Instead, each speaker manifests their desire through the natural world—metaphorically, in Shakespeare’s case, and also literally, in Lanyer’s unusual focus on a “stately oak” in “The Description of Cookham,” the country house poem that closes her collection. More than simply participating in the common Renaissance trope of figuring love through metaphors of flora and fauna, these poems use the natural world as a repository for queer desire: a place of exile from the prescribed social order, but also a place where queer desire and queer forms of life can be explored. Ultimately, both of these works have the potential to open up new ways of understanding the interdependence among conceptions of gender, desire, and the natural world in early modern England.

**Chloe K. Preedy (University of Exeter), “Sheltered From Weather? Shakespeare’s *King Lear* and ‘Storm[s] Still’”**

In a 2014 article, Astrida Neimanis and Rachel Loewen-Walker draw on the feminist new materialist theories of Stacy Alaimo and Karen Barad to evaluate how felt experiences of weather and weathering might enable comprehension of climate change’s impact. They focus on those in the privileged West who are not exposed to the worst effects of global warming, proposing to ‘bring climate change *home*... [by] reconfiguring our spatial and temporal relations to the weather-world’ (559). This provocation shares concerns with other works that connect climate inaction to many people’s increasingly abstracted relationship with climate and weather. In *Weathered: Cultures of Climate* (2017), Mike Hulme points out that ‘more people are spending greater amounts of time in climatically controlled indoor environments... Outdoor seasonal rhythms, and the daily flows of unregulated weather that accompany them, become detached from the (often) heavily regulated indoor climates’ (55). Simon Hailwood adds that prevalent anthropocentric ideas of home as ‘a *shelter from* the elements’ further obscure awareness of ‘our home as a profound *disruption of* the elements impacting the rest of terrestrial nature’ (2011, 25-6).

I am interested in how such understandings of weather, home, and shelter might relate to Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. Where ecocritical analyses of this play’s cued storm(s) have typically focused on the protagonist’s on-the-skin exposure, I will evaluate the corresponding ecocritical significance of being *inside* during this storm. I ask what it means, in Shakespeare’s tragedy, to shelter from the storm, and consider the potential implications for the play’s gendered and socially-inflected depictions of weather and weathering.

**Peter C. Remien (Lewis-Clark State College), “Nature’s Commonwealth”**

Early in *All’s Well that Ends Well* the verbose Paroles spars with Helen on the topic of virginity: “It is not politic in the commonwealth of nature to preserve virginity. Loss of virginity is rational increase and there was never virgin got till virginity was first lost.” (I. 1. 119-122, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, 2008). Aiming not at seduction but banter, Paroles gives voice to the *carpe diem* motif common in Renaissance love poetry, including several of Shakespeare’s sonnets and his narrative poem *Venus and Adonis*. The motif, and its variation *carpe florem*, carries several usual conceits: virginity is self-defeating, youth and beauty are fleeting like a flower, and sexual reproduction provides a solution to the problem. The metaphor of the beloved as flower—literalized at the end of *Venus and Adonis*—introduces an alternative temporality in which human life is reduced to a single season extended only through reproduction. As Paroles’s use of the word “commonwealth” emphasizes, nature

is understood as an organized system. Edmund Spenser envisions such a system in his representation of the Garden of Adonis in Book 3 of *The Faerie Queene*. Describing the garden as “first seminarie / Of all things, that are borne to live and die,” Spenser writes,

Daily they grow, and daily forth are sent  
Into the world, it to replenish more;  
Yet is the stocke not lessenèd, nor spent,  
But still remains in euerlasting store

(Book 3, canto 6, stanzas 30 and 36 in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 2012)

Like the elusive “steady-state economy” envisioned by Herman Daily as an alternative to modern growth-based economics, Spenser’s Garden of Adonis exists in a state of perpetual equilibrium without growth and diminishment. In *Venus and Adonis* and the sonnets, however, Shakespeare’s vision of such a self-sustaining natural economy is complicated by Adonis’s dogged resistance to Venus’s advances and the homoerotic relationship between the aged poet and the fair youth, prompting a reevaluation of how life and human relationships are sustained.

**Kara Ann Rush (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill), “Bestial Knowing—Modelling Nebuchadnezzar in *All’s Well that Ends Well*”**

In *All’s Well that Ends Well*, William Shakespeare refers to the transformation of Nebuchadnezzar from a king to an ox in Daniel 4:28-30: “I am no great Nebuchadnezzar sir, I have not much skill in grass” (4.5.17-18). While many have evaluated *All’s Well that Ends Well* representation of nature and medicine, few have addressed how Shakespeare’s allusion to Nebuchadnezzar puts the play in discourse with contemporary arguments concerning the virtues of biblical King’s fallen animality, and more particularly, the plausibility of his undergoing a literal metamorphosis or transmigration of the soul. I argue that by referencing, and even lauding the oxen Nebuchadnezzar for his “skill in grass,” Shakespeare undermines exegetical writers that see Nebuchadnezzar’s oxen state as singularly metaphorical or debased. The animal intuition of characters like Lavatch, Paroles, and Helena, elevates the earthly animality often attributed to Nebuchadnezzar into an intuition capable of the adept interpretation and remedying needed for social harmony. Furthermore, Helena, who resembles both Nebuchadnezzar and his infamous adviser, Daniel, through her specialized herbal knowledge, plays a key role in translating such earthly, animal, knowing to the level of heavenly. The play, through its favorable depiction of animal knowing, undermines the stability of the supposedly fixed hierarchal binary between human and animal, and in turn, of lofty heavenly reason and base, earthly, animal reason.

**Gregory M. Schnitzspahn (Fisher College), “‘Ruin’s Womb’: Decay and Reconstruction in Thomas Middleton’s *Lord Mayor’s Shows*”**

Because of biological reality, patriarchal cultures imagine the female body and its maternal capacities at the threshold between civilization and wilderness, order and disorder. As Ynestra King puts it:

It is as if women were entrusted with and have kept the dirty little secret  
that humanity emerges from nonhuman nature into society in the life of the

species, and the person. The process of nurturing an unsocialized, undifferentiated human infant into an adult person—the socialization of the organic—is the bridge between nature and culture. (130)

Writing three hundred years earlier, Thomas Middleton seems aware of his own culture's anxiety about the tenuous border between humanity's organic and social existence. In *The Phoenix* (1603-04), Middleton's titular disguised magistrate finds that a ship's captain has rid himself of his wife by quite literally selling her. Shocked by this subversion of patriarchy's primary tool for controlling procreative flesh, Phoenix steps aside and launches into praise for a maternal personification of marriage:

Reverend and honourable matrimony,  
Mother of lawful sweets, unshamed mornings,  
Dangerless pleasures, thou that mak'st the bed  
Both pleasant and legitimately fruitful: without thee,  
All the whole world were soiled bastardy.  
Thou are the only and the greatest form  
That put'st a difference between our desires  
And the disordered appetites of beasts,  
Making their mates those that stand next their lusts. (8.166-74)

A decade later, in *The Triumphs of Truth*, Middleton creates yet another maternal personification, but this time she is the City of London, who addresses the new Lord Mayor in a "motherly salutation" (125). But while this mother speaks of how she nurtured the Lord Mayor when he was "soft and helpless" (137) with her "dear pains and care" (139), now it is the male child who must care for a parent falling into disrepair: "And now the faith, the love, the zealous fires / With which I cheered thy youth, my age requires" (154-55). This paper argues that Middleton's mayoral shows return to one of the playwright's primary dramatic strategies: exposing the fragile nature of patriarchal constructs, as when Phoenix finds he must shore up the imperiled institution of matrimony. But the shows place the Lord Mayor himself in the role of magistrate who must preserve order and civilization, and they cast the female city of London, rather than matrimony, as the both literal and figurative construct that must be maintained in order to save her and her inhabitants from slipping back into disordered wilderness.

### **Emily L. P. Sharrett (University of Loyola, Chicago), "Pollution in a 'Sea Dispersed' or in 'a Puddle's Womb Hearsed': Reading Regenerative Futurity via Diffusion and Filtering in Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece*"**

Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece* interrogates how, if at all, ravished air, water, and wombs may be rejuvenated. In addition to mapping the ways "dischargèd" air sullies and resuscitates the atmosphere in Collatium, Lucrece also charts the fluid dynamics of water in around Rome to explore how bodies of fresh and salt water may ravish and renew a natural environment and its creaturely inhabitants (line 1043 in *The Norton Shakespeare*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed: *Romance and Poems*, 2016, 582-624). The poem's collection of natural imagery of waters functions similarly to its airy counterparts: in Lucrece, flowing and stagnant watery liquids reinforce the narrative of remediating ravished natural bodies by showing how water may be preserved, polluted, or remediated via diffusion or filtering.

This paper suggests that the images of spoiled and purified water undergoing processes of dispersion and filtering in Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece* reveal the extent to which

characters treat victims and perpetrators of sexual tyranny in ways that are informed by their knowledge of fluid dynamics exhibited by the liquid in and around spaces ranging from a womb and a “wat’ry rigol” to an ocean and a “wat’ry nest” (lines 1745, 1611). Lucrece positions natural filtering as a process that is unique to flowing water, and the poem intimates that filtering permits “putrefied” liquid to be either sequestered within or extricated entirely from “purified” liquid (lines 1750, 532). The readings I put forth below seek to show how the poem reflects on the capacity of watery environs to ravish and repair human life and lineages from within and beyond the individual human body via polluted and purified blood and water. Through their rhetorical appeals that turn upon images of moving and still watery liquids, characters wade through and variously apply the lessons of the role of fluids in regenerative futurity on earth to their conceptions of and responses to sexual tyranny, the tragic force driving the dramatic action of the poem.

**Monika Smialkowska (Northumbria University), “Ecofeminism in Practice: The Shakespeare Gardens in Manchester, UK”**

This paper examines the work of a little-known Shakespearean scholar, suffragist, and community activist Rosa Grindon at the turn of the twentieth century, and its legacy in the present day. Despite not being employed by any educational institution, Grindon delivered and published numerous lectures on Shakespeare’s plays, as well as leading study courses, mentoring an amateur theatre group, and organising Manchester’s commemorations of the 1916 Shakespeare Tercentenary. She worked at the grassroots level, through a network of community organisations, among them the Manchester Ladies’ Literary Club, the Life Study Society, the Manchester Naturalists’ Society, the Manchester Tramwaymen’s Horticultural Society, and the Manchester Society for Women’s Suffrage. Her three driving passions were social progress, Shakespeare, and the natural world, especially horticulture. She combined these interests in one of her many community projects, the establishment of a Shakespearean garden in Manchester. Initially, it was a modest affair, with a few beds of plants mentioned in Shakespeare’s plays unveiled in Whitworth Park in 1916. Subsequently, it developed into a larger and more permanent Shakespeare Garden, opened in Platt Fields in 1922. It has survived till today, but in recent years it fell into severe neglect, until in 2021 a dedicated group of volunteers, calling themselves Shakey Gardeners, began the labour of restoration, culminating in a grand re-opening event in August 2022. One motivation behind this effort was to protect the surrounding area from being taken over by rapidly expanding student accommodation and to maintain the character of its local community. This goal echoes Rosa Grindon’s original desire to enhance the quality of life of industrial Manchester’s population. While it is highly unlikely that either Grindon or the Shakey Gardeners would think of themselves as ecofeminists, they put into practice ecofeminist concerns about natural environment and commitment to social justice. They have achieved this through community involvement, collaboration, and inclusivity, using Shakespeare’s cultural capital to advance their progressive agendas.