Ruderal Shakespeare

SAA 2025

Rather than focusing on Ophelia's posies or Perdita's flowers, this seminar seeks to explore the oftenoverlooked presence of undesired and undesirable vegetation in Shakespearean texts and early modern literature and culture in general. It invites participants to look at weeds and leaf-meal that send up unruly green shoots through ordered architectures of word and stone, to attend to the vegetal infiltrators that disrupt discourses of poetics and nature, empire and race. At the same time, it encourages contributors to consider how and when, much like the resilient weeds that persist and thrive in neglected landscapes, Shakespeare's works have found new life in non-traditional performance spaces and marginalized communities. By focusing collectively on these botanical intruders, we aim to shed light both on the natural and conceptual worlds of early modernity, and our present engagement with the early modern.

Key Questions:

- What functions do undesired plants serve in early modern texts?
- Where do these botanical intruders appear, survive, and thrive?
- How are they obscured or erased, and what do they help to obscure and erase in turn?
- What insights can both their persistence and their erasure offer about early modern attitudes towards nature and the environment?

Convenor: Nandini Das, University of Oxford

Tamsin Badcoe

University of Bristol

'The weedes were wrapt about mine head': Stinking Seaweed, Binding Honeysuckle, and the Generative Waste of Printers' Flowers and Devices

Abstract: This seminar contribution offers a review of the critical and theoretical groundwork for two examples of practice-based research to be undertaken at Bristol Common Press: the first, a printing of John Helliar's 'The Prayer of Jonas' as found in his 1602 book of private prayers, *The Talent of Deuotion*, which features a characteristic border of printers' flowers; and the second, a reproduction of the title page of the first quarto of *Hamlet*, originally printed by Nicholas Ling, which features the printer's device, formed by a rebus of a ling fish bound by a honeysuckle plant. In taking its cue from previous critical studies in the environmental humanities that have sought to consider early modern literary texts, networks, and the material cultures of the early modern book trade in ecological terms, this exploratory paper reflects on the ways in which a 'ruderal' awareness can help us attend to the narratives of generation and waste that shape the material conditions of early modern printing. By engaging with classic and current work on printers' ornaments, the paper connects the uses of mass-produced vegetal forms in early modern printed books with work done to consider the reproduction of ruderal plant life in disturbed environments: the aim being to extend the vocabularies we use to talk about the materiality of early modern printed books and the processes used to create them.

Tamsin Badcoe is a Senior Lecturer in English at the University of Bristol, UK. Her first book, *Edmund Spenser and the Romance of Space* (2019), won the 2020 University English Book Prize. In addition to Spenser, she has published on Thomas Nashe, Richard Carew, and William Shakespeare and the book trade. She is particularly interested in representations of the environment in the early modern period and is currently working on a monograph, provisionally titled *Maritime Passions in Early Modern Literature and Culture*. She is a member of Bristol Common Press: a working historical print shop at the University of Bristol.

Heidi Brayman

University of California, Riverside

Grass, Grace, and Widows: Towards a Literary History of Early Modern Grass

My seminar paper explores a constellation of scenes and expressions that link grass with uncontrolled female sexuality, drawing upon the expression 'grass widow', which the *OED* dates to 1528. 'Grass widows' – women abandoned after an illicit sexual encounter outdoors – share a link to 'widow's weeds', opening up a consideration of the associations of unattached women with weeds, grasses, and waste.

Heidi Brayman (University of California, Riverside) specializes in Renaissance studies, book history, and the history of women. Her first book, *Reading Material in Early Modern England*, recovers habits of reading by studying prefaces, marginalia, and library records. She has co-edited three books in these intersecting fields: *Reading Women: Literacy, Authorship, and Culture in the Atlantic World, 1500-1800; Teaching Early Modern English Literature from the Archives*; and *Books in History, Books as History*. Questions about literary fragments and evidentiary proof animate her scholarly work, and she centres them in her current book project, *Soundproof: Deafness and Muteness in Early Modern England*.

Jason Hogue

Texas A&M University-Kingsville

Yellowing Leaves: Shakespeare's Undesirable Plant Matter

Shakespeare's plays and sonnets contain a multitude of images of yellowing leaves and barren trees, an apt picture of approaching winter and its effects, as well as a vegetal metaphor for aging human bodies preparing for 'winters' of their own. For example, Macbeth envisions his life as 'fallen into the sere, the yellow leaf' (5.3.23), and the gardener in Richard II claims, 'He that hath suffered this disordered spring / Hath now himself met with the fall of leaf' (3.4.53). Just out of frame of such images, so to speak, is a pile of leaf-litter at the base of the tree, a crucial ecological element in the composition of healthy soil. And in the second example, the gardener in fact follows his season-shifting statement to zoom out from the tree's canopy to envisage a larger ecosystem: 'The weeds which his broad-spreading leaves did shelter, / That seemed in eating him to hold him up, / Are plucked up, root and all, by Bolingbroke' (3.4.55-57). The leaves that fall come to rest among these 'weeds,' the ruderal lifeforms whose hardy agency Shakespeare expresses here as a consuming force until they are ripped out of the ground. In this paper, I investigate some of Shakespeare's undesirable plant matter-plant litter-that forms with the approach of winter and in the 'fall of leaf' to study how these yellowing, withering, abscising bodies signify in literature as well as how literary portrayals like these accommodate or modify our understanding of ecological and phenological processes, important markers for us to be aware of in our current moment of climate change and ecological uncertainty.

Jason Hogue is Assistant Professor of Renaissance/Early Modern English Literature at Texas A&M University-Kingsville. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Texas at Arlington in 2019. His dissertation (now book project), *Leaf, Bark, Thorn, Root: Arboreal Ecocriticism and Shakespearean Drama*, investigates the intersection of trees and pain in five Shakespeare plays. He has published essays in the edited collections *Food and Feast in Premodern Outlaw Tales* (Routledge, 2021), and *Shakespeare's Botanical Imagination* (Amsterdam UP, 2023), and most recently, the article '"Seeds and Roots": Hiddenness and Hendiadys,' in *Early Modern Studies Journal* (2024).

Chloe Holmquist University of Toronto

'this more gross and courser mettaled age': The Physics of Waste in Heywood's The Brazen Age

This exploratory paper offers a reading of the animate and regenerative tendencies of material waste in Thomas Heywood's *The Brazen Age* (1613), which depicts the life and death of Hercules in addition to various other Ovidian narratives. By attending to the ways play draws attention to its own artifice, I argue *The Brazen Age* maintains a persistent interest in the physics of the metamorphoses it stages. Specifically, I tease out the ways that Hercules's early threats to reduce his opponents' bodies to particulate forms complicate both the dusty residue of the pyrotechnic effects used during these initial scenes and the cosmetics used to create the 'soot[y]' complexion of the racially othered Vulcan. But Heywood's self-conscious and ironic indulgence in the exposure of his own stagecraft has, I think, another effect: the fecund, even rhizomatic animacy of these various particulates at once reveals and makes incoherent the play's racial hierarchies, which rely on a vegetal binary that aligns whiteness with growth and blackness with decay.

Chloe Holmquist is currently completing the second year of her PhD in English literature at the University of Toronto. Her research focuses on the history of science and empire, with a particular emphasis on representations of the miniature and the microcosmic in later sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century poetry. She is especially interested waste that regenerates or returns, and her essay on recursive, algorithmic 'bits' of poetic matter in *The Faerie Queene* was recently published in *The Spenser Review*.

Ian MacInnes

Albion College

To Die on a Dunghill: The Poetry and Prose of Ruderal Soil

The humble dunghill might seem to be a feature of a stable and enduring agricultural landscape, extending back into antiquity. After all, every farm has a dunghill. But English dunghills were becoming the object of increasingly contradictory interest in the early modern period. On the one hand, they were increasingly recognized by agricultural writers as a key engine of economic prosperity, particularly in an era before manufactured fertilizer. Moreover, natural philosophers unanimously viewed putrefaction and its creatures as fundamental to life itself. On the other hand, dunghills entered the popular imagination—in the works of Shakespeare and others—primarily as symbols of revulsion, contempt, and the sinfulness of the world. 'To die on a dunghill,' as the alliterative phrase goes, is the ultimate form of dehumanization. I argue that this contradictory attention is not an accident but an index of a much larger set of attitudes toward early modern English soil. Concerns were fuelled by several different environmental and

economic stressors. One of these was a soil fertility crisis: England's inefficient animal-centred economy drove an agricultural revolution focused on increasing the fertility of fields and pastures. Another source of stress can be found in the destructive flooding at the end of the sixteenth century, which overturned distinctions between arable, pastoral, and ruderal. Finally, England's increasing exploitation of animals themselves provoked more attention to constructing and reinforcing the animal-human divide and produced more examples of negative animality. I argue that the variety of early modern literary and poetic representations of ruderal soil are responding to complex and evolving environmental and economic forces.

Ian MacInnes (B.A. Swarthmore College, Ph.D. University of Virginia) is the Howard L McGregor Jr. Professor of the Humanities at Albion College, Michigan. His scholarship focuses on representations of animals and the environment in Renaissance literature, particularly in Shakespeare. He has published essays on topics such as horse breeding and geohumoralism in *Henry V* and on animal networks in early modern England. His long-running website, *Ian's English Calendar*, calculates dates for scholars of English history and Literature. He co-hosts the podcast *Real Fantastic Beasts* with medieval art historian Alexa Sand.

Grace Murray Birkbeck, University of London

'Evil Thriving': Rotten Trees and Failing Husbandry

This essay begins to explore the problem of writing about rotten trees in early modern England. Tree rot was often described as invisible but insatiable, so that affected trees would continue to grow for decades without yielding profit. William Lawson's gardening manual *A New Orchard and Garden* (1618) calls them 'evil thriving, rotten and dying trees, even while they live'. I briefly review the vocabulary of rottenness in early seventeenth-century gardening manuals and other texts, and show that tree rot – while it could be caused directly by other unwanted plants, like moss – is paradoxically imagined not as diminishment but as ruderal growth. I then turn to Lawson's manual, a 'how-to' text that promised its readers that 'there is a profitable end, and use of every tree'. Yet 'evil-thriving' trees confound Lawson's advice at every turn, and their persistence troubles what Rebecca Bushnell identifies as a dual kind of 'cultivation' in gardening manuals, which traded on the idea that 'men and women could produce beauty and profit from the land, yet also advance or transform themselves' (*Green Desire*, p. 34). The essay suggests that rotten trees, in their stubborn survival, challenge the early modern English project of bringing order to the natural world, and in turn dismantle the how-to genre's efforts to shape diligent English husbandmen through the pages of a book.

Grace Murray is a Lecturer in Renaissance Literature at Birkbeck, University of London. She completed her AHRC-funded PhD on useless books in early modern England at the University of York in 2024, in which she examined anxieties about unproductive and unprofitable reading in printed 'how-to' books, including gardening manuals. In 2023 she took up a doctoral fellowship at the British Library and National Trust researching their horticultural collections, and is now consulting on an exhibition on the gardens of Beningbrough Hall in North Yorkshire. In this seminar she is especially interested in discussing the precarious distinctions between useful and useless plants in a wide range of early modern texts.

Sophia Richardson

MIT

Will among the Weeds: Ecological Succession as Model for Shakespearean Cultural Influence

The long-established figurative alliance between authors and agriculture—the poet's Georgic 'furrows,' the lyricist's 'gardens of verse,' the novelist's tidy 'plot'—are nearly always cast in laudatory terms. And the variety of flora in Shakespeare's plays and verse 'posies,' alongside the accrued cultural capital of these works, has generated a widespread imagining of the author as an 'English rose' of the best order, ornamenting our cultural landscape with the best that literature can offer.

But as time and theory (postcolonial, adaptation, ecocritical...) have shown, Shakespeare's works don't always train neatly across purpose-built trellises. Instead, quotes and characters crop up in all sorts of unexpected, unintended, even unwelcome places. Sometimes, that is, in both real and imagined 'Shakespeare gardens,' his works are not well-behaved; they are weeds.

Taking this insight both fancifully and at face value, this paper proposes a creative taxonomy of weeds, imaginatively extending several literal survival strategies into a literary ecosystem—one taking into account the 'disturbed soils' and 'invasive species' of shifting cultural landscapes. How might we work differently with Shakespeare's legacy, I ask, if we consider his works neither as native species, nor as rhizome network, but as a patch of unruly ruderals? And how might we lend some of their proliferative strategies to other, less represented, early modern authors, to help them survive in the garden of canonicity?

Sophia Richardson (Ph.D. Yale English 2023) is a lecturer at MIT's Writing and Communication Center. Her dissertation, 'Reading the Surface in Early Modern England', explored how diverse substrates furnished figurative and theoretical frameworks for authors to think through what it means to craft text, to consume a text, to exist at the interstice between the two. In this work, she shows how imagining texts as materials like glass, paint, and silk allows them to behave in strange and slippery ways that capture cultural ambivalence about what writing, reading, and performance might mean (for English literary heritage, the representation of sovereignty, materiality of legacy...) in ways that bely and expand the capabilities of their actual materiality (pen, paper, ink). She is broadly interested in histories of materiality and cognition, about when and where the 'imaginary' takes material form. At the moment, she is thinking primarily about adaptation – who we are to Shakespeare, and who Shakespeare is to us.

Niyanta Sangal

University of Maryland College Park

Ruderal Presence: Race and Gender Variance in Christopher Marlowe's Tamburlaine

This paper will explore gender variance and racialization of Tartarian characters in Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* Part I and II. The play utilizes ruderal presence to construct an oriental representation of gender and race as it narrates the rise and death of the titular character. I will examine gender variance in the play through the lens of transplant poetics that interrogates plant's capacity to trans body's gendered representation (Nardizzi, 158). The play outlines racial differentiation through the fear of being 'overtaken' by Tamburlaine's movement across geographical spaces, that highlight concerns that he 'remain in Asia' simultaneously. These strategies are generally adopted to curb the proliferation of any unwanted vegetal presence which here comes to depict the imagined patterns of migration as a kind of invasion (2.5.44, 3.1.18). His introduction to the reader as 'shepherd's weed' plays with the use of word 'weed' to hint at his status as a person without rank, and to demonstrate the lack of desirability of his taking up power (1.2.199). He is effeminized in the text through his devotion to his empress, that to the reader signals a kind of chaste and lustless orientation that identifies him to the figure of a eunuch (3.3.77). This is done through metaphors that rely on plant terminology, which denote the excessive and unwanted nature of his presence. The play offers a very compelling reading of gender variance that disavows the perception of gender as a restricted binary while presenting a racialized gender discourse.

Niyanta Sangal is a PhD Graduate Student at University of Maryland, College Park. Her research interests are gender and race in Early Modern Drama and travelogues along with Global Renaissance. She is particularly keen on exploring gender variance in Mughal empire and does comparative research with Mughal and English texts. This panel is connected to her exploration of trans figuration through plant genealogies.

Gabriela Villanueva Noriega

Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México

Ophelia's Weedy Flowers: ecocritical readings of Hamlet through the lens of translation

As a word that's idiosyncratic to English and does not appear in equal terms in other European languages like French, German, or Spanish. (Wolff 2024, 1), 'weeds' allow us to engage with questions of how language at once reflects and prefigures our relation to the world. As Alice Wolff explains 'weeds are plants defined in relation to humans.' (Wolff, 2024, 1). There is no stable demarcation to the word yet some of

the general lines of reference for weeds are plants that are 'not cultivated' and therefore 'unintended,'; plants that are 'useless', 'unwanted,' 'unprofitable'; plants that are 'out of place' (Wolff, 2024, 2-5). One way of carrying over the term 'weed' into Spanish is by neutralizing the word as 'hierba/herb'. This of course deprives the term of its negative connotations and links it to more 'useful' associations of the culinary and/or medicinal realm. In contrast, by translating the word as 'mala hierba/bad herb' or 'maleza' a word that derives from the Latin 'malita/malice/evil', these wild plants are turned into injurious, troublesome, and dangerous entities. Any translation choice implies taking a stand as to the meaning of this word in both the specific context of a play and in the cultural context in which the play is meant to find an audience. In my case, I am seeking to work out what do weeds mean in connection to life and death for contemporary audiences in Mexico. Hamlet's aversion to weeds has traditionally been read as an expression of the character's contempt for the corruption that prevails in the state of Denmark. Ecocritical readings have offered less anthropocentric perspectives to Hamlet's rejection of undesired growth that invite us to problematize the forms in which different cultures have traditionally represented humanity's relations to non-human forms of life. From this lens, Hamlet's dread of putrefaction, seediness, and weeds can be understood as a manifestation of fear of a living world that expands beyond human control. In Hamlet the forces of corruption, death, pestilence, and putrefaction carry along with them the virtues of vitality, abundance, and growth. My interest in this matter is to push the meaning of the play towards the recognition of the limitations of both human control and meaning in the world to acknowledge that, in the end, 'there are more things in life and death than are dreamt of in [our] philosophy' (1.5.166-167). By tapping into the unstable definition of weeds mentioned above, I would like to push the connection between Ophelia and weeds further by suggesting that her speech turns 'weedy' not just because of the overabundance of plants and flowers that it manifests but also because, like weeds, it is out of place, unwanted, and unprofitable. Thinking about Ophelia's flowers as 'weeds' allows us to underscore, not so much her/their fragility and vulnerability, but more her/their hardiness and resilience along with their amazing ability to survive and regenerate themselves through time and space.

Full-time professor in English and Spanish Literature (Early Modern Studies, Comparative Literature, Poetry, Lyric Theory, and Drama) at the Department of Modern Languages (UNAM). My research centres on comparative and transnational approaches to the study of the Early Modern Period in both English and Spanish. Among other things, I am interested in Anglo-Hispanic literary connections and how they frame instances of interaction between cultures through time. In 2024, I started working with a group of researchers, teachers, and theatre practitioners at UNAM on a project called Mex-Clasicos that works in collaboration with UCLA's Diversifying the Classics (DTC) to promote the engagement of contemporary playwrights, directors, and audiences with the classics, particularly those written in Spanish. As part of this project, we launched a performance studies research group on Early Modern Hispanic and English Theatre that hopes to work at the intersection of research and theatre practice in Mexico. I enrolled in this seminar because I had been thinking about weeds and the creative project that I am presenting for some time. I interpreted the title of the seminar as a sign to give it a go. Note: Nandini's contribution to this seminar will be the following, and in the spirit of the 2025 RSA-SAA collaboration, it is part of the RSA offerings:

RSA-SRS (UK) Invited Talk, Boston 2025 Nandini Das University of Oxford

On Ruins and Resilience: Ruderal Poetics and Matters of Belonging

This lecture reflects on the growth in the cracks of the edifices of the past, and of imperial and national narratives. From the classical imagination to its early modern successors, much attention has been paid to the building of foundations, to architectural imaginations as part of accounts of civilisation itself. This lecture will turn its attention instead to the unplanned growths and unwanted, alien intrusions, vegetal and otherwise, that have always shared that space.

Nandini Das is Professor of Early Modern English Literature and Culture at the University of Oxford, Fellow of Exeter College, Oxford. She is a scholar of Renaissance literature, travel, migration, and crosscultural encounters, and has published widely on these topics, including *Robert Greene's Planetomachia* (2007) and *Renaissance Romance: The Transformation of English Prose Fiction, 1570-1620* (2011). With Tim Youngs, she has co-edited *The Cambridge History of Travel Writing* (2019), which covers global Anglophone and non-Anglophone travel writing from antiquity to the internet, and co-written and edited two volumes on conceptualisations of belonging and identity in sixteenth and seventeenth century England: *Keywords of Identity* (2021) and *Lives in Transit* (2022). She is volume editor of *Elizabethan Levant Trade and South Asia* in the forthcoming edition of Richard Hakluyt's *The Principal Navigations*, to be published by Oxford University Press, and editor of *The Oxford Handbook of Travel, Race, and Identity in England, 1550-1700* (forthcoming 2025). *Courting India: England, Mughal India, and the Origins of Empire*, her book on the first English embassy to India in the early seventeenth century, was published by Bloomsbury in spring 2023 and has received the British Academy Book Prize for Global Cultural Understanding.

Combined Reading Suggestions:

- Bayer, Mark. 'Heywood's Epic Theater'. *Comparative Drama* 48, no. 4 (2014): 371–91. https://doi.org/10.1353/cdr.2014.0030.
- Blake, Liza. 'The Physics of Poetic Form in Arthur Golding's Translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*'. English Literary Renaissance 51, no. 3 (2021): 331–55. https://doi.org/10.1086/715422.

- Bushnell, Rebecca W. Green Desire: Imagining Early Modern English Gardens. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003.
- 4. **Calhoun, Joshua.** The Nature of the Page: Poetry, Papermaking, and the Ecology of Texts in Renaissance England. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020.
- 5. Eklund, Hillary. 'After Wetlands'. Criticism 62.3 (Summer 2020): 457–478.
- Estok, Simon C. 'Disgust, Metaphor, Women: Ecophobic Confluences.' In *Ecocriticism and Shakespeare: Reading Ecophobia*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2011.
- Fleming, Juliet. 'Changed Opinion as to Flowers'. In *Renaissance Paratexts*, edited by Helen Smith and Louise Wilson, 48–64. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- Fleming, Juliet. "Type Ornament". In *Cultural Graphology: Writing After Derrida*, 51–85. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016.
- Gordon, Colby. 'Abortive Hedgehogs'. Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies 19.4 (2019): 206– 226.
- Johnson, Eleanor. Waste and the Wasters: Poetry and Ecosystemic Thought in Medieval England. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023.
- Kadue, Katie. Domestic Georgic: Labors of Preservation from Rabelais to Milton. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020.
- 12. Kerridge, Eric. *The Agricultural Revolution*. New York: A. M. Kelley, 1968.
- Kordecki, Lesley. "Like a Creature Native': Ophelia's Death and Ecofeminism." In *Literature and Ecofeminism*. Routledge, 2018.
- Laroche, Rebecca. 'Ophelia's Plants and the Death of Violets.' In *Ecocritical Shakespeare*, edited by Lynn Bruckner and Dan Brayton. Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2011.
- Mann, Jenny C., and Debapriya Sarkar, eds. 'Imagining Early Modern Scientific Forms'. Special issue, *Philological Quarterly* 98, nos. 1–2, 2019.
- 16. **Matthew Battles.** *Tree.* Bloomsbury, 2017.
- 17. Merlin Sheldrake. *Entangled Life*. Random House, 2020.
- Nardizzi, Vin. 'Shakespeare's Trans Plant Poetics'. Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies 19.4 (2019): 156–177.

- Ndiaye, Noémie. 'Introduction'. Scripts of Blackness: Early Modern Performance Culture and the Making of Race. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022.
- 20. **Oakley-Brown, Liz.** *Shakespeare on the Ecological Surface*. Routledge, 2024.
- Overton, Mark. Agricultural Revolution in England: The Transformation of the Agrarian Economy 1500-1850. Cambridge Studies in Historical Geography 23. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- 22. Rosenberg, Jessica. Botanical Poetics. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2023.
- 23. Rosenberg, Jessica. Early Modern Plant Books and the Husbandry of Print. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2023.
- 24. Rosenberg, Jessica. 'Before and After Plants'. *Postmedieval* 9, no. 4 (2018): 469–70. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41280-018-0103-5.
- Shakespeare's Botanical Imagination, edited by Susan Staub. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2023.
- 26. Thirsk, Joan, ed. *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, General Editor H. P. R. Finberg. Vol.
 4. 4 vols. London: Cambridge University Press, 1967.
- 27. Williamson, Hadrian Cook and Tom. Water Management in the English Landscape: Field, Marsh and Meadow. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999.
- 28. Wolff, Alice. 'A Thorny Problem: Defining Weeds from the Medieval to the Present'. Studies in the History of Gardens & Designed Landscapes 0, no. 0 (November 2024): 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1080/14601176.2024.2409580.