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News from the Faculty of English, Cambridge

9 WEST ROAD

Peterhouse MS 255 open at the sermon's mention of Wade. Courtesy of the Master and Fellows of Peterhouse, University of Cambridge

IN CELEBRATION OF AUTONOMOUS INTELLIGENCE

It is a pleasure to share with you the news that the Cambridge Faculty of English is now ranked the best in the world for the study of English literature and language (QS rankings 2026) - a most fitting note on which to look towards our centenary next year.

Sitting in the Manuscript Reading Room of the University Library recently, I opened up the first 'Minute Book of the Faculty of English'. As a medievalist, the volumes I more often consult in that space are on parchment or printed in the black letter of the early sixteenth century, their age bestowing a sense of importance regardless of their content. Nevertheless, this volume still had a sense of gravitas about it. In contrast to the SharePoint folders of committee minutes we now work with, this was a rather handsome (if well-worn) volume bound in blue cloth with 'MINUTE BOOK' embossed in gold on the front cover. It also began with a sense of occasion. First with handwritten decisions of the 'English Committee of the Special Board for Medieval and Modern Languages' on 6 October 1926, and then a little over a month (and a page) later, with 'The first meeting of the Board of the Faculty of English' on 16 November.

One of the things that struck me reading that first volume of minutes was the desirability of studying literature, even in – perhaps especially during – strained times. On 21 April 1939, it was agreed to offer lectures to students evacuated from London University without charge. On 22 April 1947, the minutes record that 'a number of undergraduates in scientific Faculties had written to the General Board, asking that lectures on English literature might be arranged for them during the Long Vacation Term'. Two lectures a week for five weeks were duly offered to 'scientific' students during the summer and proved popular enough to continue. Naval cadets stationed in Cambridge during and after the war were also offered lectures for a number of years. All of this stands in stark contrast to recent policy and funding decisions that emphasise the instrumentality of a degree above all else.

One of the challenges we face is communicating to potential students that English can lead them to far more interesting paths than they or perhaps governments – can imagine. This is well illustrated by the journey of the new Chancellor of the University, Lord Chris Smith, an alumnus of the English Faculty. In 2005 he wrote in this publication about his experiences as an undergraduate of being 'taught, enthused, uplifted, and enlightened'. He went on to write a PhD here on Wordsworth and Coleridge. Applying for a Kennedy Scholarship at Harvard, he

recalls being asked by the interviewing panel: ‘You seem to be keen on making a career for yourself in public life. What on earth is the relevance of English literature to that?’ His response was that he thought ‘there was no better preparation for a career in public life than the study of English literature through the ages. It taught you more about human nature, thought, passion, sensibility, society and relationships than anything else could’.

At a less illustrious level I concur heartily. As an A-level student I took English, Economics and Politics. In choosing English for a degree it might have been anticipated that I was leaving the other two subjects behind, but in the study of literature I found everything that fascinated me. Years later my work has taken in economics, education, domestic economy, marketing, obscenity, politics, rebellion, religion, travel and more. Above all, it gave me the ability to read carefully and to think about context, subtext, language and psychology. In stark contrast, the study of politics or economics at university was unlikely to have ever afforded me the opportunity to study literature. What is often cited as the drawback of English studies – that there is a less well-defined career path than, say, for Law ––is its great strength. Two of our alumni who were lucky enough to benefit from postgraduate funding share here the fascinating paths they have since followed: Noa Leach as Special Projects Editor at *BBC Science Focus* magazine and Charlie Barranu as Curator of Books and Manuscripts of the Royal Library at Windsor. As Jay Miller, Artistic Director and founder of The Yard Theatre, notes in his interview here: ‘I didn’t know then, and I don’t know now, where my degree will take me. And I value that doubt every day, because it keeps my curiosity alive’.

My curiosity was certainly sparked by the core of articles in this edition of *9 West Road* which feature early modernists’ work in a way that challenges any assumptions about what the study of literature in this period might encompass. Raphael Lyne writes about the examination of vivid memory in the ‘Memory Lab’, a UKRI-funded collaborative project with cognitive neuroscientist, Jon Simons, and Professor of psychology, Charles Fernyhough; Hester Lees-Jeffries tells us a little of her magisterial *Textile Shakespeare* and its exploration of the ‘early modern textile imagination […] to the economy, power structures, and thought of early modern England’; Bonnie Lander Johnson begins with a scholarly monograph on botanical culture in Shakespeare’s plays and traverses to a trade book on *Vanishing Landscapes* to ‘tell the story of how we became modern and alienated from the landscape’; and John Colley reports on his work on muteness and mute characters from Antiquity to Shakespeare.

Another cluster of articles bring out the thoroughgoing entanglement of life and literature. Harriet Baker’s *Rural Hours* showed how ‘neglected varieties of everyday writing acted as crucial steps towards larger works’ by Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Townsend Warner and Rosamond Lehmann, while her new project, *Intense Lives*, is an exploration of working motherhood in the lives of a group of post-war artists and writers. In ‘Let’s Write a Novel’, Alex Houen describes writing *See You Through* with Geoff Gilbert during the pandemic as ‘really fun, a joy during challenging times, and […] a testament to what friendship can become and do’; and Jay Miller argues that ‘we need live storytelling to help with living’. The scientific students and naval cadets of post-war Cambridge would have agreed. All these articles testify to the study of English literature as cultivating *autonomous* intelligence, wide-ranging, original, interrogative, and of fundamental value far beyond any immediately apparent instrumental use. In a year when we have been writing policy on A.I., with its emphasis on productivity and time-saving above all else, that is something to celebrate and preserve.

I suspect that will resonate with many of you who generously got in touch to say how much you enjoyed the last edition of *9 West Road* and to share your memories of your studies here, as well as current endeavours. Indeed, I look forward to talking to more of you in person as we mark the centenary of the English Faculty next year. We hope you will join us in celebrating the wide variety of work that the study of literature encompasses here, and in imagining what the next hundred years could hold and where our graduates will go. As Stephen Collini writes, there is reason for optimism that the discipline will flourish ‘in new and perhaps as yet unthought of ways’.

Alex da Costa
Professor of Medieval Literature and Early Print,
Chair of Faculty of English

Where did English take you?

In the coming years we want to communicate more to potential students about the varied paths our alumni take and the different ways they make an impact in the world. We want all sorts of stories from the everyday jobs that will feel relatable to the extraordinary.

If you’d like to share your story, you can upload a short selfie video here:

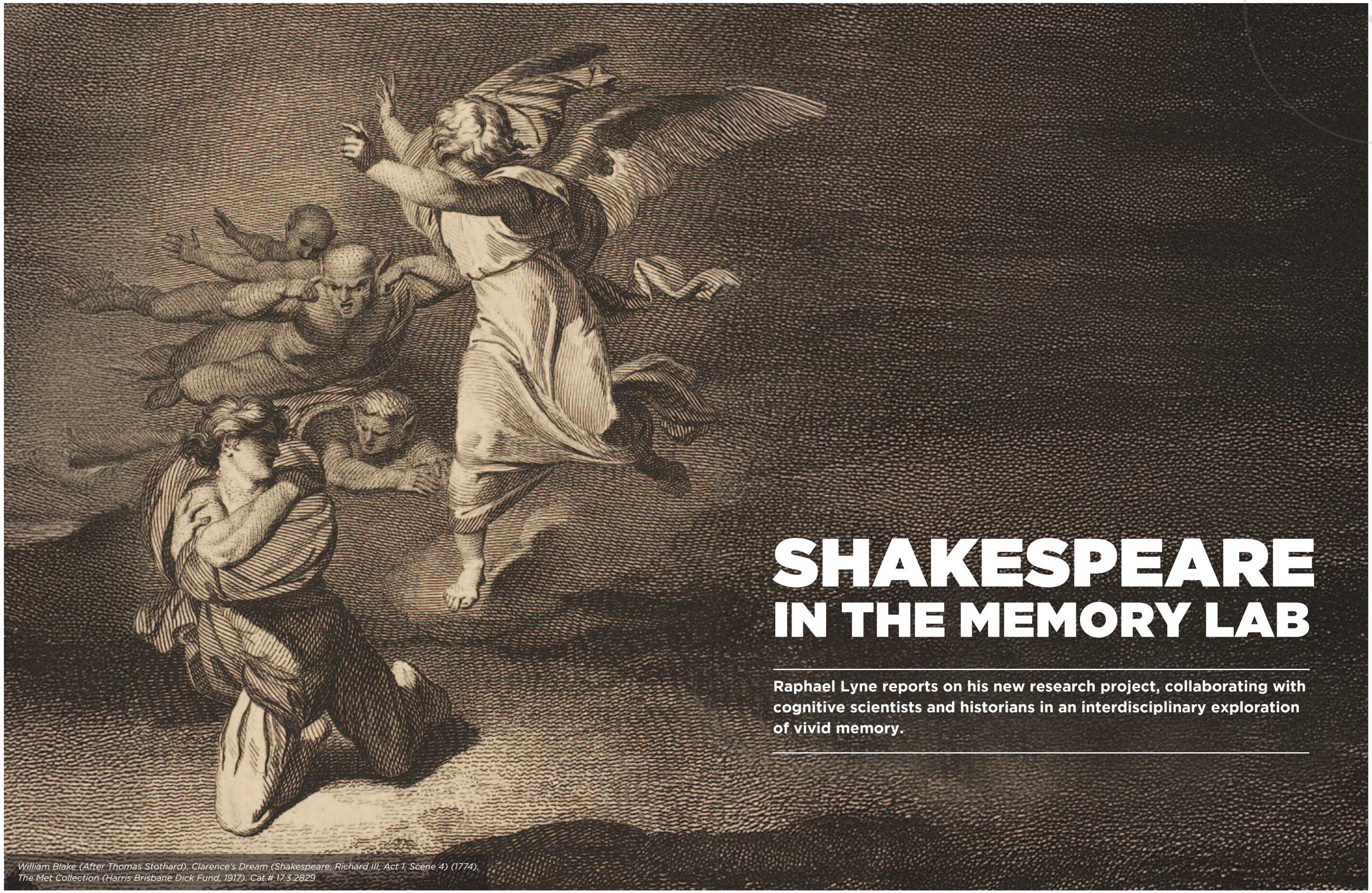
SCAN ME

Scan QR Code
Tap ‘Add file’. Then ‘Browse’. This will allow you to select either ‘Camera’ or ‘Photos and Videos’ on your phone. Videos should be short (ideally no more than 60 seconds) and informal. They don’t need to be edited or perfect! We’d love you to tell potential students:

- who you are
- ‘where English took you’ after your degree and
- what you gained from doing English here

We will edit together videos for our new website coming later this year.

If you’d prefer to share your stories by text, please feel free to email me at ad666@cam.ac.uk.



SHAKESPEARE IN THE MEMORY LAB

Raphael Lyne reports on his new research project, collaborating with cognitive scientists and historians in an interdisciplinary exploration of vivid memory.

William Blake (After Thomas Stothard), Clarence's Dream (Shakespeare, Richard III, Act 1, Scene 4) (1774), The Met Collection (Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1917). Cat.# 17.3.2829

In late 2004, I discussed some new ideas I had with a psychology fellow in my college. I wanted to know how to generate productive conversations with memory scientists. She said that by far my best bet would be to get them thinking about designing experiments. I took this to heart, but while I had made quite a bit of headway in writing about literature and cognitive science, on memory and a range of other topics, I had struggled in vain to get into the experimental process beyond the pilot stage.

Robert Fludd, 'Ars memoriae', Book 2 of Utriusque cosmi historia (Oppenheim, 1619). Wellcome Collection. CC BY 4.0

My fortunes changed in 2018 when I heard from Jon Simons, a cognitive neuroscientist in Cambridge, and Charles Fernyhough, a Professor of Psychology from Durham whose work on memory and inner voices, often in conversation with literature and history, I already knew well. They were looking for collaborators in the humanities, believing that memory research requires an understanding of subjective experience (what memory feels like, what its personal ramifications are, etc.), and scientific methods have their limits. They sought people in other fields who had different ways of identifying and addressing questions.

I was very glad, of course, to work with people sincerely dedicated to devising experiments with humanities scholars, and with a track record of doing so already. It took us until 2024 to win funding for the research. From the scientists' point of view, only with funding could we assemble the team and the resources to make a serious go of it. This was not completely familiar to me: my previous grant applications had involved things I had already broached, or which I could do in part without funding. This heightened the disappointment of several failed applications, expanding and contracting and shifting emphasis in keeping with the funders' priorities.
We were lucky to be successful in a pilot scheme for a UK Research and Innovation scheme promoting interdisciplinary research (UKRI is the umbrella organisation for all UK research funding): lucky to be one of 30 successful grants out of 900 applications, lucky to be the only arts–sciences collaboration of our kind on the list, and lucky to be in the first tranche (of two) because they have decided to discontinue the scheme amid further constriction of budgets.

The focus of our project is vivid memories. We are thinking about what makes us deem them vivid, thinking about detail, liveliness, emotional effect and more. We are also thinking about which types of memory are most vivid, why some memories are more vivid than others, what they do for us, positively or negatively, and how all this varies individually and by life stage. The scholars mentioned above have been joined by Reformation historian Alexandra Walsham, and by two post-doctoral researchers, including Martha McGill, who is based in the Faculty of English but is a historian by training. You can read about our activities on the project website: https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/research/memory/. There's a survey there: it might be closed by the time you read this, but if not, we'd love to hear about all the vivid memories we can. You can follow a link from the website to a feature about the project on Radio 4's 'All in the Mind' in October 2025 (https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m002l34j).

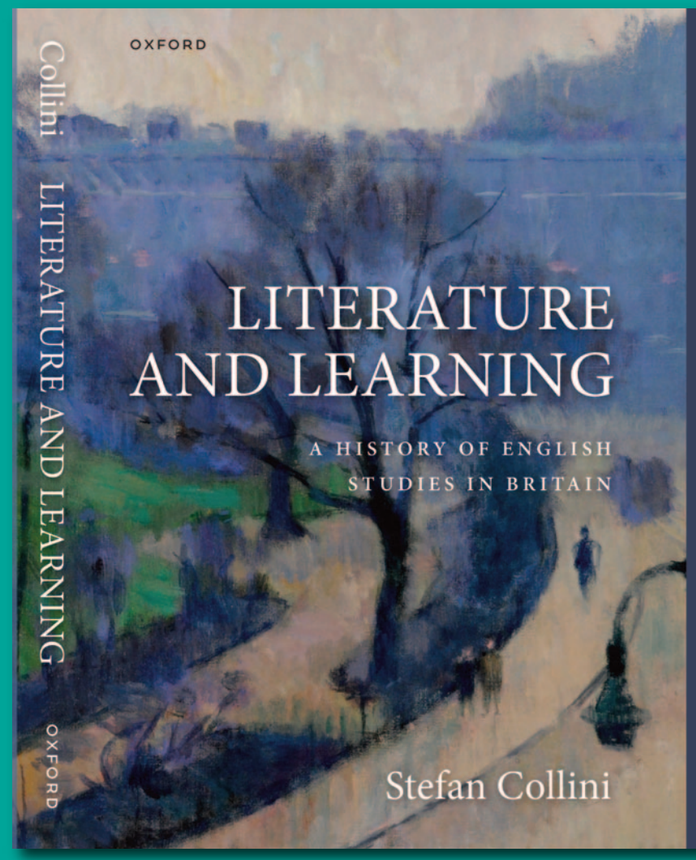
You can also read there about our regular group meetings, at which members of a broader project team, and invited guests, have talked about a range of topics. At one meeting, the art historian Christina Faraday discussed the unexpected forms of vividness found in Tudor art, alongside Will Duckett from Psychology exploring definitions and measures of vividness used by psychologists, alongside a discussion of the depiction of memory in the award-winning video game series *Hellblade*. At another session my Faculty colleague Joseph Bitney spoke about representations of memory in classical Hollywood cinema, neuroscientist Amy Milton gave her take on more recent films, and project post-doc Kasia Mojescik spoke about techniques for making and using film-clips in experiments. These meetings have done more than just bring together people with varied but interlocking interests; they have also been the occasions for designing experiments in collaboration.

Meanwhile, I have been working on Shakespeare's depictions of vivid remembering, so I can represent the importance of literature and literary study as a vital contributor to our understanding of the mind in this respect. I have looked at awestruck reports from messengers, and at charged reminiscences, as when Hippolyta in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* thinks back to hunting with Hercules and Cadmus: 'the groves, / The skies, the fountains, every region near / Seem'd all one mutual cry'. I have wondered also what to do with apparent moments of memory which aren't articulated in dazzling poetry. In *Twelfth Night*, Sir Andrew Aguecheek unexpectedly remarks 'I was adored once too', and it seems interesting to wonder what we are meant to infer from this, and how it should be acted.

I've looked at acts of vivid remembering associated with pivotal moments in tragicomedy, at old men in histories, at memories of dreams (especially Clarence's in *Richard III*), and at clowns (and others, but Launce with his dog is the star) acting out their memories. I spent a lot of time comparing him quite painstakingly to other dramatists of the time, eventually reaching the conclusion that Shakespeare is indeed distinctively more interested in staging vivid memory than others. He seems particularly interested in the ways that present things become recent, and then past, and then how memories change into stories. Like memory scientists, he is interested in the ways that authentic details are filled out and embellished, with details that can be generic or exciting. Shakespeare is also interested in the boundaries of episodes of remembering, how they can intrude, but also how they can be set up deliberately. Most of all, perhaps, he depicts individual differences, with memories formed by character as well as forming character.

We have a bit more than a year to go, and a lot to do. Results from our experiments (the mass-participation survey I mentioned above, an experiment in which subjects keep memory-diaries, and an FMRI study) will come in, and we'll work to put them into dialogue with insights from literature and history. We'll also have to think of ways, amid a very difficult research-funding environment, of keeping the collaborative momentum going after this short project has finished, because I don't think I am anything like done with this kind of work.

Raphael Lyne
Professor of Renaissance Literature
Fellow and Director of Studies at
Murray Edwards College



STEFAN COLLINI was educated at Cambridge and Yale. Following a Research Fellowship at St John's College, Cambridge, he was Lecturer, then Reader, in Intellectual History at the University of Sussex 1974-86; Lecturer, then Reader, then Professor of Intellectual History and English Literature at the University of Cambridge 1986-2014. He is a Fellow of the British Academy and a frequent contributor to the *London Review of Books*, *Times Literary Supplement*, and *Guardian*.

Last May a packed audience gathered in Little Hall to hear a discussion between John Guillory (New York University) and Stefan Collini (University of Cambridge). The prompt for this discussion was the recent publication of Guillory's *Professing Criticism: Essays in the Organization of Literary Study* (University of Chicago Press, 2022) and Collini's *Literature and Learning: A History of English Studies in Britain* (Oxford University Press, 2025). Following that summertime conversation, Ross Wilson here invites Stefan to draw out some of the distinctive themes of his 600-page history of the discipline from its (arguable) beginnings in the late eighteenth century to the early 1960s.

RW: *Both the titles and sub-titles of your and Guillory's books point to significant differences in subject-matter and approach. How would you briefly characterize the main contrasts?*

SC: John's book is more sociological, more wide-ranging and more polemical than mine. He also explores long-term themes such as the tradition of rhetoric and the rise of the vernacular, as well as addressing topical issues from recent and current debates within the profession. My book is more doggedly historical, more institutional in focus, and more detailed. I stop my story in the early 1960s, by which time 'Eng Lit' seemed to be securely established as one of the central subjects in British universities, so the book does not engage with the methodological and political debates of recent decades.

RW: *Do some of these contrasts arise from the difference between American and British perspectives and contexts?*

SC: There certainly are major differences along national lines. The magnet that arranges the filings in John's account is the part played by the so-called 'New Criticism' of the 1930s to 1960s in providing the discipline with its distinctive identity. Much of his book is concerned with how the profession is currently struggling to negotiate, throw off, or replace that identity. My account accentuates, by contrast, the diversity of scholarly practices in the British case, with literary history, textual editing and the history of the language playing long-lasting roles alongside forms of criticism. But we both trespass on each other's territory a good deal, and there are constant transatlantic connections and overlaps, especially from the 1940s onwards, that no serious history can ignore.

RW: *Literature and Learning shows that some of the figures often seen as the 'founders' of the discipline were not quite so decisive in its actual history. At the risk of establishing new heroes, which largely forgotten figures in the history of English studies do you think most deserve renewed attention?*

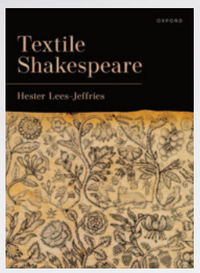
SC: Probably the two figures to whom paternity of the discipline is most often attributed in textbook accounts are Matthew Arnold and I.A. Richards. But, as I show, Arnold, though undeniably important in the history of criticism, was at best marginal to the institutional development of Eng Lit – in fact, he did not favour its becoming a separate degree course. And Richards, though again a major figure in the development of literary theory, was neither so singular nor so directly influential in the rise of 'criticism' within English studies as is often assumed. My book does not propose new 'heroes' because the story it tells is rather one of the interplay of social forces, institutional structures and ideals of learning (and it tries to get away from the usual obsession with Oxford and Cambridge by looking in detail at the English civic universities and the Scottish universities). But since you ask for names, I have to say that re-reading A.C. Bradley, especially but not exclusively his Shakespearean Tragedy, led me to admire his careful and discriminating critical voice. He was not a programmatic critic, not a theorist, so there was no subsequent school of 'Bradleyans', but everything he wrote repays attention.

RW: *Though they are not as comprehensive or detailed as yours, there have been a number of other accounts of aspects of the history of the discipline in recent years. Does all this indicate, thinking of Hegel's dictum that 'the owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the onset of dusk', that we are now beginning to understand 'Eng Lit' as a historical form because it is starting to slip away?*

SC: You need a certain distance from any practice if you are to identify what was peculiar about it, what calls for explanation. One of the themes that comes through most strongly in my book is the way that the cultural centrality of 'the tradition of English poetry' (in the singular) was taken for granted across the period I cover. This gave 'Eng Lit' a particular kind of legitimacy not available in our more pluralistic and contentious (but perhaps also less complacent or exclusionary) age. For this reason, more than any other, I suspect that much of the historical story I tell may seem almost unfathomably distant to many of those who teach and study English today.

RW: *So should we be worried?*

SC: Anybody who attends to what is happening to courses and departments around the country in 2026 is bound to be worried, indeed alarmed. But my book does not point any kind of elegiac or nostalgic moral. Quite to the contrary: one advantage of having an adequate history of the discipline ought to be that it helps us see which aspects of our inheritance were so much matters of their time and place that we need to replace them with choices more adequate to our own situation. After all, the book's final sentence is: 'It will be for others to describe how the discipline adapted to changed conditions in the late twentieth century – as well as continuing, we may hope, to flourish in the coming decades of the twenty-first century in new and perhaps as yet unthought of ways.'



TEXTILE SHAKESPEARE

If you think about costumes, clothes, and textiles more generally in Shakespeare's works, what comes to mind?

Top of the list might be Othello's handkerchief, spotted with strawberries, overcharged with significance ('There's magic in the web of it. | A sibyl that had numbered in the world | The sun to course two hundred compasses In her prophetic fury sewed the work. | The worms were hallowed that did breed the silk, | And it was dyed in mummy, which the skilful | Conserved of maidens' hearts', 3.4.63-9)—or perhaps Malvolio's yellow stockings, duly cross-gartered, Hamlet's inky cloak, or the arras behind which Polonius conceals himself. More allusively, in his distress at Cressida's betrayal, Troilus invokes the mysteriously hybrid 'Ariachne's broken woof' (5.2.147), the villainous Iachimo seems to blur the boundaries between Imogen and the white linen of her bed in *Cymbeline* (2.2), and, in *Love's Labour's Lost*, Berowne, chastened by his beloved Rosaline, promises that he will abandon 'Taffeta phrases, silken terms precise, | Three-piled hyperboles, spruce affectation, | Figures pedantical' so that 'Henceforth [his] wooing mind shall be expressed | In russet yeas, and honest kersey noes' (5.2.408-10, 414-5).

Ruff, northern Netherlands, c.1615-c.1630. Linen. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, on loan from H.G. Rahusen, Amsterdam'

In *Textile Shakespeare* (Oxford University Press, 2025), I have tried to recover what I've termed the early modern textile imagination: the centrality of cloth, to the economy, power structures and thought of early modern England, and for its people—Shakespeare among them—a way of being in the world. For early modern readers and audiences, language itself could be textile, not simply in the connection between the textile and the text—they have a shared etymology in *texere*, weave—but because of how early modern English was full of terms, concepts and idioms that were ultimately textile in their referents. Some are still familiar: to be on tenterhooks, to botch or cobble together, to dismiss garments or accessories as tawdry fripperies, to speak bombastically. Such terms, however, have become detached from their precise textile origins, and from the lived experience of early modern people. Newly-finished cloth was stretched with *tenterhooks* on a wooden frame or *tenter* so that it did not shrink as it dried; to *botch* was to mend garments as to *cobble* is still to mend shoes; a *fripper* sold second-hand clothes; *bombast* was padding, stuffing, and a *tawdry* lace was a ribbon worn around the neck, choker-style, named for St Audrey (Etheldreda), associated with healing miracles for throat complaints. For early modern English people, their country and their world could be mapped in cloth, from the woollen broadcloths of England, especially East Anglia, to the fine linens and silks imported from all over Europe and beyond. Place could be transformed into cloth: the particular shade of green woollen cloth made in Kendal, in Cumbria; cambric from Cambrai in Flanders and the more generic hollands from the Low Countries, all fine linens. Rich damasks recall their origins in Syrian Damascus, while 'worsted' yarn or cloth is ultimately named for the tiny village of Worstead in Norfolk.

Throughout this period, a significant proportion of people were involved in aspects of the cloth trade, from the wool staplers who traded in raw wool (or, even further back, the shepherds and shearers) to the weavers, fullers, dyers, cloth merchants, drapers and tailors, the spinners and lacemakers, seamstresses, silk women, tirewomen and laundresses. Early modern England was a cloth economy, but it was also a cloth culture, a cloth community, and it had long been international, drawing people and their skills to the country from all over Europe. People in early modern England knew cloth, could read cloth. They knew how and where it was made, and (especially) how much it cost. And in addition to what might even be termed its *terroir*, the past and the future of cloth were among the textile qualities which were intelligible to many if not most people in the English Renaissance. The way that basic garments were cut and constructed—often gathering and pleating rather than cutting on the bias; shaping with laces, pins and starch as much as with stitches—meant that garments were not just mended and altered but readily unpicked, remade and recycled. (I argue that this culture of recycling has a vivid parallel in the making and remaking of plays and other literary texts, by Shakespeare and others.) The very word 'stuff' can be used generically, for woven textiles, and specifically, to refer to a particular kind of woollen cloth. More generally, it is used to translate the Latin *materia*, matter, a substance out of which other things are made: 'we are such stuff as dreams are made on' (4.1.156-7), Prospero says in *The Tempest*, and one of the many possible meanings of 'stuff' is textile.

'Stuff' is also the title of my introductory chapter (the book's short epilogue is called 'Ruff'), and in between are chapters entitled 'Linen' (which also considers laundry: how bloody was Shakespeare's stage really?), 'Leather/Wool', 'Silk', 'Inky Cloak', 'Sew', 'Cut' (which is about tailors) and 'Fold'. Working on *Textile Shakespeare*, I've spent time in the archives of the Globe, National Theatre and RSC, with sixteenth- and seventeenth-century garments in the V&A, and, perhaps most unforgettably, with what might be the only surviving textile from the wardrobe of Elizabeth I, in the conservation studio at Hampton Court. I've written about every single one of Shakespeare's plays, as well as many works by his contemporaries; I've explored costume on the early modern stage and in twentieth- and twenty-first-century productions. But my work has also been deeply influenced by a decade of teaching for 'Material Renaissance', a Part II optional paper that I developed and teach with other colleagues in the Faculty, that reads early modern literature alongside and through its images and objects, with handling sessions at the Fitzwilliam and (some years) a field trip to Penshurst. It's been amazing to have such synergy between my teaching and research.

Hester Lees-Jeffries
University Associate Professor
Fellow and Director of Studies at St Catharine's College

A LOST ENGLISH LEGEND **DECODED**

The Fellows' Drawing Room, Girton College. It was a cool spring afternoon, and the sky was bright through the leaded windows. Lunch had come and gone, and we were all sitting with hot drinks before the clock chimed and we would scatter off to our seminars or supervisions or labs or libraries. Some were around a table, chatting. Some were in deep armchairs in the corner, reading papers. I was on a sofa near the fire, and next to me was the scholar of medieval history and the history of science, Seb Falk.

I handed Seb my phone and said I had a photo of a medieval manuscript to show him. I tried to explain what he was looking at while he pinched and stretched and swiped the tiny screen to make out the text of a thirteenth-century Latin sermon.

I told him that I had been thinking about lost literature, that shadowland of historical writing that we know only by lacunae and allusion, textual gaps and manuscript scraps: most writings of the ancient Greek playwrights, for instance, Lord Byron's memoirs, the second Book of Aristotle's *Poetics*, or *Love's Labour's Won*. That morning I had gone to the University Library to see Peterhouse MS 255, which contains the only surviving fragment of a medieval romance concerning a lost legend, a story cited twice by Chaucer (in *The Merchant's Tale* and *Troilus and Criseyde*) and by several other writers in medieval England. The romance's hero happens to be my namesake, and the title traditionally ascribed to it is *The Song of Wade*.

Aside from the allusions in other medieval writings, and the fragment in Peterhouse MS 255, nothing is known about Wade or his legend. A story evidently well-known in the Middle Ages and Renaissance simply dropped out of history. Writing in 1936, Jack Bennett supposes that there is 'probably no better known crux in Chaucer than the tale of Wade'.[1] The sense of a 'crux' has been exacerbated by one of Chaucer's early editors, Thomas Speght, who includes the following note in an appendix to his 1598 edition of Chaucer's works: 'Concerning Wade and his bote called Guingelot, as also his strange exploits in the same, because the matter is long and fabulous, I passe it over'.[2]

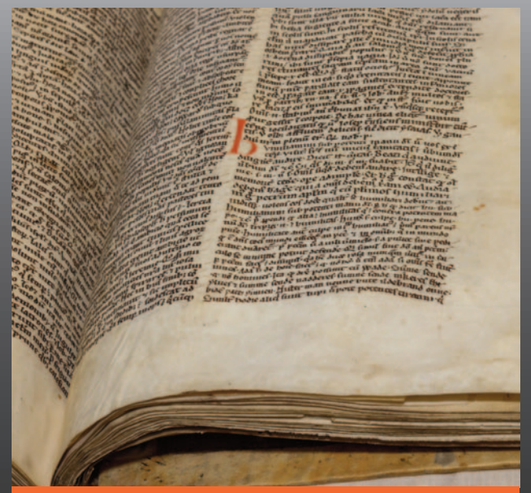
When I saw the Peterhouse manuscript that morning, however, something puzzled me. The accepted rendering of the Middle English verse, first offered by M. R. James and Israel Gollancz in 1896, reads thus:

Summe sende ylues
and summe sende nadderes:
summe sende nikeres
the [bi den watere] wunien:
Nister man nenne
bute ildebrand onne.

With the following translation:

Some are elves and some are adders; some are sprites that dwell by waters: there is no man, but Hildebrand only.

Seb Falk and James Wade reading the sermon in Peterhouse MS 255 in the University Library. Courtesy of the Master and Fellows of Peterhouse, University of Cambridge



Part of the sermon mentioning Wade in Peterhouse MS 255. Courtesy of the Master and Fellows of Peterhouse, University of Cambridge

Yet, the mention of elves and sprites, of a mythological sphere akin to the world of Beowulf, did not sit neatly in the context of the sermon, which is on the theme of humility, and which analogises vice through the characteristics of animals such as wolves and snakes. It also occurred to me that the accepted Middle English rendering did not suggest a text that would make much sense in the context of Chaucer's allusions, both of which concern matters of courtly intrigue and the intricacies of fin amour. I had, I said to Seb, a funny feeling about it.

Seb suggested that a first step in approaching this problem would be to establish our own transcription and translation of the sermon, and it was while doing so that Seb made a radical suggestion that transformed our thinking: that what had been considered a 'y' in the word 'ylues' (elves) was in fact a runic character called a wen (ƿ), found commonly in Old English and early Middle English, which makes the sound of a modern 'w'. Thus, that crucial word is not 'elves', but 'wolves', a reading reinforced by the Latin that follows:

Similiter hodie aliqui sunt lupi [...]
Similarly, today some are wolves [...]

Ultimately, Seb and I offered this rendering of the *Wade* fragment:

Some are wolves and some are adders.
Some are sea-snakes that dwell by the water.
There is no man at all but Hildebrand.

Such a reading re-calibrates what is known, or supposed, about the world of this romance, and indeed the world of the medieval Legend of Wade. It also helps solve the 'crux' in Chaucer's writings. If it was a mystery why Chaucer would allude to a legend of Teutonic warriors and mythological creatures in moments of high courtly dealings, our reading suggests that he wasn't: he was referring to a Middle English romance, and one that warns how real threats come not from elves or monsters but from a more dangerous kind of beast: humans.

Seb and I discovered many other things along the way. The sermon author, for instance, was not only adept at using memes and weaving references to pop culture into his sermon, but he was also a person of considerable learning in cutting-edge natural philosophy. He may well have been none other than Alexander Neckham himself. Strange, how a Latin sermon of such philosophical complexity, written presumably for a clerical audience, would expect that audience to be familiar with the details of a Middle English romance. Or perhaps not so strange. The sermon 'demonstrates new scholarship, rhetorical sophistication, and inventiveness', Seb would go on to say, and perhaps the sermoniser was most inventive, and rhetorically risky, when quoting from *The Song of Wade*.

James Wade
Associate Professor of English
Girton College

[1] J. A. W. Bennett, 'Concerning Wade...', *The Modern Language Review*, 31.2 (1936), 201-203 (p. 201).
[2] *The Works of Our Ancient and Learned English Poet, Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. by Thomas Speght (1598; London: Adam Islip, 1602).

PATHS SHAPED BY ENGLISH

English at Cambridge has long had a transformative impact on students' lives. This issue of *9 West Road* begins a series of reflections by former graduate students whose careers demonstrate the extraordinary breadth and enduring value of postgraduate study in the humanities. This first instalment features two postgraduates: Charlie Barranu, whose path led from the study of medieval manuscripts to the curation of rare books at the Royal Library, Windsor Castle, and Noa Leach, who moved from researching artistic responses to change in circumpolar Indigenous communities to finding scientific stories that will captivate the public interest as editor of *BBC Science Focus* magazine.

These testimonials remind us that research and training in English foster habits that travel far: rigorous analysis, attentiveness to how ideas circulate, sensitivity to evidence, an ability to translate complexity and a commitment to public good. Their reflections reveal not only the long-term value of doctoral skills across sectors, but also a shared appreciation for opportunities that shaped them, and a hope that future students can access the same.

Their journeys underline the importance of scholarships and studentships, which open the door to opportunities that might otherwise remain closed. They offer a compelling picture of what postdoctoral education makes possible: careers that are nonlinear, inventive, ethically engaged and grounded in the belief that learning illuminates both the present and the future.

Professor Orietta Da Rold
(Director of PhD Studies)

CHARLIE BARRANU
ENGLISH GRADUATE 2021

A career spent among medieval books and the people who study them is rarely the result of a single decision; more often, it grows from a series of encounters, instincts and opportunities that gradually shape a professional path. My own journey into the world of heritage libraries began during my undergraduate years, when I volunteered at Parker and Taylor Libraries at Corpus Christi. I had been searching for work experience, but what I found was something far more formative. Those early days among manuscripts revealed to me how deeply I enjoyed uncovering the lives behind the making and reading of medieval books. That experience quietly but decisively set the direction for everything that followed.

Motivated by this discovery, I pursued an MPhil in Medieval History, eager to immerse myself further in the period that had captured my imagination. The research process was slow, meticulous and full of unexpected revelations – it was exhilarating. I loved exploring questions that felt meaningful; I loved learning from the people around me just as much as from the manuscripts themselves. After submitting my dissertation, I secured a trainee position at the Classical Faculty Library, which confirmed that librarianship was a career I would find fulfilling. I completed my professional qualification at UCL in 2017, formalising the path I had already begun to walk.

The decision to embark on a PhD grew naturally out of this momentum. Partly, I simply wanted to know more: about manuscripts, about medieval intellectual life, about the ways knowledge moved through multilingual societies. I also believed, somewhat naively, that specialist expertise would make me more competitive in the job market. That assumption proved false, but the skills I developed during my doctorate have been invaluable in the heritage sector. My PhD research examined around 250 manuscripts from the University Library, exploring how language shaped knowledge exchange in 13th- and 14th-century England. The project challenged assumptions about linguistic proficiency, reading habits in relation to social background and the organisation of knowledge. It led me down unexpected paths: a deeper engagement with Greek, now published, and a study of monastic audiences for medieval romance, which is nearly ready to share with the world.

Funding came through a studentship from Newnham, which covered my maintenance, while teaching and research assistant roles helped me meet my fees. The workload was intense at times, but those experiences enriched my doctoral years, giving me a broader sense of academic life and a stronger foundation for my future career.

Today, I work full-time as Curator of Books and Manuscripts at the Royal Library in Windsor Castle, alongside a part-time academic role at UCL, where I teach Manuscript Studies and supervise dissertations. The PhD has shaped my career in ways I couldn't have predicted. Full-time curatorial work leaves little space for sustained intellectual exploration, so I cherish those years when I could read widely, debate ideas and let thoughts develop slowly. Those habits continue to inform how I teach, research and understand our relationship to the past and the objects it left behind.

Charlie Barranu
Curator of Books and Manuscripts at the Royal Library in Windsor Castle

NOA LEACH

MPHIL IN CRITICISM & CULTURE, CLARE HALL, 2021–2022

In Lent Term, 2021, I was sitting, mask-clad and sanitised, in the English Faculty Library and listening to sonorified ice core data. The sounds of ancient glacial ice melting popped and crackled through my earphones as I researched change – though the world seemed in standstill – and the artistic responses by circumpolar Indigenous communities to it.

Five years later, I am researching a Norwegian icebreaker's expedition to collect data in the Arctic, its team of oceanographers lowering instruments from the icy surface to find answers to vast mysteries moving deep below. I'm now an editor at *BBC Science Focus* magazine, and the feature is about the potential collapse of the vital system of Atlantic Ocean currents that regulates the climate.

My job involves reading across swathes of scientific discovery to find stories that will captivate our readers, covering everything from quantum gravity to Alzheimer's plaques. I investigate these topics, work with writers to bring them to life, and, when I am the one writing, interview scientists to translate their work for a general audience.

My MPhil at Cambridge was similarly broad and simultaneously specific. The MPhil in Criticism and Culture was led by the Faculty of English but encouraged interdisciplinary exploration. As such, I was able to sit in on lectures from other faculties and use their libraries as I learnt about how culture and the world inform one another. For my MPhil dissertation, studies in dendrology and river science helped ground my research into how ecological ideas in Virginia Woolf's works have spread their tendrils through and influenced subsequent generations of writers and artists. It was the nature of the discipline to range across everything, and it gave me the confidence and critical thinking to interrogate the ways in which any global change shapes local lives.

After the course ended, I chose to stay local – taking up the position of editor of one of the Wildlife Trust's regional magazines, based just outside Cambridge. Here, I investigated conservation projects around the county and beyond, writing about their success stories and obstacles. It was an essential springboard into the world of specialist journalism and publishing.

Yet none of it would have been possible without the support of Clare Hall's Boak Studentship, which was generously endowed by the late Professor Boak of Western Australia. Thanks to this tuition funding and maintenance support, I was not only able to complete my MPhil but also fully engage in college life at Clare Hall (including rowing, choir and the allotments). Ultimately, it helped me to step into an increasingly challenging – and ever-important – space, upholding scientific rigour in the public discourse, and fostering truth and integrity through educational entertainment. That the arts play a central role in this is something the Boak Studentship recognised, and for that I'm extremely grateful.

Noa Leach is Special Projects Editor at *BBC Science Focus*

9

THE ENGLISH FACULTY **AND THE ESTELLE TRUST**

In 2025, the Estelle Trust made two donations to the English Faculty. A former student at the Faculty, Nigel Farrow, founded the Trust and its projects and donations are mostly responses to educational needs and causes that reflect the experience of his international career in publishing.

These projects range from a directly managed, development programme for community schools in Zambia to the annual award of the *Estelle Prize for English* at Queens' College. The Prize is an essay competition for sixth-formers that reaches out to attract potential students who might not normally think of Cambridge University as a place to study English literature.

The Estelle Trust's donation to the MPhil studentship in the English Faculty is a celebration of the Faculty's Centenary in 2026. Fittingly, Nigel has a personal link to the Faculty that spans nearly 100 years. When he arrived at Queens' College in 1958 to read English literature, he was one of the last students tutored by Leonard Potts, who had joined the English Faculty as university lecturer in 1928. He remembers Leonard Potts as a kind and generous tutor.

The Trust's second donation is a contribution to a fund at the Faculty that helps authors pay permission fees for the reproduction of illustrations in their academic books. This donation is part of the Estelle Trust's support of public and academic institutions that are fostering research, education and entertainment in the arts and humanities. The Trust delivers much of this institutional support through the funding of research, publications, and public exhibitions in partnership with Lund Humphries Foundation for the Visual Arts.

The creation of the Lund Humphries Foundation as a charitable incorporated institution (CIO) was initiated by Nigel at the start of 2025. With financial help from the Estelle Trust and other generous donors, it is currently supporting the development of major publications based on collections of literature and art held at four Cambridge colleges:

• Queens' College. A new scholarly catalogue of the College's medieval, Oriental and early manuscripts, alongside a more accessible book on the Old Library, Cambridge's oldest library.

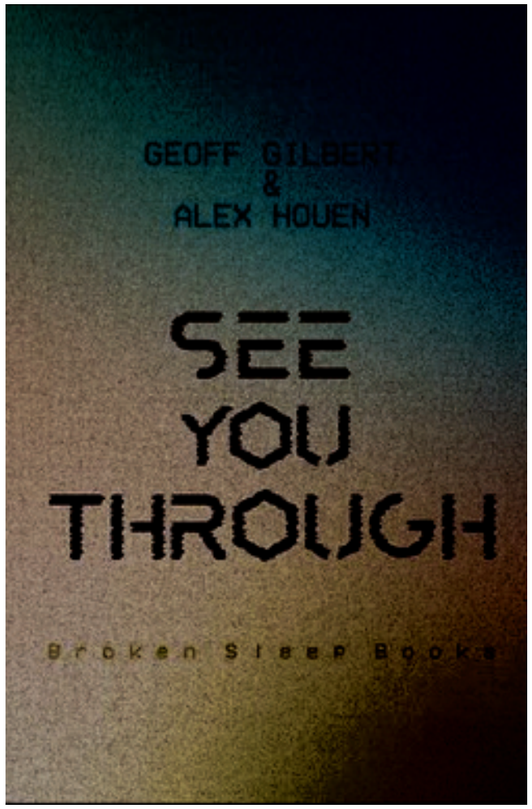
• Clare Hall. A descriptive catalogue and illustrated study of the Bell Collection of British studio pottery, recently donated to the College and forming the basis of its new study centre for artists and twentieth-century ceramics.

• Murray Edwards College. *The Women's' Art Collection: Place, Space, Meaning*, which will present and illustrate the College's collection (the largest in Europe) of twentieth- and twenty-first-century works by women artists and explore its role in the College's education of women.

• Emmanuel College. A book by Professor Barry Windeatt, former Chair of the English Faculty, on the College's unique George Watson Collection of colour-plate books, featuring richly illustrated hand-coloured volumes published between 1770 and 1850.

Let's Write a Novel...

'Let's write a novel': that's what my long-standing friend and poetry collaborator, Geoff Gilbert, would habitually suggest as a plan for spending a few days together. My habitual response was an eye roll. I've known Geoff since we met in Cambridge in the late 1990s – he was a Junior Research Fellow and I was a PhD student. Over subsequent years I've usually gone over once a year to Paris, where he lives and teaches, to spend a little time with him.



One year we came up with the idea of writing poetry together during these visits to prevent ourselves from reminiscing. We'd pass the poem back and forth over a couple of days, taking turns to add a few lines, variously aiming to complement or re-orient what the other had written. It was always really fun; you never knew what was around the corner, and the resulting poem always felt irreducible to either of us in a good way. We published a pamphlet of these poems back in 2016 with the title *Hold! West*.

During the COVID pandemic the lockdowns prevented us from meeting in person, so we switched to seeing each other online and decided to meet more often. 'Let's write a novel', suggested Geoff yet again. And why not? No need to be constrained by the duration of an annual two-day visit. Our initial working title was a set of words which were being used a lot during the pandemic: *Take, Give, Keep, Care, Hold, Well, Clear*.

We gave up on that as a title, as it was too difficult to remember the order of the words! Eventually we settled on *See You Through* because it was evocative of people meeting via screens and needing to help each other through tough times. We came up with a couple of main characters, Mimo and Emael, and decided to write the novel as a long lineated poem relating screened life, intimacy, facial recognition technology, and surveillance.

The writing process unfolded over a couple of years: we wrote most Sundays online, for four or five hours each time, sending the poem-novel back and forth via Skype. Each chapter of the book is the product of a writing session. Once we had a full draft, we did a thorough edit of the content, then a further edit for the prosody. Again, the writing process was really fun, a joy during challenging times, and I think of the book as partly a testament to what friendship can become and do.

If you're interested in knowing more about the novel, which was published last August, read on!

What to make of those intense eruptions of life that remain largely unlived? There are times when Mimo feels he's dancing precariously on a crack between what happens and what there is. There are times when he feels that crack is widened dramatically by his younger 'bother' sibling, Emael (they/them), whose ability to rob things of their impersonality is not the only reason they are a crime. Haunted by parts of his life that slip away from him, Mimo does his best to hold them close as Emael.

His job doesn't help. Paid the minimum wage to check that facial recognition software is working, Mimo's labours of identification constantly throw up associations of memory and imagination by which he gets entangled in other lives. The live CCTV footage he has to watch over is a varying feed that ranges from shopping malls to a London riot, to a celebrity's funeral, to an industrial piggery.

For Mimo, trying to get things clear, or get well clear of them, also means working out how two of his preoccupations, glass and plexiglas, can make you see things differently. Glass he associates with a heritage that extends back to ancient Sumeria; shattered fragments of past. Plexiglas is not shattering but breaking into large dull pieces. Plexiglas is compatible with human tissue, is the stuff of riot shields, glamping domes, transparent coffins, and the possibility of much bigger aquariums.

Mimo's conviction: if there is such a thing as contemporary fiction, it can most succinctly be defined as the replacement of glass. But that's not how things are seen by Mimo's 'Director', a figure who haunts him like a stale ghost and whose voice keeps merging with his own inner voice urging him to jettison poetry and stick to a narrative easy as a breeze in an empty sheepfold – and preferably with some parents watching over it.

But Mimo's main familial concern is to get to the bottom of the crime that is Emael. Easier said than done, as Emael has jumped through a window of opportunity to work in Marseille at the restaurant of their aunt Ish and uncle Jacques. We learn from Emael's voice messages how things are unfolding for them there: endless pot scrubbing; developing an intense relationship with the resident octopus, Zinédine; and falling in love with another employee, young Khaled.

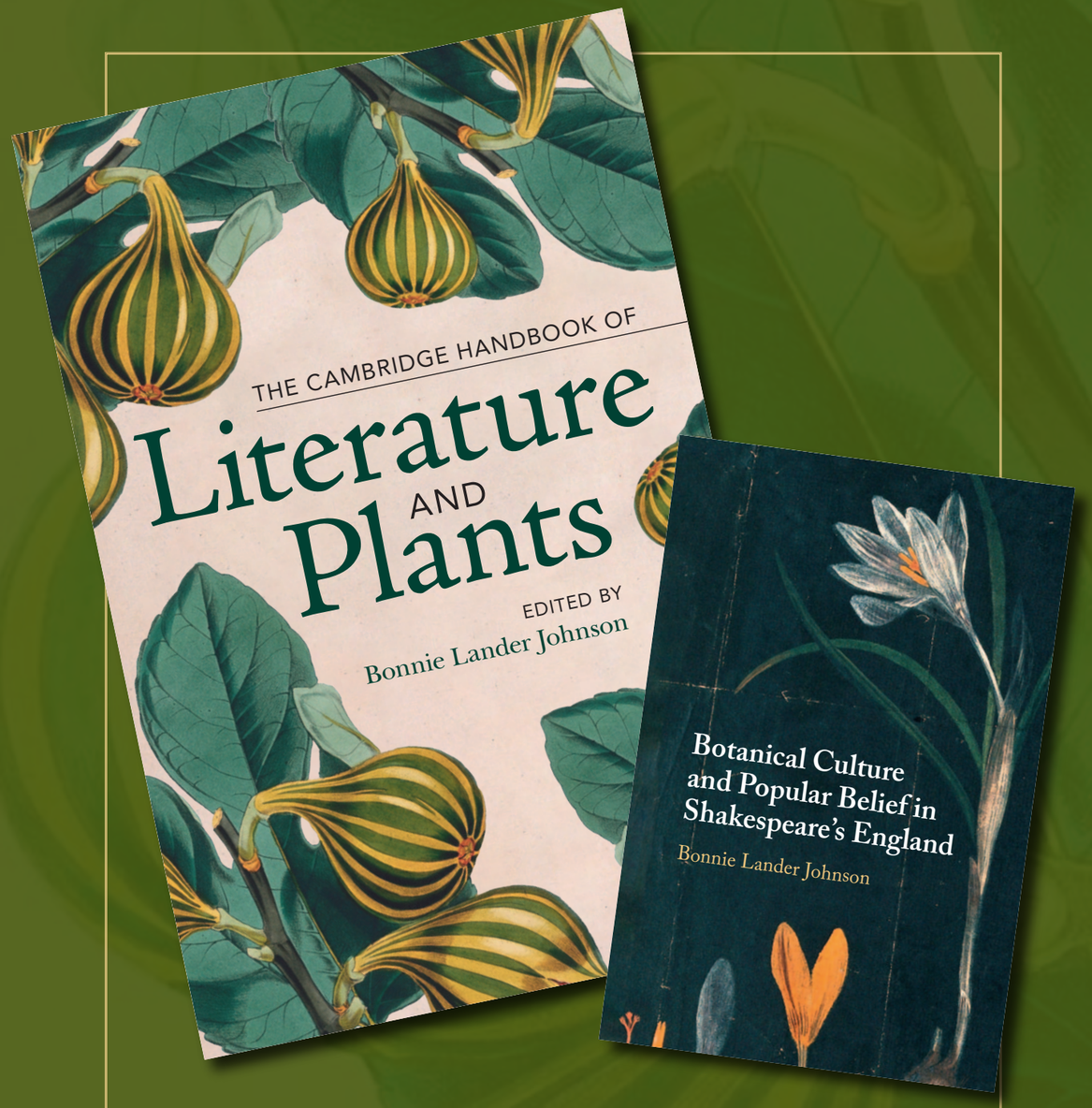
Precariousness increasingly becomes intimacy for the main characters: for Mimo, the industrial piggery job provides a last straw; Emael finds themself living in a tent sandwiched between sea and suburb. How does Emael come to think they've become 'a fabulous success hatched from the impossible'? And does Mimo get to the bottom of Emael's crime?

Well, I'm not going to say here – that would just be telling. But the final give and take is a stolen song of communal vertigo, held up against planetary disaster, a crime beyond surveillance.

***See You Through: A Novel* (2025) is available from Broken Sleep Books.**

Alex Houen
Professor of Modern Literature and Critical Theory, Fellow of Pembroke College

Alex Houen with Geoff Gilbert (right)



A HISTORICAL REALITY OF PLANTS

By accident, three books that I've been working on for the last decade all came out in 2025. Placed side by side, they could almost be the same book: on the covers are a saffron flower, a fig vine and an apple tree. I wasn't always interested in plants. I don't have much time to garden. After my first monograph was published in 2015 (on early modern chastity), I really wasn't sure what to work on next, so I started listening to the quiet but persistent thoughts I had been having for some years about the historical reality of plants. Plants are everywhere in Shakespeare, in most early modern writers, in much writing from every period of history. Why do artists feel so compelled to curate, understand, interpret, analyse and depict plants and why are they so useful as motifs, ornaments, symbols? Reformation controversy touched all elements of the material world; plants in particular were submitted to a lively and vexed ideological dispute: were plants creatures made by an Incarnate God, available as aids to devotion, or instead idols distracting the godly mind from word-based worship?

My doctoral work on chastity had come together because I found in the early modern history of that virtue a way of cutting across various social domains: high and low; male and female; domestic and public; medical, political and theological. Plants offered the same wide vision. Everybody used plants in daily life, but everyone also believed they had some higher purpose, the definition of which had to be discovered, discussed, fought over. Plants were central to ordinary practices from feeding, educating, dressing and healing to building and travel but they also attracted attention from every kind of artistic skill. They were some of the key items fought over in the sea wars, through which the early modern nation-states rose to power, and they were at the centre of Elizabeth I's self-presentation and so an important part of English propaganda and proto-colonialism. The final seam in the argument, the one that helped me complete the book, emerged when I realised that plants were my way into understanding the least documented but largest body of early modern people, the people whom I had always wanted to know better: illiterate commoners.

The CUP monograph, *Botanical Culture and Popular Belief in Shakespeare's England*, reads four Shakespeare plays in the context of popular plant cultures in order to argue that illiterate commoners were not mere passive recipients of learned and elite attempts to re-educate them into a 'proper' understanding of nature's diminished place in the world order. By looking at ballads, household books, historical references and domestic architecture, I found that commoners were active, clever and funny producers of plant cultures (and plant 'texts'), happy to answer learned, Reforming divines with their own theologies of nature – theologies more suited to common life and common traditions.

While working on the monograph, I corralled scholars from across the globe to contribute to a Cambridge Handbook of plant literature. It started before lockdown, so it became a very protracted project. It has twenty chapters covering plant genres from Old Norse to the present day and in every global region. In the emerging world of green studies, plant studies, vegan studies, this Handbook took a more traditional lit-crit approach. It asks who was writing about plants when and where and why and for whom and for what reasons? Which genres of writing emerged out of the human reliance on and interest in plants? What does plant literature tell us about changing perceptions of how we understand the human person in relation to the rest of the created world and how were plant texts used to negotiate the sharing or stealing of resources? Many of the global-region chapters focussed on a single plant and traced its place in a long literary history so we see particular kinds of national, ethnic or regional imagination emerging over centuries: the Chinese lily, the African Boa Boa tree, the Middle Eastern cypress.

After almost a decade of thinking and writing about plants, it seemed a natural move to write a trade book. I had to learn to write with fewer footnotes, fewer explanations and justifications, fewer diversions, more story, more personal encounter. I thought it would be painful, but it was instead immensely liberating. It also took a long time to get the idea of the book right. *Vanishing Landscapes* combines nature and travel writing with cultural history to tell the story of how we became modern and alienated from the landscape at the end of the medieval period. Through seven chapters, each covering a single plant (apples, saffron, woad, timber, reeds, grapes, wheat), I travel across Britain and Ireland looking for farmers or artisans still working with plants in the old way. As I go, I tell the story of how each plant disappeared from our daily lives and the specific institutional changes that caused the separation: private property, modern medicine, the global market, urban centres, the first corporation, the banking system.

That book helped me to make peace with the fact that I am a Luddite. I'm now working on another project that charts a more recent and (for me) more complex period of technological and social change. This book will be, I hope, something of a Luddite's hymnal: a lyrical meditation on who we are without machines

Dr Bonnie Lander Johnson
Fellow, College Associate Professor and Director of Studies at Downing College

Founded in 2011 by Artistic Director Jay Miller, who studied English at St Catharine's, The Yard Theatre has become one of London's most dynamic creative spaces. Housed in a reclaimed warehouse in Hackney Wick, it has since presented a run of bold, exhilarating productions. Conceived at first as a temporary pop-up venue, intended to last just three months, The Yard has instead evolved into a theatre of national significance. A two-time recipient of the Peter Brook Empty Space Award for innovation, it has been an early platform for several now-famous artists. We spoke with Jay about the Yard's origins and the excitement surrounding its ongoing redevelopment.

DH: You studied English at Cambridge – what drew you to the subject, and where did you imagine it could take you?

JM: *Il actually thought that I was going to study music, but I changed my mind twenty-four hours before the application deadline. I had always played the piano, but in my last year at school I began to understand the power of words and story. Mum was a writer but sadly she was dying in my final years at school. I remember helping her with her writing when she was ill. She would treat my opinions with a seriousness and a respect, something that had never really happened at my school. Before this intervention, I considered books to be immovable objects of study. But in conversation with mum I realised that books were a creation, and that words were made, and that they are unstable. I wanted to understand more.*

I didn't know then, and I don't know now, where my degree will take me. And I value that doubt every day, because it keeps my curiosity alive.

DH: Cambridge has a strong student theatre tradition. What role did that play in helping you move from literary study into live performance?

JM: *I auditioned for the choir in my first week at Cambridge, and I auditioned for the Freshers' Play at the ADC. I didn't get into the choir but thankfully I landed a large role in the play. (Funny how these seemingly innocuous moments are those that actually change your life.) My time at Cambridge had a huge impact on my career because I acted in lots of plays. I wasn't one of those students who acted in four plays per term; instead, I chose one play that I really cared about and then put my all into it. (I also played football, badly, captaining a college team.) Learning with your peers about how plays might be performed was a wonderful nursery for my future career.*

DH: In 2011 The Yard was intended as a short-lived pop-up. What were the key moments that made you realise it would become something far more enduring?

JM: *The key moment was when we started to produce theatre. Producing theatre means choosing what to put on the stage and fronting the cash to make it happen. To begin with, we didn't have any money, and so we relied on productions over which we had little control. Once we were able to choose, make and sell our shows, we were in more control of our destiny, and audiences understood more clearly what we were doing and why.*

DH: The original structure was made from recycled and reclaimed materials, not just for aesthetics but out of necessity. How important do you think that spirit of improvisation and material thriftiness is to the theatre's identity today?

JM: *Improvisation and thriftiness are essential, although, in truth, I think they have always been essential. I have been regularly returning to Shakespeare recently and I am reading his plays thinking 'wow, not only do you know how to write, but you also know how to produce'. There are some characters in his plays that are superfluous to the plot, but they have some good gags. He knew he needed to prime his audience with laughter, before giving them a punch in the gut, which is a form of improvisation. I haven't ever worked in a theatre where the spirit of improvisation isn't required. Our art form is not one founded on a commercial imperative. There is never enough money; we have to raise such a lot of money every year. There is no reason for us to exist, except that, for a strange reason, we need live storytelling to help with living.*

DH: In the past you have run community centres and you have always worked with children - how do you see the role of place and community evolving in your programming?

JM: *I work in the most exciting area of London because it is where there is the most difference and it is where change happens at a rapid pace. There is always a new initiative, idea, business, neighbour, around the corner. I find this restlessness inspiring. But this rate of change means that some people can get left behind. The arts have recently become associated with gentrification because people want to live around creativity. To counterbalance this I have always believed it is important to not leave people behind. We regularly work with children of many different ages from the local area to make theatre. We introduce them to new ways of making theatre, by commissioning artists to make professional shows with them. We treat this process as a celebration of equality. The artists we work with are excited to have their craft shaped by the children, and the children are always eager to learn and be inspired by the artists. The gap between 'child' and 'professional artist' becomes indistinct. This results in truly innovative work that we can put on our stage.*

DH: With the theatre being re-built and expanded, what new possibilities are you most excited about? Are there risks you want to take in the new venue that you couldn't in the old one?

JM: *The essence of what we do at The Yard will not change: we're making a new world in our space every night. The way I direct is guided by the possibility and power of live storytelling –what stories can do to us, to our emotions and bodies. Stories work when they shake our bones, break our hearts, stop us in our tracks. RIBA-winning Takero Shimazaki Architects have helped us craft a beautifully unique producing and programming house, which embodies our ethos on a much bigger scale and is the most sustainable theatre of our size in the UK. The design pulls you into the space, excites your senses and creates community.*

The risk is that we lose our soul ('more seats to fill, more expensive building to run, so let's give them meat and potatoes'), but the opportunity is that we can improve the work we make and offer it to a wider range of people. Two such opportunities have manifested themselves. Firstly, our success over the last few years has made us ambitious, resilient and convinced that there are audiences for theatre that defies genre, traditions and rules. So, we are more than doubling our capacity. Secondly, Hackney Wick has been transformed by the legacy of the London Olympics, in and around Stratford. We are welcoming new neighbours to East London, including Sadler's Wells and the V&A. I'm excited by the opportunities to collaborate and engage our communities together.

DH: What themes or narratives are you most excited to explore in your own work in the coming years?

JM: *Britain has been at a crossroads for ten years. We have been asking 'who do we want to be?' I think we're beginning to find some clues now. I want to make work about those clues.*

DH: Is there a moment from your Cambridge English degree — a lecture, a text, a discussion — that still resonates with your work today?

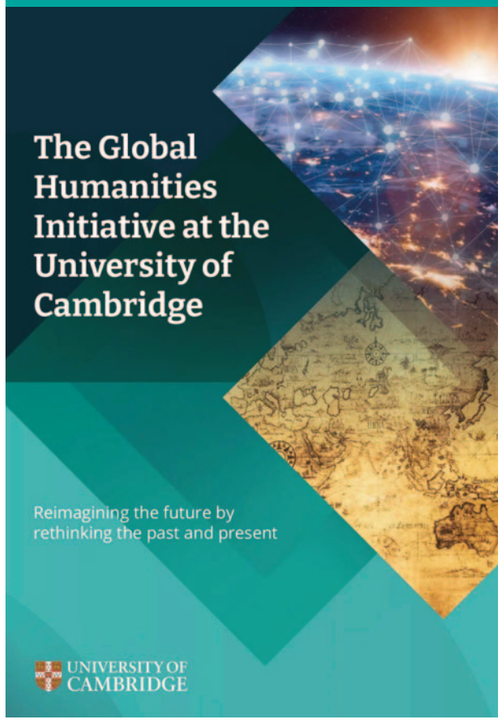
JM: *I was supervised by Eric Griffiths. He had a big impact on the rigour I apply to my work. We used to spend hours talking about the etymology of one word. We'd have extended discussions about a comma. But I also admired Eric's bluster, his penchant for controversy. He would elide 'low' and 'high' art, which appealed to my Geordie sensibilities. And he would make outrageous claims not knowing if they were true, pretending that they were, to get me thinking independently. It was a hyperactive Socratic approach, but an approach that I use every day.*

Jay Miller was interviewed by David Hillman, editor of the newsletter

REACHING OUT

May Hawas and Emily Senior have been appointed Deputy Executive Directors of the Global Humanities Initiative.

The Global Humanities Initiative was established in 2020 to provide fresh insight into big-picture questions. It aims to transform the way we teach, research and think about the humanities.



The GHI is anchored at Cambridge and is composed of a network of universities from around the world, including Fudan and Nanjing (China), Ashoka University (India), the American University of Beirut (Lebanon), the University of Ghana (Ghana), Universidad Diego Portales (Chile) and Sabancı University (Turkey).

The network is committed to developing arts and humanities projects related to structural global issues, including climate change, violence and its legacies, economic inequality, and the impact of new technologies and media. All member universities seek to transcend the territorial separation of specialist knowledge about the world into regions, such as East Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East, and are committed to discovering, understanding, and critiquing the connections, interactions and even disruptions between cultures.

Towards this, the network has launched a number of projects initiated by the School's various Faculties in collaboration with the member universities, including the 'Classics Beyond Borders' workshops on the Greek and Roman classics in Africa and the 'Caribbean and Cambridge' report on legacies of enslavement. Meanwhile, the Francophone programme is working to develop Francophone postcolonial studies with a series of visiting fellowships and events; and the Ancient World–CSMVS Mumbai academic programme provides intensive faculty and student training on how objects of the ancient world can be used as teaching material.

The Initiative annually calls for submissions from faculty for a mobility scheme across the network's universities, allowing faculty to visit partner universities to develop teaching and research collaborations. The network has also started a new book series on the Global Humanities with Cambridge University Press.

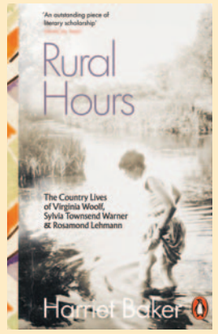
This year, Emily is organising the Global Humanities Summer School in July 2026. The Summer School will bring together PhD students from Cambridge, Chile, China, Ghana, India and Turkey to work together over two weeks on the topic of 'Global Plant Lives'.

May is helping to actualise the new MSt in the Global Humanities. The MSt isan interdisciplinary postgraduate degree that explores human culture, thought and expression worldwide integrating history, art, film, literature, philosophyand religion. She hopes that with the GHI, interest in and research on world literature and global cultures, as well as an interdisciplinary focus on world history, will grow in the Faculty of English.

May Hawas is Associate Professor in World Literature and Valerie Eliot Fellow in English at Newnham College

Emily Senior is Associate Professor in the Faculty of English

HARRIET BAKER



I joined the Faculty in October 2025 as a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow. Prior to this, I was on maternity leave, having completed my PhD at Queen Mary, University of London. As a writer, critic and scholar, my work focuses on the connections between life-writing and literary, art and cultural history. My current Leverhulme project looks at the role of life-writing in the creative practices of a group of important twentieth-century artists, including Gwen John, Paula Modersohn-Becker, Marion Milner, Prunella Clough and Anne Truitt. Alongside their visual works, these artists produced letters, diaries, dream narratives, working notebooks, memos, inventories and lists; the project seeks to uncover the ways in which these written forms became sites for creative expression and experiment.

For each artist, the form this writing took varied: from the meditative letters of Paula Modersohn-Becker, in which the painter determinedly writes herself into artistic identity; to Marion Milner's diaristic investigation into the role of the unconscious in her paintings; to Prunella Clough's notebooks, in which her inventories of post-war landscapes comprise, together with her canvases, a singular vision of the world at mid-century. A letter, a description of a dream, a list: I'll be working with an expansive definition of life-writing, understanding all of these ephemeral and occasional writing practices as what the American scholar Melanie Micir calls 'biographical acts'. And I'll propose that these private, provisional, and mostly unpublished forms are of value and interest both as steps towards the visual works for which these artists became known, and a distinct and neglected mode of aesthetic experimentation.

Underpinning my work—both academic and public-facing—is an interest in revisionist feminist approaches to archives. My research participates in a broader turn in archival work that looks to understand women's creative lives from the perspective of their unpublished or incomplete works, as well as the material traces of their daily working lives. The project builds on the research for my first book. In *Rural Hours*, which was published by Allen Lane in 2024, I examined country interludes in the lives of three inter-war women writers – Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Townsend Warner and Rosamond Lehmann – during which they experimented with new forms of writing, from household texts such as diaries, lists and inventories to sketches and notes for stories. Combining literary criticism, literary biography and archival research, the book argued for the literary as well as biographical value of even the most ephemeral and domestic of these writers' texts, showing how these neglected varieties of everyday writing acted as crucial steps towards larger works. And it aimed to demonstrate a feminist approach to literary biography focused on the overlooked and apparently fallow periods in a writer's life, revealing these episodes to be quietly creatively fertile.

Rural Hours was awarded the Biographers' Club Tony Lothian Prize, and the *Sunday Times* Charlotte Aitken Trust Young Writer of the Year Award. Bringing the book out was a full-time business (and I had a small baby in tow). I enjoyed speaking at numerous bookshops and literary festivals, on BBC Radio 4's *Today* and *Free Thinking*, and the TLS Podcast. Last October, I was invited to give the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society Lecture at UCL, in which I reclaimed and celebrated Warner's identity as a homebody. Engaging creatively with an inventory she had made of the contents of her country cottage, I traced the entwined paths of domesticity, romance and emergent left-wing politics which characterised her life in the early 1930s. It was a great pleasure to bring the book full-circle—my love for Warner's writing sprang from the many spirited discussions of her work at the (now ended) Sylvia Townsend Warner Reading Group, hosted at UCL.

I am now writing another book for Allen Lane. *Intense Life* is an exploration of working motherhood in the lives of a group of post-war artists and writers including Doris Lessing, Penelope Mortimer, Maeve Gilmore, Beryl Bainbridge and Jean Cooke. I have dipped my toe into the archives and am excited for the next few years of research. For those subjects with no formal archive, I'm beginning to speak to offspring and family members, an expanded research methodology that presents challenges but also possibilities.

Much of my other work is public-facing. My essays and criticism have appeared in the *London Review of Books, Paris Review, New Statesman, The Times* and *Financial Times*, among others. I particularly enjoy writing about visual artand continue to explore my fascination with artists' working lives and methodologies. I have interviewed many artists, though my favourites are always with the painters, particularly Caroline Walker, Chantal Joffeand Rose Wylie.

Harriet Baker is a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow in the Faculty of English

Woodcut depicting characters from Andria, including mute and unstaged characters – Terencius (Strasbourg: Grüninger, 1496), sig. b1v [Universitätsbibliothek Heidelberg, GW M45481; https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.17966#0006]

STAGING SILENCE

Notes from a Conference on Ancient, Medieval, and Renaissance Drama (St John's College, Cambridge, 3–4 July 2025)

The idea of 'Staging Silence' as a conference topic leapt out at me from the pages of a 1496 edition of Terence (2nd century BCE). I was reading the book in a Cambridge library in spring 2024. Lavishly produced, it has a full-page woodcut at the start of each of Terence's six comedies, which were popular throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance. The images help readers follow the plot by literally drawing connections between characters. But strikingly, the woodcuts also depict characters who never appear on stage, or characters who appear and say nothing. Look more closely at the house in the top left of the woodcut for *Andria*, for example. Here we see Glycerium in childbirth, even though she never appears *in propria persona* in the play. There's also Chrysis, Glycerium's guardian, who has died before the action began. Archilis is here, too, a servant who silently attends Glycerium but who lacks any scripted lines. These woodcuts stage silence inasmuch as they draw attention to these absent or otherwise 'mute' characters.

I'm now preparing a book on these characters and how Renaissance dramatists responded to them: *Muteness and Mute Characters from Antiquity to the Age of Shakespeare*. I organised the 'Staging Silence' conference to tackle the subject more broadly: what more generally were the practicalities, conventions, and ethics of staging silence in the Western literary tradition, from Aeschylus to Shakespeare? I wanted to strike beyond the work of critics such as Bruce Smith and Philip McGuire who, respectively, have written about theatre and sound studies, and about theatre and silence in modern performance. The conference aimed for novelty in three ways. First, in its historical sweep, with contributions addressing texts from antiquity to circa 1700. Second, in its generic range, focusing on drama but also considering the staging of silence in non-dramatic but nevertheless performative texts. Third, in its comparativism, with analysis between works from England, ancient Greece and Rome, and even the literatures of early modern France and Spain.

I need to give some thanks here. This two-day conference was made possible with financial support from St John's College, Cambridge (where the conference was hosted) and the UK's Society for Neo-Latin Studies. I'm grateful also to Cambridge colleagues for chairing sessions: Richard Beadle, Joanna Bellis, Katrin Ettenhuber, Evgeniia Ganberg, Philip Hardie, David Hillman, Hester Lees-Jeffries and Andrew Zurcher. My thanks also go to participants and speakers who travelled to this event from Canada, France, Italy, Poland, Switzerland, the USA, and other cities across England, Scotland and Wales.

I'm grateful to the speakers most of all because their papers so radically expanded my sense of what 'staging silence' might mean and why it matters. A theme of the papers was to challenge the apparent

Session 3 (Pierre Hecker; Ros King; Richard Bradshaw; David Hillman)

Detail from woodcut depicting characters from Andria

binary between speech and silence and to ask whether silence was a state, condition,or act. Individual papers considered the relationship of song to silence (Felicity Brown), the silence of staged moving objects (Leanne Groeneveld), the place of silence in histories of sexual violence (Clara Manco), and the silence of women characters in early modern drama (Jiamiao Chen; Beatrice Righetti; Carla Suthren). Other papers focused on other silent characters in the drama of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, considering disinformation in the history plays (Ros King), silent ambassadors (Nathalie Rivere de Carles), and Ferdinand's lycanthropy, bordering on animal inarticulacy, in *The Duchess of Malfi* (Henry Aceves). Besides a focus on characters, some talks also considered actors. What opportunities for silence did Shakespeare give his actors (Richard Bradshaw), and who played Procne, a silent character, in Aristophanes' *Birds* (Sarah Gonzalez)?

Another group of papers took more theoretical or diachronic approaches. Linguistics mattered for Aoife Beville and Karol Zieliński, who both spoke about pragmatics and strategic silences. Meanwhile, Pierre Hecker and Julie Peters, in her keynote, challenged participants to think about gesture: for Hecker, the gesture of laying a finger on one's lips; for Peters, the silent language of gestures in medieval disputation, and how these gestures could perform and sometimes occlude the power of the law. But gesture only represents one way in which silence was shown to become legible. Other papers considered silence's legibility in early modern print (Stuart Gillespie; Amanda Trainham). Others still highlighted the stubborn illegibility of silence. So Ben Parsons and Mark Chambers highlighted how little we know about the staging of non-speaking infant and animal roles in medieval drama. Elisabeth Dutton's keynote further underscored how our appreciation of silence on medieval stages is mediated by stage directions that have little relation to authorial intent. A final keynote by Barbara Ravelhofer returned to the topic of illustrationslike those of the Terence edition I mentioned above, to ask why only certain silent characters appear in medieval illuminations of the plays of Seneca.

Some of my personal highlights included talks that especially challenged us to embrace new methodologies and ways of thinking about premodern texts. One of these was Laura Seymour's on neurodivergent rhetoric, arguing that speech and silence can both be conceived as meaningful modes of signification from the perspective of Disability Studies. And Emily Louisa Smith introduced us to AI 'silence slicer' software, which podcasters use to delete silences from performance clips on the assumption that silence is always undesirable. (Though it also mutes quiet, mostly women actors, it turns out.) Thus, the papers spanned discussion of ancient Greek stages to the digital stages of the twenty-first century. The lively conversations that were stimulated belied the preoccupation with silence that united us.

John Colley
Research Fellow, St John's College

OF HATS AND MANUSCRIPT STUDIES...

I arrived at the English Faculty in the autumn of 2025 as a Teaching Associate in Medieval Literature. I completed my PhD in 2024 at Yale University, after which I roamed the New England countryside as a lecturer for a year, teaching courses in medieval and world literature and in college-level writing, or 'comp', as we Americans say.

My research concentrates on the literature and manuscripts of late medieval England. Like most medievalists, I wear several hats. I am a student of medieval lyric poetry, with interests in questions of form, popularity and the social currency of short verse. I am also drawn to questions of multilingualism, especially the ways in which poets thought across idioms and forms in their bi- and trilingual composition. I am deeply interested in the social histories of making and of labour. I seek to uncover literary representations of manual and artisanal work, to underscore technical vocabularies for work and its products, and to track how these representations and terms crop up in literature. All these interests are united by my work in manuscript studies. I am a palaeographer invested in how the methods and ends of this discipline can be used for literary purposes. Scripts—the precursors and equivalents of typographical fonts—contain a great deal of literary and social history in their shapes, names and in the ways scribes traced them out by hand.

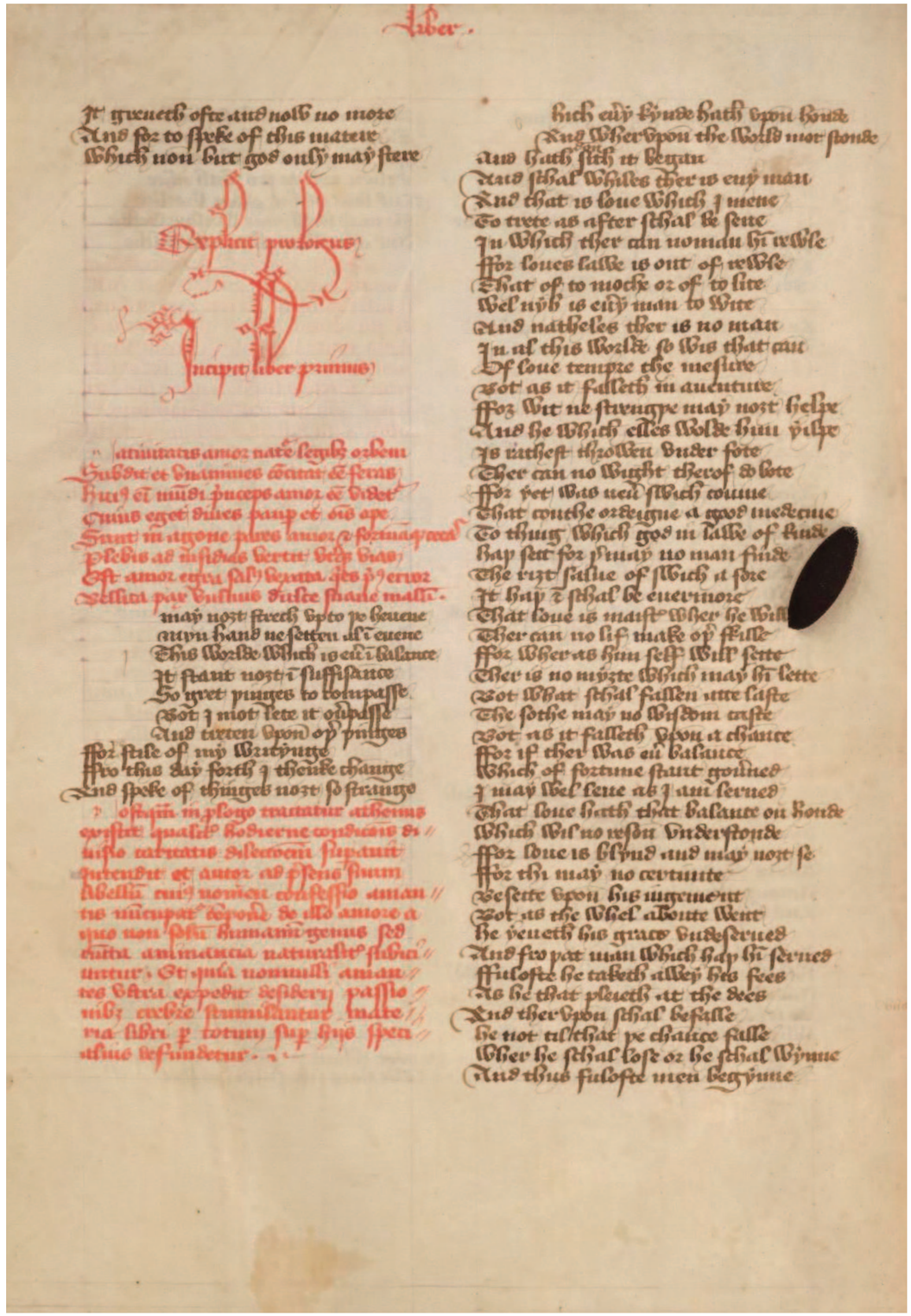
I am currently preparing my first monograph for publication, titled *Reading Hands: Scripts and Literature in England and France, 1370-1425*. This project argues that the scripts in use during the 'Age of Chaucer' and its aftermath were used by scribes in unique ways to serve literary ends. One source of evidence that particularly inspires me is a disparate archive of scribal 'pattern-book' or writing models, booklets and advertising broadsheets in which apparently professional scribes modeled their penmanship in multiple scripts. They worked to label these scripts with descriptive Latin terminology and often wrote little blurbs as part of their showmanship. The writing models reveal that scripts in this period of the European Middle Ages ultimately affirm the idea of choice. Scribes could choose from a range of scripts for their writing, and readers could as well. The idea of choice then alluringly raises other possibilities: a choice of script could acutely indicate preference, comfort, taste or desire. These are all phenomena we might readily call literary, and script readily indexes them all through the idea of choice.

One thread that arises from this idea in my book is how medieval metalanguage are drawn from and perform literary techniques. I linger in one chapter on the jarring term 'bastard', a common word for certain types of fancy scripts, to gain a deep sense of the social history of the word, and to argue that scripts are deeply enmeshed in broader social histories. I see scripts as portrayers of intimacy, as markers of linguistic difference and as indicators of readerly reactions ranging from boredom to amazement. What emerges from my work here is a clear understanding of the literary implications of medieval 'graphic design', a term that seems so presentist and post-print. Scribes and readers, like modern graphic designers and consumers of the printed, typeset or digital word, functioned within the same visual idioms and understood things that are often hard to articulate or even be conscious of about how the shapes of letters help construct a literary and cultural hermeneutic.

When not going blind from staring at looping anglicana ascenders, I also like to play with literary theory and its applicability to manuscripts. I am currently working on an essay that explores the frequent irregularities of medieval manuscript texts and metatexts through the lens of Roland Barthes's meditation on photography, *La chambre claire* – specifically his famous concept of the *punctum*, the aspect of a photograph that 'wounds' the viewer through a small, unexpected detail. I explore manuscript irregularities (such as textual lacunae, parchment riddled with holes or small marginal notes smudged into illegibility) as similarly wounding 'points' that help us reimagine ideas of literary wholeness or codicological completeness. I also have plans to tackle the manuscripts of the lyric poet Serlo of Wilton, a lesser-known 12th-century figure who, after a wild youth among the brainy avant-garde of Paris's Left Bank scene, became a Cistercian monk. Serlo's poetry, sensual and gloriously pretentious, smacks of the *flâneur* of Balzac's Paris or Proust's, far removed from the Romanesque world of Serlo's lyrics. What do poetic tableaux reveal about the relationship between the gazing subject and the external urban experience fragmentarily collated by the gaze? I hope to prod some of these questions to life.

My teaching seeks to animate medieval literature so that its alienating distance becomes a productive foothold for students. I tend to drift towards topics of gender, sexuality, as well as class and social status in my lectures and seminars. With my students I like to explore how medieval literature envisions possibilities of queer expression, how lyric utters calls for resistance against tyranny, or how the rich poetic descriptions of luxurious objects complicate the ethics of wealth and privilege. They have been more than obliging, and I am grateful for their warm willingness to engage.

Seamus Dwyer is a Teaching Associate in Medieval Literature in the Faculty of English



PROFESSOR DAME GILLIAN BEER

On 17 May 2025, Gillian Beer's ex-students and friends threw a party for her 90th birthday.

Santanu Das and Clare Pettitt interviewed her about her life, career, and work and a short extract from this interview is published here.

Can you tell us a bit about your childhood?

Because of the war, I grew up evacuated in Somerset. So I think of myself as a West Country person. Otherwise, I would have grown up in London. I was ten when the war ended. My mother was divorced, and it was not easy being a divorced young woman at that time. But she was also the village schoolmistress and so she wasn't just my mum, she was doing everything in the community. The war meant we shared a house or were officially the lodgers of the Brices. They had two sons my age and we were all in this half in, half out family together. Mr Brice was a bricklayer. I was very fond of them, and they very fond of me. We lived with them till my mother got a headship when I was twelve and we moved from Wiveliscombe on the Devon border to Street in North Somerset. Throughout my childhood she and I would go for long walks – in the war, there were no cars on the road. And as children we would all get on our bikes and go wherever we wanted. I was extraordinarily fortunate because you hear so many sad stories of people with a single parent. One can feel imprisoned by it and I never felt imprisoned. In some ways, it was a peculiarly free childhood – though we had to watch out if the siren went.

What were you reading as a teenager?

I read Shakespeare avidly when I was around fourteen or fifteen. I had a back injury and was housebound for some months and he was one of the people I read non-stop. I read all of him but as narrative, as experience – totally uncritically. I had no critical instruments that I can recall, I just read in this capacious, intense way. It stood me in good stead later when I got the Charles Oldham Prize at the beginning of my third year in Oxford, which was a very big thing in those days – you had three examinations and had to demonstrate complete knowledge of all of Shakespeare, both plays and poems. It was a nineteenth-century prize. I think it preceded the establishment of the English Faculty. I never expected to win it, but that early immersion carried me through.

What was it like to be a young female academic at the time?

I was protected from being a minority as I was at St Anne's, which was a women's College then. I loved being at St Anne's as a student and I was so well taught by Dorothy Bednarowska. For my BLitt thesis – on this absurdly over-ambitious topic, 'Uses of Landscape in the Nineteenth-Century novel' – I was sent to Lord David Cecil. I have very fond memories. He didn't teach me anything about writing footnotes or bibliography, but he did encourage me all the time – "What would you like to do next?', he would ask. And I later heard that he had told someone, 'It's the young women nowadays that you've to watch for the future'. And then I had the great good fortune that, when I got my first job, at Bedford College, London, again an all-women's College, I had Kathleen Tillotson as my mentor, professor, and chider. She was at the time writing *Novels of the Eighteen Forties* and editing Dickens. And once John [Beer] and I got married, I went to Liverpool, which had a marvellous English department and where I got a part-time job. There were Kenneth Muir and Miriam Allott and Inge-Stina Ewbank, always important women around.

I must say that, in Oxford, I had assumed that men were the 'brilliant ones' because they declared themselves as brilliant. It was a particular kind of brilliance, but I was very fortunate in having a woman's pathway through. I went as a research fellow to Girton which, at that time, was an all-women's College. At every stage in that early part of my career, I was in a sequestered – or rather an equalised – situation.

Why was interdisciplinary scholarship so important for you?

It happened to me, and then became central to my work and then I reflected on it. When I was writing *Darwin's Plots*, which I wrote over a long period, it was the time of poststructuralism. For me, the coming of poststructuralism was salvation really. I was feeling constricted by what literary studies were at that time and suddenly there were all these new questions you could ask. Reading Derrida was so enhancing. And it was the time when I was very friendly with people like Rosemary Bechler and Allon White who came to my narrative seminars and together we did a lot of talking and working. It was a very intense period. All the time I was questioning the foundations of what I was accustomed to.

When I first started thinking towards *Darwin's Plots*, I had been going to write a book about Victorian fantasy since everybody at that time was doing social realism. I was interested in people like Charles Kingsley, who mixed social realism and fantasy, and he led me to Darwin. So when I first approached Darwin, I really came in via Kingsley. The more I read Darwin, I realised this man has a fantastic imagination. He was having a struggle with what kind of language he could write in. How do you write about vegetable races, say? Saying 'race', is it possible to mean only cabbages? He tested categories and observed individuals. That was the point in my career when I became thoroughly interested in interdisciplinarity. And then I began to recognise the joys of it – raiding all other kinds of knowledge.

It was also because of my conversations with Marilyn Strathern [the anthropologist] and Alison Jolly [the primatologist]. And I spoke with Alison all the time when I was trying to think about what would become *Darwin's Plots*. She had four children. We met when we were each walking down Newton Road with our babies in pushchairs and she said to me, 'Do you live around here?' And I said, 'I do!' and she said, 'Oh, we must get together' and that was it, and it was one of the greatest intellectual moments of my life. And we were both in the thick of thinking about childbearing and evolution. The personal and the academic were for me always caught up intimately.

You have often returned to the essay form. It has been said that each of the essays in *Open Fields: Science in Cultural Encounter* is like a book. What is it that makes the form so attractive to you?

You can raise questions you don't have to answer – in some ways, it is instant pleasure rather than long-term gratification. Writing a book is a long business and your mind changes in the course of writing it, whereas the essay has this spontaneity. You're engrossed in this moment – you're perhaps thinking about Edith Simcox, or Vernon Lee, or Pope and women's Gothic, or about Gerald Manley Hopkins and Helmholtz, or music in the *Mill on the Floss* – and you can pack all your concentration into that without making a long-term writing commitment. You know, John [Beer] wrote books and that's what he loved – he loved the long durée whereas I have always enjoyed the intensity of the essay. I get fascinated by something and then I get fascinated by something else. *Virginia Woolf: The Common Ground* was written as essays and gathered as a book; and the same with *Arguing with the Past*. Even with *Alice in Space*, you could argue it is a set of essays – it comes at the Alice books at all sorts of different angles.

You have come back to Woolf throughout your career. Why?

When I read Woolf, I feel I'm in the presence of happiness even when she is telling me the most painful things. Writing to her was a form of happiness. She might be writing about the most terrible things but in writing and reading there is companionship. And she can be funny, as even in *The Waves*. And in *Between the Acts* I love the wisps of conversation happening now, in the midst of pre-history and the coming of war. That is also something so enjoyable about close reading - it isn't crystallisation, it attests to the moment of tension, you feel the pressure of the sentence. You are able to have a conversation with someone who is not there – reading closely gives you this sense of being in conversation, both of you listening, resisting, responding.

What have you been reading recently?

I have read Ali Smith's *Glyph* twice now. I like and admire it very much. It's limpid and mysterious, funny, but challenges the reader and writer with troubling questions about the rights of fiction in the face of extreme reality.

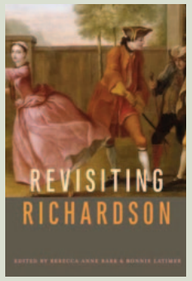
This is an edited extract of a longer interview with Professor Dame Gillian Beer forthcoming in the Cambridge Quarterly.

NEWS

Professor Anthony Bale and **Professor Clare Pettitt** were elected to the British Academy's Fellowship, in recognition of their outstanding contributions to the humanities and social sciences. The Academy elects to its Fellowship 'outstanding scholars who have achieved distinction in any branch of the humanities and social sciences'. Link to further information: https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/news/agm-welcomes-92-new-fellows-2025/

Dr François-e Charmaille has been awarded the Derek Brewer prize for a scholarly paper on an Arthurian topic by the journal *Arthurian Literature*. This year's prize has been awarded for their essay 'Transgender Grammar in the Tale of Grisandole'. The essay, which will be published in the 2026 issue of the journal, analyses the uses of grammatical gender in the depiction of a trans knight in Arthurian prose to uncover distinctively medieval ways of thinking about gender transition. The Prize is awarded in memory of Derek Brewer, an eminent scholar of medieval literature who was a Professor at the Faculty of English and the Master of Emmanuel College from 1977 to 1990.

Francesca Gardner, a PhD student and Harding Distinguished Postgraduate Scholar at St Catharine's College, published an essay in *Critical Quarterly* which received widespread media interest. The essay, entitled 'Lawnmower Poetry and the Poetry of Lawnmowers', traces lawnmower poetry back to the early modern mower poetry of Andrew Marvell, suggesting that poets use the machine to explore childhood, masculinity, violence, addiction, mortality, and much more. Her research was featured in media outlets including *The Times, The i Paper*, the BBC, BBC Radio Cambridgeshire, ITV News, and ITV Anglia.



Dr Rebecca Anne Barr has just published *Revisiting Richardson* (Bucknell University Press). Co-edited with Prof. Bonnie Latimer (University of Southampton), this collection re-examines the work of eighteenth-century novelist Samuel Richardson and how it resonates with contemporary readers. The essays in the collection examine historically overlooked works by Richardson and find unexpected traces of his writing in post-conceptual poetry, detective fiction, and the fantasies of historical romance. The jointly authored introduction reflects on a decade of scholarship, including the impact of the authoritative Cambridge Edition of the Works of Samuel Richardson, and argues for Richardson's continued relevance in our troubled present.

Professor Marcus Waithe has been part-seconded, from October 2025, as Deputy Head of the School of Arts and Humanities, with specific responsibility for research and doctoral funding. In this capacity, he has established a Research Committee at School level, and is reviewing the School's research strategy, promoting funding opportunities, encouraging both grant applications and traditional scholarship, and initiating a project to assist colleagues in finding time for research. He is also working to address a sudden and steep decline in publicly funded doctoral studentships, which have fallen from roughly 30 across the School to 3 in the new cohort — a change that threatens both our students' prospects and also the constitution and replacement of our disciplines (if you are reading this and think you may be able to help, please be in touch with the Cambridge Development and Alumni Relations office).

FACULTY NEWS CONT.

Dr. Hannah Lucas, Newby Trust Research Fellow at Newnham College, has published *Impossible Recovery: Julian of Norwich and the Phenomenology of Well-Being* with Columbia University Press. The book explores the entanglement of illness and revelation in the writings of the medieval mystic Julian of Norwich, illuminating the unexpected commonalities between the medical and the mystical and their significance for philosophies of health and well-being.

Dr Ruth Abbott has received the Gordon Duff Prize, awarded annually for an essay on a subject relating to the science or arts of books and manuscripts. This year's prize has been awarded to Dr Abbott for her essay 'Transcribers of the Mind: Copying Historical Manuscripts in the British Museum Reading Room, 1759-1795', which was also recently published in the journal *Library & Information History*.

Dr Timothy Glover curated an exhibition of medieval manuscripts and early modern books at the Parker Library. The exhibition was titled 'Ordinary Encounters with Medieval Manuscripts: Practical Books of Pastoral Care' It explored the practical kinds of books priests used to educate ordinary people, including manuscripts that teach through diagrams, flowcharts, unusual page layouts and pictures.

A record of the exhibition appears at: https://www.corpus.cam.ac.uk/parker-library/collections/exhibitions/ordinary-encounters-medieval-manuscripts-practical-books.

Dr Glover also published some groundbreaking research on the enigmatic medieval hermit, mystic and religious writer Richard Rolle. The work appeared as a Research Feature on the Cambridge University website: (https://www.cam.ac.uk/stories/richard-rolle-hermit-bestseller) and received coverage in *The Telegraph* (https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2025/12/20/medieval-manuscript-discovered-shropshire-school/) and BBC News (https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cx2ydvqn3zgo).

Professor Ross Wilson has edited *Percy Shelley in Context* (Cambridge University Press), a collection of forty essays, with contributors from seven countries, which draws together leading experts and emerging voices on the life and work of Percy Bysshe Shelley – poet, pamphleteer, philosopher, translatorand correspondent. The volume shows Shelley to have been at once one of the most eccentric, fascinating figures of his age, and emphatically of our age too, continuing to influence contemporary writers, to be referenced in popular culture and to inspire social and political movements..

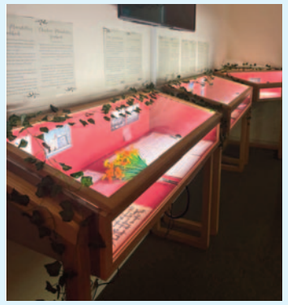
Dr Michael Lysander Angerer, Newby Trust Junior Research Fellow at Clare College, won the ISSEME award for Best Article by an Early-Career Researcher, for his article '*Hebban olla vogala*: An Eleventh-Century Link Between Dutch and English Literary History' (published in *Neophilologus*). The article re-examined the oldest known poem in Dutch, which survives as a faded scribble in a manuscript from late eleventh-century Rochester. Having established an improved text through multispectral imaging, the article argued that the poem likely exploited the similarity between Old Dutch and Old English to be intelligible in both languages and should therefore be seen as part of both Dutch and English literary history. These findings offer a new perspective on a text widely studied in Dutch and Flemish schools and were reported in both Dutch and Flemish national newspapers.

LIBRARY NEWS

The English Faculty Library supports taught courses at both undergraduate and graduate levels, and we work alongside academic staff and research students. It's a busy library with print stock still in high demand; nearly 29,000 books were borrowed in 2024/25. We purchased 1,300 new books and that's in addition to the more than one million eBooks available online. Visitors can browse the collections in the English Faculty Library and alumni of the University of Cambridge can apply for free access to the University Library (a form is available online).

EXHIBITIONS

The library welcomes visitors to our exhibition space, the 'Benson Gallery'. We welcome proposals for exhibitions from current students, staff and alumni of the Faculty of English and Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic (ASNC) with the aim of sharing the outputs of academic research with a wider non-specialist audience. The content may relate to language and literary themes, and historical, cultural and interdisciplinary topics, and proposals with a relationship to library collections are encouraged. Exhibitions normally run for a term and in 2025 we featured research from two PhD students.

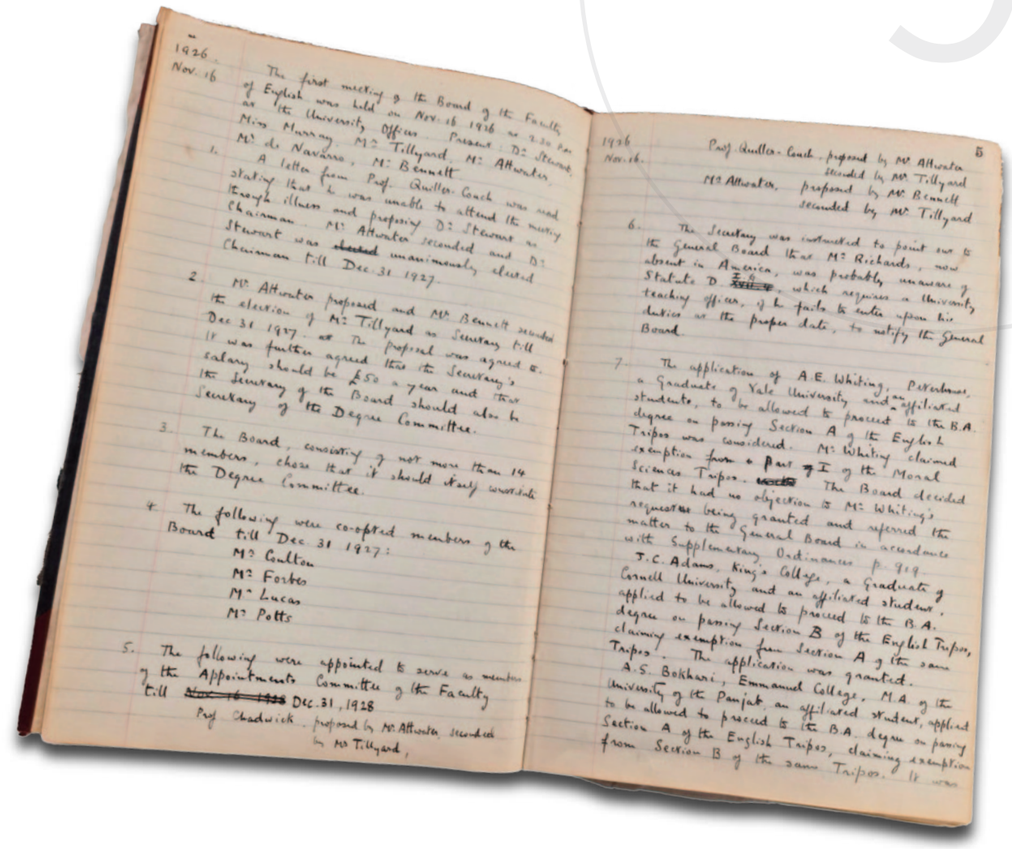


Lara Harris, a PhD student in ASNC, invited us to explore the quiet involvement of women in the practice of gynaecology and pharmacology in medieval Scandinavia, between 1250–1550. It showcased seven manuscript excerpts containing medical recipes intended for the female body. Some of these manuscripts were certainly owned and/or used by women, and others may even have been created, at least in part, by women in renowned Bridgettine cloisters. A similar theme featured in the 'Curious Cures: Medicine in the Medieval World' exhibition at the University Library.

India Oswin, a PhD student in English, explored women's involvement in concrete poetry in 1960–1980s Britain. The research, and the collections highlighted in the exhibition, challenge the view that women were not active in concrete and visual poetry in Britain during this period. The exhibition highlighted the work of many concrete poets and artists from the period, such as Alison Bielski, Jennifer Pike and Betty Radin.
A highlight of the display was a reprint of the 1978 edition of *Materializzazione del linguaggio ed*. by Mirella Bentivoglio.

Our blog features more pictures from these exhibitions and other displays over the year and is available online. You can follow the library on Instagram and Bluesky @eflcam.

Laura Moss,
Library Manager
English Faculty Library


1926
Nov. 16

The first meeting of the Board of the Faculty of English was held on Nov. 16 1926 at 2.30 pm in the University Offices. Present: Dr Stewart, Miss Murray, Mr Tillyard, Mr Atkinson, Mr de Navarro, Mr Bennett.

1. A letter from Prof. Quiller-Couch was read stating that he was unable to attend the meeting through illness and proposing Dr Stewart as Chairman. Mr Atkinson seconded and Dr Stewart was ~~elected~~ unanimously elected Chairman till Dec. 31. 1927.

2. Mr Atkinson proposed and Mr Bennett seconded the election of Mr Tillyard as Secretary till Dec 31 1927 at The proposal was agreed to. It was further agreed that the Secretary's salary should be £50 a year and that the Secretary of the Board should also be Secretary of the Degree Committee.

3. The Board, consisting of not more than 14 members, chose that it should itself constitute the Degree Committee.

4. The following were co-opted members of the Board till Dec 31 1927:
Mr Coulton
Mr Forbes
Mr Lucas
Mr Potts

5. The following were appointed to serve as members of the Appointments Committee of the Faculty till ~~Nov. 16 1928~~ Dec. 31, 1928
Prof Chadwick, proposed by Mr Atkinson, seconded by Mr Tillyard,

1926
Nov. 16

5

Prof Quiller-Couch proposed by Mr Atkinson seconded by Mr Tillyard
Mr Atkinson, proposed by Mr Bennett seconded by Mr Tillyard

6. The Secretary was instructed to point out to the General Board that Mr Richards, now absent in America, was probably unaware of Statute D ~~XVIII~~, which requires a University teaching officer, if he fails to enter upon his duties at the proper date, to notify the General Board.

7. The application of A.E. Whiting, Peterhouse, a Graduate of Yale University and an affiliated students, to be allowed to proceed to the B.A. degree on passing Section A of the English Tripos was considered. Mr Whiting claimed exemption from ~~a Part of~~ I of the Moral Sciences Tripos. ~~Voted~~ The Board decided that it had no objection to Mr Whiting's request being granted and referred the matter to the General Board in accordance with Supplementary Ordinances p. 419.

F.C. Adams, King's College, a Graduate of Cornell University, and an affiliated student, applied to be allowed to proceed to the B.A. degree on passing Section B of the English Tripos, claiming exemption from Section A of the same Tripos. The application was granted.

A.S. Bokhari, Emmanuel College, M.A. of the University of the Punjab, an affiliated student, applied to be allowed to proceed to the B.A. degree on passing Section A of the English Tripos, claiming exemption from Section B of the same Tripos. It was

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