

An Interview with Dr. Hillary Nunn

Dr. Hillary Nunn is a Professor of English and Graduate Coordinator at The University of Akron. She teaches courses in the early and mature plays of Shakespeare and early modern literature. Along with her work at the University, she has done extensive research of Renaissance literary culture and cookbooks, and she is the author of Staging Anatomies: Dissection and Tragedy in the Early Stuart Era (2005), "On Vegetating Virgins: Greensickness and the Plant Realm in Early Modern Literature" in the collection The Indistinct Human in Renaissance Literature (2012), as well as "Home Bodies: Matters of Weight in Renaissance Women's Medical Manuals" in the volume The Body in Medical Culture (2009).

AshBelt's Editor in Chief, Kaylie Yaceczko, sat down with Dr. Nunn to talk about reading Shakespeare, how to keep the love of education alive outside of the classroom, and why snails may be more useful than we may have thought.

For those who have not had you in class, would you mind describing your educational background? Bring your academic journey from undergraduate to being a professor at The University of Akron to life.

Well, I didn't expect to be an English major when I went to college. I always knew I was good at it, but I didn't really think of it as a thing you did. I thought I was going to be an International Relations major because I thought I would get to travel to exotic places and, you know, do exciting things, but I didn't realize you had to take economics to do that. (laughs) That came as a surprise. So, I started to get more involved in my English classes, and that is when I totally dove right into Renaissance literature because it was incredibly exciting. I thought of it as being a thing that would be always important in the way that we studied English. Some places aren't necessarily thinking of it that way, but that is part of what made me decide to go with it, aside from the fact too that it seemed that everything started in the Renaissance. I know that's not one hundred percent true, but the way that we think about literature is very much influenced by that. I thought about doing more recent literature, but I realized that was full of people. I didn't necessarily want to be competing with everybody that I went to school with, so I chose something a little different. I went on to Michigan State from there where I started to find myself more and more drawn to the idea of performing and how performing was important in Shakespeare as opposed to reading, and that made a huge difference and propelled me into thinking about how people thought about bodies themselves. That's where all the medical interest came from, and that's just fun and bizarre. That's why recipes and eating and medical study became such a big part of what I do.

You teach the courses in Shakespeare's early and mature plays at the University. What drew you to study Shakespeare and then later teach it at the collegiate level?

Shakespeare's never done. Shakespeare's studied, but Shakespeare is always debated. There are no solid answers in Shakespeare, and that, I love. It makes class discussions all the more fun because it's true that everybody can have a different interpretation that holds even when it's completely contradictory to someone else's. Shakespeare is different in every performance, and wherever it is done, it has a different meaning. The possibilities are really endless, and that is

what makes it exciting for me because every class is different. I have taught early plays and late plays I don't know how many times, and I never quite know where a group is going to go. Yet, there is always something new and interesting that happens in the classroom because students bring something different to the text every time.

Many people, especially college students, can have a wide variety of opinions when it comes to studying Shakespeare. What is your method in presenting Shakespeare and other classic literature in a way that reaches students who are hesitant about the subject?

Well, first of all, adaptation is always a way to do this because people have been playing with Shakespeare since Shakespeare was first written. Students never quite believe it when I say that's a mode of study in its own right. That mocking Shakespeare is studying Shakespeare, and a lot of people are actually happy to mock Shakespeare! They just don't think of that as something they can actually work with. You know, when people find out that, yeah it's okay for them to write a paper about *The Lion King*, they often change their mind about what Shakespeare can mean to them, so I try to find what it is that a given student would want to actually latch onto. I think it works really well for students to offer critique of Shakespeare as well, I mean, Shakespeare is a presence that is troubling. He perpetuates a lot of stereotypes and has been used for all kinds of nefarious ends, and seeing how that can happen is incredibly important and letting students think about that angle is just as important as it is celebrating Shakespeare.

I'm sure it makes it more enjoyable that way.

Yeah, isn't it terrible? I mean, in some ways it's terrible that the more enjoyable approaches are the ones about the more evil things, but I guess that's human nature, right? You want to understand how literature can function to enable bad impulses as well as good ones.

Which play has been your favorite to teach?

Oh, that's a terrible question.

(Both laugh)

It changes all the time! I like to teach plays that students have never heard of. People think they know *Hamlet*, and people think they know *Macbeth*, but people have not typically read things like *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well that Ends Well* and plays like *Titus Andronicus* that often catch them off guard. And they can be horrified; they're often horrified by these plays, and they're not sure they're allowed to be horrified by them. Talking about that feeling of horror and that sense of "Oh, this is awful! If this happened today, we would certainly not be celebrating this!" That's where good conversations come up. I would say that those later plays—plays like *The Winter's Tale*—for me are so much fun because they're bizarre, and they get students to interrogate what is it about Shakespeare that actually keeps him current. Often, it's those bizarre things, not the fact that "*Hamlet* speaks to the ages!" It's that we have to struggle to make *The Winter's Tale* work for us, but that can actually be really interesting.

When you say students are often unsure if they're allowed to feel horrified, what do you mean by that?

I think that a lot of people think they're supposed to say that Shakespeare's a genius. They've been taught that Shakespeare's a genius, that he's the most important writer in English, that without him we would somehow be less civilized, so when they read these plays that are about awful things—where people who do awful things get away with these awful things—they start to wonder why is this okay where women are harassed and married off and all this kind of thing. But those things are not great romances in the way that I think people come into the class sort of thinking that *Romeo and Juliet* still is. (laughs) That's a problem. They don't feel that they're supposed to notice that. The students often have that idea that Shakespeare's good for them and that they just have to deal with it, like taking vitamins. It's a thing you have to do; you do it without questioning, or it seems that's what a lot of them think. In my classes, we always question these things, and it's a little liberating for them.

Which particular concept in Shakespeare do you find stirs up the most robust discussion from students?

One thing that students always notice and want to talk about are the positions of outsiders, and who they think of as being an outsider in the plot can change from year to year. But it means they do a lot of talking about how younger people are treated by older generations and what the expectations are for them. That often leads to really interesting and hot debates about gender, and so that's something that students will often latch onto and will want to address more on. Those sorts of questions and themes are really important, and they are a way that we typically make our way into the comedies. Sometimes, students want to talk about what the larger society should look like according to the structures of plays, like what works and what doesn't. That's a thing that's been happening more and more as students are thinking more about politics in general, and one nice thing about Shakespeare is that you can have political discussions that are removed from the kinds of anger that often happen in the rest of the world but where ideas can still be tried out. That can make for some interesting discussions, too. Plus, we get time think about things like time and parents and about that question of how do you make a big decision. Those are all things that students are always happy to think about.

If a student is looking to read Shakespeare and doesn't know where to begin, where would you say would be a good place to start?

My first question would be what do you expect out of Shakespeare? Because I do think that is the thing that is important is students want to read something that is going to let them have a better conversation at a dinner party with their parents' educated friends. (laughs) That's one thing. But if they want to do it because they're looking to find out about if Shakespeare can be funny, that's a different thing. So, the first question I would ask would be why do you want to read Shakespeare, and then go from there.

It's hard to know where to start, but I think if a student says, "Well, I don't know. Aren't I supposed to?" I think I would probably not go with a comedy because the comedies are really hard to read and laugh at. When you're thinking that comedies need to be funny, Shakespeare's comedies take some getting used to, so I don't think I would start with that if it's really their first time. I know my first was *Julius Caesar*; I would not say that because that was just way too

stilted for me, even though I love it now because it's far weirder than I ever gave it credit for. I would go for a tragedy, and I might go with something unsubtle like *Titus Andronicus*. It's hard to be bored when you're reading *Titus Andronicus*.

(Both laugh) I would agree with that!

Perhaps an understatement, but still! But it does get harder and harder because things resonate in ways that students aren't necessarily prepared for, and *Titus Andronicus* is one of those things. I would ask them if they like horror movies first, and then I would say to check out *Titus Andronicus*.

You've done a great deal of research in Renaissance literary culture, specifically cookbooks and recipes. Did you have a specific moment where you realized this was something you wanted to pursue academically?

It was always creeping up on me, I'll put it that way. When I was working on ideas of medicine, the idea of what you eat determines your health was always in the background, but people never talked about how anybody decided what to eat or how to prepare things. That, along with my hope that I would be able to find more things written by women, turned me toward looking for recipes. When I read recipes, at first, I thought, "I don't know what I'm going to do with any of these!" (laughs) Because first of all, they read differently than we think recipes ought to read, and I thought, "Well, I'll just make them," and then I realized that I don't know how to cook over an open hearth. This was not a skill I had developed in life! (laughs) You have to read a lot of them first, I think, to start to notice trends and to work with them from there, but once you start, it's so hard to stop because the things that people eat and drink can be incredibly every day and sort of boring, like how to make a pancake, or they can be just totally overwhelmingly complicated and kind of weird. Some of the things people considered to be food, we would not consider food. Then, when you look at how people made their own medicine it can get even weirder because the idea that snail water might be good for you...it's not a thing you would find at CVS. (laughs) But you can still buy it on Amazon, just so you know. I didn't know that until last week! Apparently, it's really good for your skin, but I don't know what it smells like to tell you truthfully.

(Both laugh) Well, that would definitely be a project!

Well, and that's another thing that's been getting to me lately is that it's not pretty. It's not pretty, these recipes. These things that you could use for ingredients were pretty limited, and when something bad happens to you and you really need a cure, you try what you can try.

In your Shakespeare classes, you have shown students how to transcribe Renaissance recipes through EMROC, or the Early Modern Recipe Online Collective, along with the Dromio transcription platform from the Folger Shakespeare Library. What do you hope is the biggest takeaway students get from transcribing these recipes and doing this kind of research?

First of all, that they can do it. That these are not scary things. That you can read this handwriting, and you can actually contribute to making something that's important to

scholarship. That's one thing I want them to get; the other thing is that I want them to see that everyday texts have value, and recipes are everyday texts. They are written by people who don't care about spelling. They're written by people who scribble things out. They're written by people who are just trying to save paper, sometimes, so they are writing really small in margins and using ink that they made themselves and actually trying to cope with an environment that, as much as it might feel bizarre to us, isn't really all that different than we are and our is. They recognize a disease, and they have to do something about it. Their options of what to do are different than ours, but in that sense, they're really close to us. And I think it makes that sense of connection stronger at the same time it makes the sense of difference bigger because their options are certainly not like our options. I mean, they're not calling a doctor. They can't call the nurse line or anything like that! So, they have to ask people in their neighborhoods, and though that's something we do, it is certainly not what we consider your last hope as some of these are. The kinds of treatments may seem, well, barbaric in some respects because you would be cutting up things that you wouldn't necessarily want to think about being part of your medicine, like snails, and you're putting them on people at high temperatures sometimes. You're doing some things that don't necessarily seem like they're going to be that effective, but at the same time, it does show that there is some thinking that goes into all of this. It's not just wives' tales, as it's often assumed to be, that there's actual knowledge in the selection of different herbs that's beyond what we know. One of the things I love is students will be looking at plants, and I'm surprised. I learn that a lot of my students can't cook anything, so it can surprise me that a certain idea of what boiling does is something that they've never thought about before and that's step one in cooking. They learn some of these things that are actually practical in their world, too. Those are all things that I love about it because it both makes people feel like they understand everyday people a little bit more, but also, they understand how different the world is. One of the things that students always say to me when they do the medical recipes is, "How do they know when a person had cancer? They had cancer then?" They're impressed, in a way, that people had these concepts and know it when they see it, and we rely on doctors to tell us these things.

Have you ever tried to recreate one of these recipes? Was it what you expected?

I have never tried one of the medical recipes because that just seems a little...much. (laughs) I've made lemon puddings. I have made tarts. I made a cheesecake once that was really very good! Desserts are always the ones that I want to make. The ones that involve unusual cuts of meat, not so much. The cheesecake was surprisingly flavorful. I kind of expected it to be a little on the bland side because it was plain cheesecake and didn't have vanilla in it because people didn't always have vanilla, but it had elderberries. That was good, even though I had to use elderberry tea, but it still worked. I would encourage you to try it!

You do a great deal of work with the Literary Guild at the University, especially with the Upstart Crows and SAGES (Society of Akron Graduate English Scholars), which are the writing organizations on campus for undergraduate and graduate students. What would you say is the biggest benefit for students in having organizations like this available to them?

Well, I think there are a lot of things that are good about both these organizations. One is that for creative writing groups outside of class, you get to compare notes in a way that is a little different than in class. There's not the expectation that you will have to quickly go back to something and make it better and turn it in by a deadline, so you can absorb the things that people are saying to you in a different way. And it's the friendliness, really. It's the idea that you're getting together with other people from beyond class. Most people tend to be English majors or minors, but there are sometimes people involved who you wouldn't expect to meet in these groups, and that's really what's great. Especially during a pandemic, there's not enough time to actually get to know people in your classes and having organizations like this change that dynamic. SAGES is actually really helpful for other reasons too, in that, students in grad programs often are not sure of how to translate what they do into other settings, whether it means they're wanting to go on for a PhD or whether they want to try to join a certain sort of professional organization. We talk about those things and work on taking the kinds of projects that people have in their classrooms and using them in other contexts so that they get a sense of what a career would be like and that's useful professionalization, plus it's fun. I love working with student groups, especially when they have wonderful officers.

What advice would you give students who are looking to further their education after they graduate from the University?

There are all kinds of ways to do that! I have to say that, well, the pandemic is a huge pain to put it mildly, but one thing that it's shown is that there are a lot of people who want to further their education outside of the classroom. I hope that is one thing that sticks. Just today, I have a Zoom meeting about early modern herbals that I can attend that is being hosted in Massachusetts, and I can go! Keeping an eye out for those kinds of local groups, I think is a huge, huge help, or not even just local groups but there are local groups, too. There are so many reading groups in the Akron area. Bookstores post them all the time and going to a bookstore is a great thing that I hope to get to do again someday! There are like-minded people out there, and if you are a writer, just keep writing. No one knows who you are when you submit something, so why not? Even if you don't submit, you're doing it for yourself, so keep doing it! That's the main thing that I have to say. When you graduate, it's not the end. You're taking your skills and loves into a wider world, and there are always people out there who will be willing to engage with you on those things. That's what I would advise. Then, there's always grad school. It is kind of amazing to me that people will find these strange outlets in their workplaces for these kinds of things. I mean, if you love to write, and you don't care what you're writing, there will be all kinds of opportunities for you.