

THE ENGLISH AGGIE

New faculty features • Exploring the NVS • Sci-Fi Contest • Aggie Alum Interview • Student features



What is the New Variorum Shakespeare?

[The New Variorum Shakespeare \(NVS\)](#) is a landmark editorial project that traces its origins to 1871, when Horace Howard Furness published the first New Variorum edition of *Romeo and Juliet*. Each volume incorporates both textual changes in later printings of Shakespeare's plays as well as several centuries of commentary about Digital Humanities Research (CoDHR) at A&M University

assumed responsibility for publishing the digital NVS in 2019. In the first phase of this transition, CoDHR released open-access digital editions of *The Winter's Tale* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 2021, using software designed by its research team. The NVS has since moved into the English Department, where the team is preparing the next phase of development, including the publication of 15 additional editions currently under contract. Following the model of cutting edge digital humanities projects, the NVS print editions are being transformed into an open-source, online application—accessible worldwide from a laptop, tablet, or other device—ensuring that Shakespeare's plays and their critical histories remain available to future generations of readers.

the plays. From 1933 through 2020, the Modern Language Association (MLA) served as publisher of the series, releasing the last print volume that year. With a generous MLA grant, the Center of

Meet the NVS Team Director



Image credit: Dr. Stagg
Texas

Why is it important to create an accessible, user-friendly interface to encourage students to explore Shakespeare's plays in a dynamic way?

Variorum editions have long been central to Shakespeare studies, but the print volumes were never easy to navigate for anyone outside the field. Often priced between \$300–\$500, they were also prohibitively expensive for students and for institutions with limited resources.

Dr. Stagg is an Assistant Professor of English at Texas A&M University. He is the author of *Shakespeare's Blank Verse: An Alternative*

Digital Editor Image credit: Dr. Torabi

Dr. Robert Stagg Dr. Katayoun Torabi

History (OUP, 2022) which was shortlisted for the Society of Renaissance Studies Book Prize and the University English Book Prize, as well as various chapters in edited collections and numerous articles in leading journals.

Associate Digital Editor



Image credit: Dr. May

Dr. Torabi is an Instructional Associate Professor of English and the Digital Editor and Project Manager for the *New Variorum Shakespeare* (NVS) project at Texas A&M.

Digital Editor



Image credit: Dr. Todd

Associate

The digital New Variorum Shakespeare addresses both challenges. Freely available online, it is designed with an interface that is intuitive, accessible, and comprehensive. Unlike the print editions, the digital platform brings all the essential components of a variorum together at a glance: the play text, commentary notes, and textual notes. This makes the NVS a resource not only for scholars, but also for students at every level, as well as teachers, performers, and general readers interested in Shakespeare.

Future Plans & Student Involvement

We typically offer a number of UPREPs, short for the [Undergraduate Professional and Research Experience Programs](#), each year for students who want to gain

work experience on the NVS, ranging from technological support to publicity and marketing. The NVS is also a research and events hub in Shakespeare studies, and students are always warmly welcomed at our semesterly seminars and lectures. Looking further ahead, we are planning to collaborate with e.g. Shakespeare's Globe in London and Waseda University in Tokyo on projects that will enable students to get involved. Dr. May is Associate Digital Editor of the New Variorum Shakespeare. He is former Associate Editor of the World Shakespeare Bibliography and holds a Ph.D. in English. Dr. Todd is an

Dr. Kris May **Dr. Dorothy Todd**

Instructional Assistant Professor of English at Texas A&M University and an Associate Digital Editor.

SCAN TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE NVS

tinyurl.com/nvstamu

About

I am a recent English Aggie PhD graduate, and I am excited to continue working and teaching here at TAMU. My educational background was not a straight journey from a bachelor's to PhD in English, but it has allowed me to explore multiple disciplines and their interconnectedness. Let's just say I took the scenic route to my PhD. In 2008, I received my bachelor's degree from Oklahoma Baptist University with a double major in English and Biblical Studies, and a minor in TESOL. I knew I eventually wanted to teach at the university level, but honestly, I couldn't pick just one department I wanted to research and specialize in. I tried out seminary in Colorado before deciding to go for essentially a third bachelor's degree in Biological Anthropology. While on a new path at UCCS working towards becoming an osteoarchaeologist so that I could tell the stories of the dead, I became fascinated with the field of cognitive archaeology. Through this, I discovered a gap in our knowledge of how narrative works in the brain to produce a human capacity for telling stories that is present in all cultures at all times. Long story short, I eventually applied for grad school, but I made the switch back to my literary roots so that I might find a way to marry these parallel lines of interest from different disciplines. In 2015, I earned my master's degree from Wayland Baptist University. Not wanting my UCCS years to go unrecognized without a piece of paper, I earned a certificate from UCCS in Cognitive Archaeology in 2016. After spending a few years teaching at a university in rural Oklahoma, I actually started my PhD at Oklahoma State University in 2019. When their

only medievalist, my committee chair, had to abruptly retire for medical reasons, I transferred to TAMU's PhD program. I started in 2020, right in the midst of the pandemic. It was crazy (kind of like this long explanation of my educational background – sorry!), but I have loved it here and officially graduated this summer (2025)!

Focus area & research interests

My research focuses on medieval literature, specifically from the 12th-14th century, as well as cognitive literary studies. Broadly speaking, I am fascinated by the social cognitive processes involved in writing and reading literature and how that has played out in the history of storytelling. I look closely at the transition from oral to written storytelling, how oral stories were collected and written down throughout the medieval world in the form of framed tale collections (such as *The Thousand and One Nights*, Boccaccio's *Decameron*, or Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*), what it means to create a textual storyworld in writing, and to participate in one through reading. Along those intersections, I am also interested in medieval folklore, ballads, romance, and animal fables. For example, I have written and presented on Aesop's fables and its relation to why we as humans like to anthropomorphize, especially in narrative and poetical form.

Would you like to share any fun fact(s) about yourself? (This could be about anything--your favorite book, author, poem, literary movement, movie, etc)

Some fun facts about me are that I am an Air Force wife, and we

have three amazing kids. I completed an EMT program and certification years ago, but didn't get a chance to actually work in the field (unless you count having boys!). My favorite literary genre to read for fun is YA Fantasy. My comfort-read that I discovered in junior high and have read over a dozen times since is a YA Historical Fiction called *Titanic: The Long Night* by Diane Hoh. Just a few of my favorite authors are Robin McKinley, Jane Austen, and C.S. Lewis. One of my favorite poems is "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" by Walt Whitman. I will never forget reading it for the first time in college.

Photo by Lauryl Harvey Photography

What classes (if any) are you teaching this semester? What classes do you plan to teach in the near future or hope to create for the Department of English?

This semester I am teaching four sections of *Introduction to Technical & Professional Writing* (ENGL 210). I have also taught, and hope to teach again, *Rhetoric & Composition* (ENGL 104), *Writing About Literature* (ENGL 203), and *Arthurian Literature* (ENGL 330). Teaching a Medieval Literature or Chaucer course would be fun, possible courses for me to teach in the future. Given my interdisciplinary research, I would love to create a course on the topic of "Literature and the Mind" that explores the cognitive processes involved in writing and reading literature, how we participate in textual story worlds, and how that is studied in multiple disciplines. I think a class like that would appeal to a variety of both major and non-major students. I'm also looking forward to teaching the department's new *Science Writing* course (ENGL 463) in the Spring! Students can check out the description in the [undergraduate catalog](#).

What has been your favorite aspect of TAMU/Bryan-College Station so far? My favorite part of TAMU has been the people. This campus and the English department just have some genuinely cool students, faculty, librarians, and staff.

About

I received my master's at Northeastern State University at Tahlequah, OK and my doctorate at Oklahoma State, Stillwater.

Focus area & research interests

I'm Rhet Comp with a focus on New Media. My main research interest is extremism and the far-right, hate speech. I am currently researching the intersection between toxic fandoms, like GamerGate and the far-right for a book tentatively titled *Microfascist Networks*, which applies DeleuzoGuattarian terms to the new media networks created by these toxic fandoms. I look closely at groups like The Fandom Menace, Synder Bros, and even Elon Musk fans. That can be depressing work, so when I am not monitoring the far-right, I unwind by writing reviews, interviews, and hopefully a few opinion pieces for PunkNews dot org. It's a great second interest, and I hope to write a book on hardcore dancing soon. I have to finish the one I am currently writing first. But I want to look at the ways in which place and space interact with publics to allow these kinds of dances. Afterall, a two-step at a honky tonk bar is totally different from the type of two-step you see at a hardcore show. It's a very interesting cultural practice, and I think a lot of people might want to read about it.

What classes (if any) are you teaching this semester? What classes do you plan to teach in

the near future or hope to create for the Department of English?

Right now I am teaching writing courses in technical communication and honors English. In the tech course we play all the hits. And it's great. Instructions, memos. Great stuff. The honors English course is *Writing about Literature* (ENGL 203), and I am really excited about it. The theme is mass manipulation, and we are going to read some great stuff and watch some excellent films to explore that theme. For example, one unit deals with paranormal activity and the ways in which people can get manipulated there. What makes people want to believe? How do we, those of us who are more skeptical, converse with believers? Everyone is different, right? So, how do we get to know each other better? We are reading "The Yellow Wall Paper," which seems like a natural fit. And we are watching some reality TV featuring the famous paranormal investigator, Lorraine Warren, who inspired The Conjuring cinematic universe. This will happen mostly through October, too. It's going to be great. Students will write their own investigative piece. Another unit is on demagoguery, something Texas A&M can lay claim to as one of the leading scholars in the field is our own Jennifer Mercieca in Department of Communication & Journalism. We are going to discuss her work, maybe. And watch the criterion classic film *A Face in the Crowd* starring Andy Griffith. It's going to be a blast! Demagoguery is probably the best concept any emerging democratic citizen can be armed with in the age of deep fakes and culture wars. It's basically a communicative practice that pits an outside group against what sociologists call an ingroup: us vs them, basically. And that is increasingly how the world is structured around us today. Whose team are you on? That kind of stuff. Learning to spot that kind of thing and knowing why that type of communication is so alluring can help cut through a lot of BS and maybe stop some violence. No group is immune to it. No one can fully resist it. Powerful stuff. The way out, according to Trish Roberts-Miller, is focusing on policy rather than identity. Hopefully the class gets there.

Would you like to share any fun fact(s) about yourself? (This could be about anything--your favorite book, author, poem, literary movement, movie, etc)

I once got out of a fist fight using only the power of rhetoric. That's pretty cool. But I can't really tell the story in polite company, as there are some choice, Not Safe For Work phrases that are essential to its telling. If you see me at a show sometime, ask me for it, and I will definitely give you an ear full. That's probably the funniest fact about me. Other than that, I have a wife, two kids and a cat. The cat's name is Doyle Wolfgang Von Frankenstein. The kids named him after the guitarist from The Misfits. Henry is in high school here, and Emma is finishing college back in Stillwater. My wife is Sara. I have a lot of fun facts about her. Once at a concert where The Pretenders were opening for B 52's, Chrissie Hynde called out to the audience, "What do you want to hear next?" And Sara shouted back, "The B52's!!!" That's my wife.

Image credit: Dr. Jones

What has been your favorite aspect of TAMU/Bryan College Station so far?

I literally just got here. Like, August 12th was when we moved into the new place. I haven't really seen much, but you have a great vinyl record store in Bryan and a really friendly, neighborhood comic book shop, so I can't complain. Plus, it was super cool coming into town for the first time and seeing a huge sign that said "Bryan, welcome to Aggieland!" I couldn't help but imagine the punctuation there, making it a personal greeting. And it's fun to introduce myself as Dr. Bryan Jones of Bryan, Texas. I am looking forward to getting to know more about the town. As a punk rock writer and researcher, this area is deep in punk lore, with legendary bands hailing from Austin, like MDC, Big Boys, and The Dicks all from nearby. And now you are seeing bands like Die Spits and Pussy Gillette emerge from there. It's a great time to be in Texas. Plus, there's this little punk venue here in Bryan called the 101, and I gotta check that out.

Learn more about my interests outside the classroom

Read my reviews at PunkNews.org.

Introduce yourself to the undergraduates!

Howdy, I'm Ben! I was an English major (Creative Writing concentration) at Texas A&M (class of '14), worked in an independent bookstore for a while, and am now a sales rep for W. W. Norton & Company. (Side note: if you're not exactly sure what to do after graduation and want to work in book publishing, keep a regional sales rep position in mind. It wasn't on my radar when I was in college.) I live in Nashville with my wife and son, and my first collection of poetry was published last year.

Have you always been interested in writing poetry? What are some of your favorite pieces you've written?

While I didn't always lean toward poetry, I've wanted to read and write ever since my twin brother and I

made up bedtime stories with our mom as young children. I recall journaling a few rhyming poems in elementary school and writing about a puff of pink cloud I glimpsed through sheets of dark rain clouds while sailing as a 12-year-old. A few of my favorite poems I've written and the reasons why are: "C Boarding Group" for its concision, "End of the World" for its inclusion of primary sources, "Inventory of Pit Stops" for its more ominous tone than is typical for my work, "Dead Horses" for its imagery and ending couplet, and "Precarious Cairns" for the emotional punch it packs as the book's

closing poem. **For your recent poetry book, *Dust Storms May Exist*, what was the main inspiration behind your pieces? Do they each follow a cohesive theme, or do they all combine to consider several themes?**

This collection gets its scaffolding from a 10,000-mile road trip I took with a friend around the United States when I was 24. We explored the music, history, geography, and cuisine of the country, and over the course of three months began to fall in love. However, the road trip eventually ended, as did the relationship, so I wrote these poems largely to make sense of those experiences. There are also poems with religious language as my beliefs began to fracture and expand, poems searching for my dad who died when I was a baby, and even a section in the middle of the book about seven months spent traveling in South America the same year as the road trip. That year was the loneliest I've ever been and the freest I've ever felt. So while the subject matter varies, diction echoes across pieces and I hope readers sense the connecting strand of a journey: of the bewildering transformations of early adulthood, the thrill of discovery, the palpability of loss and longing, the shifting landscapes of memory. One last thought on cohesion: I think we writers can feel a pull to define a creative project by a unifying theme or concept, but when I read a poetry collection, I want to be as deep inside another person's life as they'll let me go, in the many crevices that make up an existence. I'm not sure people would want to read sixty pieces in a row about a road trip, or desire, or God, or my dead father. There are many things to write about.

What advice would you give to aspiring authors?

Write what you can't stop thinking about. Don't worry if other people will like it or deem it important. If you're drawing from the depths of

your experiences and emotions, living inside specific details instead of universal platitudes, there's a decent chance you'll create something another person will see themselves in, see their own questions and yearnings and memories. Other than that, read widely to gain inspiration and pull from what other authors are doing, and consider how words sound and feel, not only what they mean. Ultimately, your perspective matters. Everything you think, feel, experience has value. It's up to you to put it into words.

Image credit: Ben Groner III

How do you think the TAMU English department helped you with your creative journey?

The writing workshops I took junior and senior year were particularly impactful to my writing life. My interest in poetry multiplied under the close reading and perceptive ear of professor emerita Janet McCann, and legendary storyteller Larry Heinemann influenced my confidence as a writer more than any other professor. Behind his piercing blue eyes and brutal war stories was the kindest heart, and he lived to help students believe they too could be writers if they kept reading, paying attention to their lives, and approaching the blank page. At the end of senior year, he signed my copy of *Paco's Story* "with every good thing in my heart," and that's an untellable amount of goodness. He died a couple years before I finished the manuscript of my book, and I still regret never telling him how much he influenced me. Also, winning the Gordone Award for poetry came as such a shock and further boosted my belief in my writing ability. Scrolling through the course descriptions of the English undergraduate catalog now, there are so many classes I wish I'd had the time to take and so many professors I wish I'd gotten to learn from. But even though people might not initially associate the humanities with Texas A&M, I look back on my college years with gratitude and the knowledge that its students and faculty are bursting with creativity and talent.

Have you always been interested in writing poetry? What are some of your favorite pieces you've written?

On my [website](#)! Other than the selected publications gathered there, there's a link to buy a personalized copy of my full collection. (You can also order it from your local bookstore.) I have a few poems that came out in Peatsmoke Journal and Novus Literary Arts Journal this past spring, and one more forthcoming from The Red Branch Review in October. After a couple years of editing and publishing my collection, then focusing on readings and events, I'm finally submitting poems to literary journals again. It feels good, like this is only the beginning.

RANIA FAKHRI, CLASS OF 2027

My name is Rania Fakhri, I'm a junior and I went to high school in Houston, TX. I did live in Beirut, Lebanon for seven years prior to my junior year of high school, but I was born in Houston. I'm an English

major, seeking to add a double major in French as well as two minors (not yet decided, but leaning towards Religious Studies and Women and Gender studies.) Otherwise I'd be graduating too early! I hope to enroll in law school following my graduation from TAMU. I'm not yet fully decided on the specific field, but I am passionate about human rights, international law, and legislative policy. Whatever I end up doing, I hope to serve my greater community in some way that makes a tangible impact. I do also have a variety of academic and other interests, I am fascinated by linguistic history and hope to participate in some sort of research around that. I love history in general, and also pursue music in my free time. I play piano, bass,

and guitar, and try to always have music in my life in some form or another!

My favorite novel is **Catch-22** by Joseph Heller. I love anything with satire or sarcasm, and a good antihero.

Rania also has a club called Word by Word, to improve literacy in underserved regions in Texas by enhancing access to physical books. Follow them: [@tamuwordbyword](https://twitter.com/tamuwordbyword)

ALYSA TAYLOR, CLASS OF 2026

My name is Alysa Taylor, and I am a senior English major with an aggieTEACH SEED minor, a program that provides teaching certification for non-education majors. I am currently open to various career opportunities. I'd love to teach ELAR 9th-12th after graduation, but I am also looking forward to applying to positions in the publishing sphere. I'm currently involved in two research projects, one within the English department that focuses on the writings of H.P. Lovecraft, and another less oriented towards literature that focuses on the practices of elephant poaching. My experiences as an aggieTEACH officer have taught me a lot about motivation and consistency. Since aggieTEACH was previously exclusive to people within the program of the same name, there were a smaller number of members to manage, which made building connections and promoting the organization's message challenging, especially as the chair of External Relations. As of this semester, though, we have opened it up to students of any major and academic background, as long as they have a passion for educating the next generation. Getting through the more difficult portions of planning and ensuring good turnouts has proved to me that with consistent work, change does come, and I am so excited to see how the group develops this school year.

I love any novel written by Toni Morrison, particularly **Sula**. I also love the poet and novelist Ocean Vuong, especially his poem **Snow Theory** featured in his collection **Time is a Mother**.



Image credit: Rania Fakhri raniaf04@tamu.edu



Image credit: Alysa Taylor

alysataylor@tamu.edu

AUTUMN SIMUNDSON, 3+2 PROGRAM & CLASS OF 2027

Howdy! My name is Autumn Simundson, and I am a senior English major with a minor in History. I am part of departmental honors as well as a member of the 5-Year Bachelor of Arts and Master of Arts in English program. I am also on the committee for the upcoming Spring 2026 Undergraduate Humanities Research Symposium. I am passionate about anything regarding humanities research; conducting it, promoting it, and making it more accessible to students. I value literacy and literary criticism as incredibly important skills that can be developed throughout a lifetime, and I hope to foster these skills by teaching higher education post-graduation. Outside of classwork I enjoy writing short stories, baking, and spending time with friends. I love being a Peer Mentor! As a Hullabaloo U Peer Mentor, I am able to connect with incoming freshmen and develop my leadership skills. I have been able to gain practical teaching experience while also teaching others about the

Image credit: Autumn Simundson

university and, more specifically, the English department. I love this department, and I want to encourage new students to love and utilize it as well.

This is always a tough question, but I consider my favorite books to be the ones I can easily relax with. In that case, the ***Mistborn trilogy*** by Brandon Sanderson holds a special place in my heart.

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