Conference Programme & Abstracts
"The Uses of Trees in Early Modern England"
23 June 2022 – 9.30-18.00
Sorbonne Université
9:30-9:45 Welcoming address & introduction
Line Cottegnies and Anne-Valérie Dulac

9:45-10:45 Keynote
Chair: Anne-Valérie Dulac (Sorbonne Université)

Victoria Bladen (University of Queensland, Australia): “The Tree of Life and Arboreal Aesthetics in Renaissance culture”

11:00-12:30 Trees in/as Art


Chantal Schütz (École Polytechnique, Paris): “Of trees and lutes: yew, ebony, spruce and rosewood in resonance”

Buffet lunch

13:45-15:15 Staging Trees
Chair: Ladan Niayesh (Université de Paris)

Nicolas Thibault (Sorbonne Université): « The tree that hides the man : manipulating and reassigning royal symbols in Thomas of Woodstock”

Sophie Lemercier-Goddard (ENS LSH, Lyon): « “The Ecco of the woods”: Woodlands as the theatre of the colonial enterprise in Virginia and New England »:

15:30-16:30 Keynote
Chair: Line Cottegnies (Sorbonne Université)

Justin Begley (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Munich), “Animalis Arbores: The Case of Nehemiah Grew’s Trees”

16:45-17:45 Trees and the 18th-century Imagination
Chair: Pierre Labrune

Laurent Folliot (Sorbonne Université): “Parasitical Beauty: The Materiality of Trees in Picturesque Discourse”

Nicolas Bourgès (Sorbonne Université) : “Trees as vehicles for reflection about nature and time in the poetry of William Cowper (1731-1800)”

17:45-18:00 Concluding Remarks & Perspectives
Across early modern European culture grew a complex language of trees that surrounded the concept of the tree of life. It was articulated in a variety of media and forms: illuminated manuscripts, woodcuts, paintings, mosaic, fresco, sculpture, and pageantry. Arboreal motifs and metaphors were a significant vehicle for expressing ideas of spiritual knowledge and articulating religious ideology. The sources for arboreal iconography lay in biblical text however the meanings that were read from these images extended beyond the textual metaphors to intersect with social ritual, folklore, and the cult of the cross. We will also see how unsettling forces of otherness lay embedded within such arboreal iconography, particularly apparent in the figure of the Green Man. This paper maps key ideas surrounding the tree of life and its arboreal aesthetics in Renaissance culture, highlighting recurring motifs and ideas, and demonstrating its double nature whereby orthodoxy was shadowed by the Other.
This paper aims at studying some of the uses of trees in early modern garden statuary. In addition to the well-known art of Tudor topiary, trees could then function as ornaments for statues made of stone or could also be integrated into the highly sophisticated display of animated statues in Jacobean gardens. By focusing on two plays by Shakespeare, *Much Ado about Nothing* and *The Winter’s Tale*, this presentation will tackle the main aesthetics issues of the role of trees in gardens as staged by Shakespeare. Starting with the question of trees as theatrical properties, this study will explore the cultural but also philosophical evolution of the representations of trees and wood in Shakespeare’s later plays, more precisely when these elements are integrated in garden statuary.

Almost all early modern musical instruments rely on wood, be they wind or string instruments, percussions or keyboards. Among them, the lute is remarkable since it combines several different essences to produce a rich and eloquent compound that some authors have even regarded as a mouthpiece for the trees from which they are issued, identifying a deep connection between the music produced by the instrument and the primal power of the natural element whose destruction was necessary to create the human artefact. The complexity of the instrument also exposes the economic circuits involved in obtaining the types of wood necessary for the instruments, and hence its composite identity: Italian, Bavarian and exotic woods, sometimes combined with ivory or other precious materials. Finally, the very shape of the instrument, particularly in later developments such as the theorbo, refers, like recorders and other elongated wind instruments, to the shape of the tree or branch that produced them, making it, in effect, a piece of speaking/singing wood. The lute thus constitutes a perfect example of hybridity in the artistic uses of wood and trees, put in the service of personal expression yet always recalling its connection to the natural world, emphasized in particular by the fact that the strings necessary to make the instrument resonate are manufactured from the guts of animals (mostly sheep). The apparently trivial nature of the materials used to create heavenly harmonies was not lost on authors who, like Shakespeare, noted and interrogated this incongruity, seeing in it a relevant epitome of human contradictions.
“The huge greate Oke was once a plant.” This observation, found in Timothy Kendall’s anthology *Flower of epigrammes* (1577), seems to state the obvious: trees do grow out of smaller (and frailer) plants and are subject to time. Yet this image is far from the emblematic representation of the oak, inherited from the Bible, which was often used in early modern poetry or political theory. Traditionally, the oak was the tree of Jupiter and connoted strength, immutability, and majesty, thus making it an ideal royal symbol (with the cedar). However, as Andrew McRae notes, “the politics of the oak—and of trees more generally—were [then] by no means as settled as it would become in a later period.” (2012) This then allowed for all sorts of rhetorical and semantic play, in particular in late Elizabethan history plays which depict the troubled reigns of contested kings. With a focus on the anonymous play *Thomas of Woodstock* (c. 1591-1595), I would like to explore how royal symbols such as the oak (and the cedar) are manipulated and subverted on stage. Like Kendall’s epigram, the play insists on the precarious nature of trees, both real and symbolic, showing how inadequate and artificial rhetorical tropes can be. Deprived of its emblematic and specific quality, the actual tree reappears behind the symbol. That symbol can then be reassigned to other potential candidates, which allows the play to challenge essential tenets of royal orthodoxy such as the king’s uniqueness.

Trees occupy a central space in early modern travel, exploration and trade. A good indicator of a country’s riches and economic potential, the thick woodlands of America were also a highly disputed ground in Indian and English face-offs and an obstacle to observation and exploitation. The desire to cleanse away the woods – to convert them into fruitful meadows while securing their coveted primary resource – did not however erase their poetic and metaphorical dimension: in John Smith’s *Generall Historie of Virginia* (1624) and *A Description of New England* (1616), the woods become a space of performance. More than a simple background or a pastoral setting, they set the stage of the colonial enterprise: they were a site of reinvention on an individual and a collective level and a few wooden objects created a dramaturgy of power which pitted two different ecosystems against each other.

Sophie Lemercier-Goddard (ENS LSH, Lyon): "“The Ecco of the woods”: Woodlands as the theatre of the colonial enterprise in Virginia and New England”
At first glance, animals and trees have little in common. Animals are mobile creatures that eat, breathe, and mate, while trees are immobile and do not visibly engage in any of these behaviours. In seventeenth-century England, however, naturalists began to recognise that animals and trees are not so different after all. With a focus on the botanist and Secretary of the Royal Society, Nehemiah Grew (1641-1712), my paper will explore some of the ways in which trees were reimagined during the period in question. As I will seek to show, with his careful anatomical research and creative application of plant-animal analogies, Grew revealed that plants, much like animals, are living and active beings, which consume food, intake air, and engage in sexual intercourse. By making these largely invisible vegetative functions palpable, Grew, in turn, challenged long-held ideas about plant life and the scale of nature.
Laurent Folliot (Sorbonne Université), “Parasitical Beauty: The Materiality of Trees in Picturesque Discourse”

Theorists of picturesque beauty, such as William Gilpin in his Remarks on Forest Scenery (1791) and Uvedale Price in his Essay on the Picturesque (1794), tend to promote ways of looking at trees and woodland that are comparatively free from utilitarian or edifying considerations, tonal harmony and textural effects being the primary concern of painters and connoisseurs alike. However formalistic such an approach may appear, the picturesque emphasis on detail renews the perception of trees by stressing their materiality: they are worth looking at, not merely as parts of a whole (the forest landscape), but also because of their singularities, of their knots and knobs, their lividities and discolourations, even their excrescences and parasites. In other words, the late eighteenth-century imagination is fascinated with trees because they offer a tangible picture of organic life in its endurance and transience—warts and all.

Nicolas Bourgès (Sorbonne Université), “Trees as vehicles for reflection about nature and time in the poetry of William Cowper (1731-1800)”

In his poems William Cowper alludes to different types of trees, the meaning of which can be interpreted in two ways. In The Task (1785), the longest poem he wrote, they are used as symbols enabling the poet to contrast natural beauty and harmony to urban development. He also invites the readers to question their relationship to the environment through observing and describing how animals use trees, their natural habitat. Another central aspect of his poetical works is the association between trees and time: The Poplar Field (1784) and Yardley Oak, an unfinished poem from 1791, both include a philosophical dimension that questions the link between persistence and change. Cowper’s allusions to trees also reflect his interest in gardening – which he practiced while living at Olney (Buckinghamshire) – and refer to Weston Park, a nearby property which is now destroyed, and where the poet found inspiration. Analysing the role of trees in Cowper’s poems gives one the opportunity to draw parallels with visual arts, including echoes to the concept of the Picturesque. Thus he can be considered as a writer bridging the gap between Augustan and Romantic poetry.