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Introduction to Digital Humanities Final

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**Meter and Motherhood:**

**18th Century Women Poets on the Intersections of Labor and Life**

**Research Question and Hypothesis**

Looking at the themes and topics that women poets were writing about in and around the 18th century, I seek to understand how women writers engaged with two central topics— labor and motherhood. I hypothesize that there is a shift in how women write about labor and motherhood in this period. My research question centers on how changing socio-political attitudes about women’s roles in society, childcare, working conditions, and the home are reflected in the work of women poets writing on these topics during this period. Tracking the poets’ formal (linguistic and stylistic) choices and mapping poetic accounts at the intersection of labor and motherhood will help to illuminate how changes in both the poetic and the social-political are encoded in the work of these poets. My approach aligns with that of the authors of [“How We Do Things With Words: Analyzing Text as Social and Cultural Data”](https://app.perusall.com/courses/introdh24/how-we-do-things-with-words-analyzing-text-as-social-and-cultural-data) who write, “Interdisciplinary insights and partnerships are essential for realizing the full potential of any computational text analysis involving social and cultural concepts.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Moreover, inspired by Cynthia Whissell’s piece, [“Traditional and Emotional Stylometric Analysis of the Songs of Beatles Paul McCartney and John Lennon](https://app.perusall.com/courses/introdh24/whissell-1996-traditional-and-emotional-stylometric-analysis-of),” among other applications of emotional stylometry, I will track the emotional connotations of the words these poets use most frequently in their writings on these topics.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**Dataset**

Using the Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive (ECPA), which has the full text of each poem, as well as metrical notation and sourcing information in many cases, I will filter by gender.[[3]](#footnote-3) This reduces the larger dataset down to 67 authors. When ECPA has the original form of the poem, I will include that in my dataset as well; this will help me to develop an argument based on more data and will combat errors associated with OCR. For a subset of the poems in their original form that are particularly relevant to this project, I will use Recogito to annotate the poems.

**Methodology and Tools**

My methodology rests on identifying key words that are frequently used in 18th century women’s poetry about these topics. Words such as “child,” “newborn,” “milk,” “breast,” “kitchen,” “cooking,” “husband,” “man,” “home,” “women,” “mothering,” and “labor.” I will use word cloud visualization to show the most frequently used words. Employing Voyant Tools for topic-modeling, I will create groupings of topics that relate to one another, as Boyd-Graber, Jordan, et al. explain in “Applications of Topic Models”:

Interactive topic model and metadata focuses on a specific type of metadata: time. It allows users to view the evolution of topics over time to understand, for example, how the issue of slavery is reframed from an economic argument to an argument over human rights. It supports filtering to specific topics or to see how words are used over time across topics.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Furthermore, in addition to topic modeling, I will create data visualizations in Tableau Public to depict the relationship between the authors, their language, and the content of their work. I will also create timeline maps of the changes in the frequency of topics and terms as well as the shifts in conceptions of things such as child rearing, motherhood, and labor using ClioVis. I can also use this to help trace how these ideas shift with respect to the date of specific publications. Once again, this approach is supported by Boyd-Graber, Jordan, et al’s assertion that “While topic models provide users with overviews of corpora, topic models cannot be much help if the users cannot effectively see or understand the underlying topics and how they relate to specific documents.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

**Presentation and Dissemination**

Finally, using the web-publishing platform Omeka, I will create an online exhibition, using the visualizations and topic models that I generate to depict changes in time, as well as how the frequency of keywords, their usage (with respect to metrical patterns and tone) intersects with broader socio-political themes and patterns. The Omeka exhibition will not only enable me to document changes in women poets’ attitudes towards motherhood and labor over the course of the long 18th century but**,** more broadly, it will allow me toanalyze and reflect upon the imbrication of formal poetic choices and socio-political ideas and outlooks.

This project would make accessible and help further critical analysis of an important dataset, offering students and scholars of literature, labor history, queer and feminist history, political and social science, and gender studies a resource from which they can develop further research questions and endeavors. This project can inform research about 18th-century poetry, cultural production, and gendered norms of the period. Looking at these poems—both from a close and “distant reading” perspective—would enrich interdisciplinary scholarship on many levels.[[6]](#footnote-6) For example, a student looking at gendered norms in contemporary poetry might find their work enriched by this 18th-century-focused project. Similarly, a student in the field of political science might find that examining patterns in literature, will deepen their analysis of these issues and bring new and salient questions to the fore. As Underwood writes in his 2017 article, “A Genealogy of Distant Reading”: “Linguistic categories are just as important as the social categories.”[[7]](#footnote-7) This project would affirm the equally important and intertwined nature of the linguistic and the social.

Drawing on Catherine D'Ignazio and Lauren Klein’s 2021 Lecture— “Data Feminism: what does feminist data science look like?”—I would include data sheets to ensure there is public and transparent access to the process by which this exhibition was created[[8]](#footnote-8). I would also adhere to their ethical practice of making labor visible. Of course, being a multi-pronged project, this would likely require a team of people to collaborate, all of whom would need to be recognized. As Cordell points out a project of this kind must not only make its own creative process transparent but also suggests that part of its power lies in making transparent the lineage of a text and recognizing its creators.[[9]](#footnote-9) “One of the most compelling reasons to take bibliography [and citational practices] seriously for digitized historical texts is that doing so forefronts their createdness: the chain of human labor that led to their present existence.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Cordell recognizes that digital humanities projects of this kind must make the “iterative realities of digitized text” apparent.[[11]](#footnote-11) So too, in her 2022 article, “The Role of the Library When Computers Can Read: Critically Adopting Handwritten Text Recognition (HTR) Technologies to Support Research,” Melissa Terras asserts that this “iterative” quality must be accounted for and the work at each stage must be properly cited and credited (Terras 138, 143).[[12]](#footnote-12) As Cordell suggests, this project would not only make the lineage of these poems transparent but in itself it would represent yet another layer of their history. Cordell argues that: “Digitization does not remove a historical artifact from material culture, but adds another stratum of computational materiality to its social text” (Cordell 214). With this project, I seek to add this stratum of materiality to the social texts surrounding 18th-century women’s poetry.

**Works Cited**

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