Submission to RC Pedagogy Contest June 2022

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In the fall 2021, I taught a third-year undergraduate English course with 29 students that took the form of an extended group project focused on an album of “Original Letters” by “Eminent Women,” collected by a London librarian and self-professed sufferer of “autographic mania,” William Upcott. Compiled during the early decades of the nineteenth century and dated to 1824 on the title page, the album includes letters by 48 women, many of whom were writers with a public reputation, though others were artists, educators, philanthropists, political reformers and celebrated society figures. The women represented in the album range widely in terms of how they came to public eminence and their class, religious and sexual identities. The album therefore reflects a period of rising opportunities for women in Britain, as their contributions to various fields began to be recognized.

In this course, students engaged with the album through a digital facsimile and conversations with the curator at the New York Public Library, where the album is held. Early in the term, we met (via zoom) with Elizabeth Denlinger, curator of the Pforzheimer Collection at the NYPL where the album is held, to enable students to gain a better understanding of the album and its physical makeup, as well as the conditions of collecting and archiving in the early nineteenth century. Early on in the course, students selected an individual woman from the album, and they were responsible for transcribing the letter(s) by the woman as found in the album and contextualizing it through research. To support this work, we discussed the practices of letter-writing and its importance to women. Students also completed a biographical assignment, where they reported on their woman’s life, and a bibliographical assignment, that looked either at a publication they wrote or, if they were artists, their artwork, or some other important aspect of their public careers. They also completed a final project on their chosen woman as a culmination of their work in the course. Some wrote essays, others complied exhibits and a few produced podcasts.

The course was experimental in a number of regards. As I wrote in my syllabus:

This will be an interactive and project-based course. Students will be expected to share their research and writing with their classmates and to work together as a team. This course may feel different than other English courses for a few reasons:

* we are studying more writers/texts (though the selections will be shorter, to approximate the reading within a more traditional third-year class);
* we will not always be reading the identical excerpts from the selected texts;
* we are reading many authors who are not canonical and not well known;
* we will be reading a very broad range of genres;
* we will be investigating some women who did not write (artists, activists);
* we will be learning as we go; many of the authors are unknown, and we will be collectively working together to learn more about them;
* we will be engaged in academic writing in genres that may be new to you.

The assignments in this course have been designed to foster a collaborative working environment as we collectively engage in this discovery research together. The purpose of this course is to extend our knowledge of women in the period; if you are looking for a course that engages with canonical writers, even canonical women writers, I suggest you consider taking another course.

Students were told that all assignments were to be posted in a public-facing web-based exhibit platform called OMEKA (first drafts were submitted privately, for feedback, with revised versions posted online). For the assignments, students were encouraged to present their findings in an accessible and engaging form, using stories and images in an effort to draw readers into the narrative, with the intended audience not being solely the instructor or even their classmates, but potentially a wider audience of those interested in learning more about the album and the women featured in it. Students were given models of this kind of writing, and the learned from each other once the first assignments were posted. The outcome of this group project was a website exhibit, featuring all of the student work, which is viewable here: <https://olem.omeka.net>.

Although the course was not directed to women students, it was clear in the course outline and syllabus that they would only be studying women. All of the women from the album were well-known in their day, but many are obscure now, and learning about them required that the students pursue original research. For their first assignment, every student did a diplomatic transcription of the letter(s) as found in the Upcott album and contextualized it as best they could with the information given. A full list of the index to the album may be found [here](https://olem.omeka.net/exhibits/show/eminent-women-album/upcott-s-index-of-letters). As may be seen, the list includes some canonical authors, including [Maria Edgeworth](https://olem.omeka.net/exhibits/show/maria-edgeworth), [Charlotte Smith](https://olem.omeka.net/exhibits/show/charlotte-smith) and [Helen Maria Williams](https://olem.omeka.net/exhibits/show/helen-maria-williams), but many others who are not well known today, even among scholars of the period, as well as women who were important figures in other ways, such as the prison reformer [Elizabeth Fry](https://olem.omeka.net/exhibits/show/elizabeth-fry) and the wool artist [Mary Linwood](https://olem.omeka.net/exhibits/show/mary-linwood), or the culturally prominent Ladies of Llangollen ([Lady Eleanor Butler](https://olem.omeka.net/exhibits/show/lady-eleanor-butler) and Sarah Ponsonby). After they had worked on their letters, transcribing and contextualizing them for their first assignments, the students were given the option of changing the women they worked on. Every single student, however, decided to stick with the woman they had begun to work on for the remaining coursework.

The second assignment was a biographical one, where they researched the woman’s life. The third assignment had them read and discuss a work written or otherwise made by the woman in question, and the final assignment involved a final project involving another avenue of research on their chosen women. Each assignment involved the students using different research sources and tools. As many of the women were obscure, research involved combing through catalogues and archives (such as the Royal Literary Fund), reaching out to archives for material that was not digitized, and to other scholars working on the woman in question. In doing so, students engaged in real investigative research, and most became very attached to their chosen woman and learning more about them. As students worked through their individual research assignments, as a class we read short pieces or excerpts from as many women from the album as we could. This often meant reading writing in a range of genres, far beyond what they might normally read in a literature course, and most weeks the reading was generically grouped, to include travel writing, educational writing, philanthropy and science, in addition to reading poetry and fiction; a full reading list is included in the course syllabus and canvas modules.

I was both impressed and inspired by the students’ work; impressed at the original research they carried out, inspired by the enthusiasm they showed for uncovering the lives and cultural productions of the women in question. Structuring the course around the album—and the forty-eight women it contained—offered an opportunity to think about the Romantic period in much broader terms than we often do in an undergraduate classroom, moving far beyond canonical authors and canonical works. Thinking about what made these women eminent opened up multidisciplinary possibilities, as students saw the wide range of women’s cultural work in the period, including literary contributions but also the central role women played in art, education, political reform and social life.

The best way to access the student work is via exhibits: <https://olem.omeka.net/exhibits>. As you can see, each woman in the album has been given their own exhibit. For example, here is an entry for Lady Anne Seymour Damer: <https://olem.omeka.net/exhibits/show/hon-anne-seymour-damer>. The menu on the left displays the four assignments completed by the student Cassandra Reeves, who had selected to work on Anne Damer: [the letter](https://olem.omeka.net/exhibits/show/hon-anne-seymour-damer/letter), [the biography](https://olem.omeka.net/exhibits/show/hon-anne-seymour-damer/biography), [a study of her novel, *Belmour* (1801)](https://olem.omeka.net/exhibits/show/hon-anne-seymour-damer/book-review) and her final project, in the form of a podcast “[Who Was Anne Seymor Damer](https://olem.omeka.net/exhibits/show/hon-anne-seymour-damer/who-was-anne-seymour-damer-)?” Each student completed a series of similar assignments, which are viewable in the exhibit for each woman. On a few occasions, more than one student worked on a single woman, and because we had 29 students in the class and 48 women, not all assignments exist for all women.

Because many of the students were keen to continue work on this project, I obtained funding from my department to pay students to continue to transcribe, research and polish the public-facing project. A team of eight students completed all outstanding transcriptions for the letters, checked all of the transcriptions, and polished the work they had done on their own assignments; a smaller group of students is currently drafting an introduction. I also applied for and was awarded a Teaching and Learning Development Grant, from my University, to support the review of the materials the students created and to conduct interviews with them, to better understand the impact of integrating student-directed research, and implementing the “students as partners” paradigm. I am particularly invested in understanding what motivated students in the course, which emphasized original, student-directed research, and public-facing research outputs. Working on lesser or unknown women, some of whom I had never encountered before, meant that as the course unfolded, I felt that I wasn’t engaged in the usual pedagogical role of imparting knowledge, though I was providing historical, literary and social context and also research strategies and tools. Learning from the students is key to thinking about how to design similar courses; I have a strong sense that many of the students felt enthusiasm, excitement and connection to the course work, but further discussions with them will help to illuminate *why* this was the case and help me better understand how providing undergraduate students with meaningful opportunities to engage in researcher shifts what is traditionally done in an undergraduate classroom in the discipline in compelling ways.

To support this application, I have included the following:

* a detailed syllabus, that includes all of the course assignments.
* a link to all of the course materials in canvas, with all modules, and files, without student information: <https://canvas.sfu.ca/courses/71242>
* A map of our Omeka site.

**Omeka Site Map**

The main URL for the Omeka site:

<https://olem.omeka.net>

A hyper-linked table of contents for the album:

<https://olem.omeka.net/exhibits/show/eminent-women-album/upcott-s-index-of-letters>

All of the exhibits (on individual women plus the introduction) may be found here; use the page counter at the top right to move between pages:

<https://olem.omeka.net/exhibits>

A collected references page is accessed here:

<https://olem.omeka.net/references>

Although I believe all of the student work was exceptional, I wish to call attention to the following assignments in particular:

# Angela Wachowich’s final essay, “Romantic Friendships: Eminent Women and the Ladies of Llangollen” <https://olem.omeka.net/exhibits/show/lady-eleanor-butler/romantic-friendships--eminent->

# Cassanda Reeve’s biography of Anne Seymour Damer, <https://olem.omeka.net/exhibits/show/hon-anne-seymour-damer/biography>

# Scott Postulo’s Exhibit of Lady Caroline Lamb’s Visual Art, <https://olem.omeka.net/exhibits/show/lady-caroline-lamb/an-exhibit-of-lady-caroline-la>

Rachel Sargent’s final essay on “The Publishers of Sarah Burney,” <https://olem.omeka.net/exhibits/show/sarah-burney/publishersromanticera>

# Christine Cruz’s bibliographical assignment on Elizabeth Benger’s *Poems on The Abolition of Slave Trade*, <https://olem.omeka.net/exhibits/show/elizabeth-benger/book-review>

# Lauren Nicolle’s transcription of letters by Elizabeth Macualay to the Royal Literary Fund,

<https://olem.omeka.net/exhibits/show/elizabeth-macauley-biography/letter-from-elizabeth-macauley>

Belle Eist’s catalogues of Mary Pilkington’s anonymous and unattributed contributions to the *Ladies Monthly Museum* and Magazine and the *Ladies Magazine,*

<https://olem.omeka.net/exhibits/show/mary-pilkington/cataloguing-mary-pilkington---> and

<https://olem.omeka.net/exhibits/show/mary-pilkington/mary-pilkington---s-anonymous->

Garin Falmon’s final project podcast on William Upcott and the Legacy of Conservation,

<https://olem.omeka.net/exhibits/show/eminent-women-album/upcott-and-the-legacy-of-conse>

Emily Mikkola’s adaptation of the coursework to describe her personal collection of historical postcards, <https://olem.omeka.net/exhibits/show/mary-holderness/grace---louie-figge-postcard-c>