Teaching Romanticism and Feminist Disability Studies with Dorothy Wordsworth

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A copy of a page from the journal Dorothy Wordsworth kept from February 12, 1831-September 7, 1833 serves as the frontispiece to Susan Levin’s 1987 book *Dorothy Wordsworth & Romanticism*. In the reproduction, Dorothy’s script is illegible, but the page is an evocative aesthetic object: the text is cross-written, with a larger, vertical script covering over the smaller text that runs from left to right. The image implicitly demonstrates one of what Levin calls the “special problems for the editor” posed by Wordsworth’s writing: her non-linear, recursive style (175). These late journals resist the form of the printed book and the values that shape the academy, both through their idiosyncratic structure and through their content. Wordsworth during this period was experiencing a range of physical and cognitive impairments, possibly deriving from complications from an inflamed gall bladder and a progressive mental disability that some have likened to or identified as Alzheimer’s or pre-senile dementia.[[1]](#footnote-2) Levin connects Wordsworth’s difficult manuscripts directly to her cognitive decline, noting that her late journals and poetry “[provide] a fascinating record of her mind’s wanderings/deterioration/development” (175). These unpublished journal entries demonstrate that the state of Wordsworth’s mind and body—or, perhaps more precisely, critics’ understanding of the state of her mind and body—shapes our understanding of her work. These interrelations between Wordsworth’s body and corpus make these “special problems” for the editor into unique opportunities for students in courses dedicated to studying disability and Romanticism.

In this essay I describe an extended unit and major assignment centered on Dorothy Wordsworth’s published and unpublished journals in an upper-level English course I have designed, titled “Romanticism and Feminist Disability Studies.” The course will demonstrate, among other things, how disability studies-based interventions reveal the ways in which notions of normal and able bodies shape not only our ideas about health and wellness but also the Romantic canon and, in turn, how the traditional Romantic canon contributes to normative ideas about health and wellness. In this, I am influenced by Allison Kafer’s concept of the “curative imaginary” (27). Kafer distinguishes the “curative imaginary,” as an idea, from medical cure as a practice by highlighting the social forces that compel people with noncompliant bodies and minds towards rehabilitation. The curative imaginary derives from “an understanding of disability that not only expects and assumes intervention but also cannot imagine or comprehend anything other than intervention” (27). “Romanticism and Feminist Disability Studies” asks students to consider how these notions of health rooted in normalcy have shaped and continue to shape both the literary canon and access to that canon. Students will imagine Dorothy Wordsworth as part of a larger, more disabled Romanticism and will develop strategies for making her work more accessible to disabled readers and scholars today. In this way, “Romanticism and Feminist Disability Studies” brings together two important strands of my teaching that are both informed by disability studies. First, it asks students to consider how thinking through disability changes our understanding of literature and the cultures that read it; and second, it asks students to engage in rhetorical strategies to make their work—in the classroom and in writing assignments—more accessible to an audience that can include disabled people.

“Romanticism and Feminist Disability Studies” is in many ways the product of several years of teaching courses about disability, Romanticism, and their intersections at Emory University and later at Spelman College and The Georgia Institute of Technology, where I am currently a Brittain fellow and instructor in English. As a graduate student at Emory, I taught composition and literature courses aimed at attracting the school’s many undergraduates with plans to go on to medical school, nursing, or public health. In those courses, I found that teaching disability studies and Romanticism together proved valuable in a number of ways. The theoretical approach allows students not typically interested in English literature or close reading to find the stakes in the subject matter. My background in disability studies always informs my teaching, and I find that bringing disability into the conversation enhances it at all levels. My students at Emory who read William Hay’s 1754 essay *Deformity: An Essay* in part or in whole used Hay’s insights to better make sense of more canonical readings from Alexander Pope and Samuel Johnson. That same spirit informed our conversations about the Wordsworths, Coleridge, and Mary Shelley. At the same time, I rarely teach disability without Romanticism. My first-year writing course at Emory, *“*Disability and the Gothic,” used Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and some of its cinematic and digital adaptations and intertexts to trace a shifting, complicated history of the relationships between literary and medical notions of disability from the early nineteenth century to today. Similarly, I taught a second-year English course at Emory titled “Fictions of Addiction” that traced continuities and shifts in attitudes about drug users from the eighteenth century to the present. Students considered, among other things, how Lady Delacour, the dissipated opium-user whose rehabilitation shapes much of the first two volumes of Maria Edgeworth’s *Belinda* (1801), and Billie Holliday, who describes discriminatory police practices that kept her from getting medical treatment for addiction in her memoir *Lady Sings the Blues* (1956), were subjected to medical authority ultimately undergirded less by medical knowledge than by gender and racial scripts.

Another course that I taught at Emory, “Disability and the Gothic,” also highlighted continuities between standard practices for successful writers—awareness of audience or rhetorical situation, strategic use of multimodality—and strategies for making communication accessible. I built on those experiences in an ENGL 1101 course I developed and currently teach at Georgia Institute of Technology, “Composing Access.” In that class, accessibility becomes both the subject and goal of the student’s reading and writing. Students produce digital maps of barriers to access on their campus, audio description guides to on-campus art instillations for blind and low-vision users, and podcasts that assess the accessibility of educational practices and research opportunities at the school. These writing assignments draw explicitly and implicitly on Jay Dolmage’s call for principles of universal design to reshape our pedagogy and Georgina Kleege and Scott Wallin’s claim that multimodal accessibility documents like audio description can be used to produce interesting and valuable writing assignments. At the same time, these assignments force students to consider audience and the ways in which multimodal communication can either create or address barriers to access, depending on how they are deployed.

Drawing on those experiences has allowed me to envision a unit on Dorothy Wordsworth’s *Grasmere Journals* and her poetry. The journals and poems are short enough that this project could be adapted with slight revisions for a range of period courses, including a Romanticism survey, but I will be describing here how it would operate in the upper-level English course I’ve named “Romanticism and Feminist Disability Studies.” The course is framed by two key critical insights: first, Anne Mellor’s observation that what Romantic scholars have long termed “Romanticism” is, in fact, a “masculine Romanticism” that is shadowed by an unrecognized “feminine Romanticism”; and second, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s call to “transform” feminist theory by “integrating disability” (333). Students in this course will use Romantic texts to test Garland-Thomson’s claim that “integrating disability as a category of analysis and a system of representation deepens, expands, and challenges feminist theory” (335). In addition to addressing these important critical questions, approaching Romanticism from the intersection of gender and ability also addresses two key concerns raised by David Higgins and Sharon Ruston’s recent volume, *Teaching Romanticism*: Romanticism’s increasingly marginal position in the academy and the difficulty of bringing new works and authors recovered by Romantic scholars into the classroom. Each unit in “Romanticism and Feminist Disability Studies” pairs Romantic women authors with both contextual readings from their contemporaries and twentieth- and twenty-first century texts on related issues. Reading Mary Wollstonecraft alongside Carole Pateman’s work on what she calls “Wollstonecraft’s dilemma” in the modern social safety net, or the cancer plot in Edgeworth’s *Belinda* alongside Susan Sontag’s *Illness as Metaphor*,encourages a fuller understanding of both historical moments. In so doing, it reveals the value of the study of Romanticism for students with a range of academic and professional goals and interests.

Bringing disability studies into the Romanticism classroom also helps to close what Higgins and Ruston call the “gap between teaching and research” in the field (2). Disability studies has only recently begun to make its mark on the period, with first book-length project on Romanticism and disability, Michael Bradshaw’s *Disabling Romanticism*, appearing in 2016. Taking up these authors in both their own and our historical moments allows “Romanticism and Feminist Disability Studies” to engage in practices that Bradshaw and Essaka Joshua call for in their volume. Reading Romantic authors as part of a canon of disability literature works to disable Romantic texts, which Joshua and Bradshaw describe as, in part, an effort to both produce “new reading[s]” of texts and “un-reading[s]” of traditional accounts of the canon (1-2). By tracing the echoes and anticipations of contemporary conversations about health and disability in Romantic-era texts, “Romanticism and Feminist Disability Studies” also counters the critical tendency towards “symbolic appropriation,” that is, the tendency of critics to read representations of disability as symbols meant to describe other, supposedly more foundational or elemental experiences.

The course will come to Dorothy Wordsworth after units on Wollstonecraft, Edgeworth, and Romantic and twentieth-century notions of independence and health. Students will read Wordsworth’s *Grasmere Journals* alongside relevant poems by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. For example, students of course will read William’s “Resolution and Independence” alongside Wordsworth’s journal entry on the leech gatherer. But in an in-class exercise I have used in the past, I will break students into small groups to discuss the poem in the context of different entries from the journal. Some will examine her account of the encounter with the leech gatherer. Other groups will look at later diary entries that account for the composition of the poem. On May 4, 1802, Wordsworth tucks an account of transcribing part of the poem into a longer description of William’s physical and mental dis-ease:

William had slept pretty well & though he went to bed nervous & jaded in the extreme he rose refreshed. I wrote the Leech Gatherer for him which he had begun the night before & of which he wrote several stanzas in bed this Monday morning. (94)

At the end of the entry, Wordsworth describes herself “repeat[ing] verses to William while he was in bed” until “he was soothed & I left him” (96). A third group will take up an entry from three days later, wherein Wordsworth notes that William takes advantage of his improved state to finish the poem:

William had slept uncommonly well so, feeling himself strong, he fell to work at the Leech gatherer—he wrote hard at it till dinner time, then he gave over tired to death—he had finished the poem. I was making Derwents frocks. (97)

In the past, students who have read the more well-known entry have discussed Wordsworth’s role in cataloging their walks and raised the question of the value of that work to William’s poetry. Groups reading the other entries considered a broader conception of Romantic collaboration that accounted for not only labor of composing and recording but also how that labor is at times complicated by and at others enabled by the day-to-day encroachment of bodily needs, illness, and mental distress. After I brought the class back together to share their journal entries and their insights, I asked them to speculate about which journal entry is most often published with William’s poem. When students had a guess—and most of them guessed correctly—we talked about how our understanding of authorship and literary labor is still shaped by particular notions of gender and bodily ability. In isolation, the exercise was useful for asking students to think about William’s poetry beyond the text as both the output of labor from a range of historical figures and as a document that we, as a class, do not receive in a vacuum.

In “Romanticism and Feminist Disability Studies,” this conversation will connect to the larger questions of how notions of gender and bodily ability have shaped critical understandings of Romantic literature. Putting this conversation in the context of a sustained reading of the entire *Grasmere Journals* also will provide students with an opportunity to further consider William’s poetry as, in part, an editorial project. In the traditional Romanticism classroom, the poem and Wordsworth’s account of the leech gatherer enjoy a mutually supporting relationship in that his poem justifies the presence of her journal entry on the syllabus. But absent William’s poem, the “old man almost double” described in Wordsworth’s journal bears no immediately apparent difference or distinction from the many other itinerate, often disabled figures that appear throughout her journals (23). In class, students are prompted to consider why this figure struck William, in particular. In discussion boards, I will ask students to produce poetic or prose works that build from any of the other arguably equally striking figures that populate Wordsworth’s journal. Such exercises raise another important question for this class: how does the tendency to anthologize Wordsworth’s journal entry and “Resolution and Independence” in tandem shape our understanding of both Wordsworth’s and her brother’s intellectual work?

Students reading the full *Grasmere Journals* can also consider the journals as an account of what critics have identified as a particularly feminine Romantic subjectivity and as a disabled Romantic subjectivity. After we read and discussed the journals together, I would assign different groups within the class different secondary essays about the journals. In class, we would pair/square/share to discuss how these critical accounts of Wordsworth’s journals reveal what Joshua and Bradshaw call the “symbolic appropriation” of disability to serve other critical purposes (1). Chief among those is what Mellor identifies as feminist readings of Wordsworth’s late-life cognitive disability as an “unconscious rebellion” against the domestic demands placed upon her (166). But even for Mellor, Wordsworth’s dementia becomes “a triumph of the relational self” in that it was supported by Mary Hutchinson Wordsworth’s thoughtful care in ways that reciprocated Wordsworth’s earlier commitment to caring for others (167). In “Romanticism and Feminist Disability Studies,” students will consider in individual writing and in group discussion whether these critics, in figuring gender as the primary source for Wordsworth’s fluid conception of identity and dementia as its symbolically resonant end point, implicitly ignore her experiences of disease and disability as disease and disability.[[2]](#footnote-3)

But while some students will read and respond to critical works that understand Wordsworth’s late-life cognitive impairments as an expression of her more elemental experience of gender, others will be assigned secondary readings that interpret disability as lack or as an absence of the self.[[3]](#footnote-4) These accounts of disability as lack do not map perfectly onto Wordsworth’s actual collected writings. While she does, at times, express frustration, hopelessness, and even something like depression in response to her physical and mental impairments, and some of her friends and family, in their own writing, connect those expressions with a fundamental change or loss of self, those moments are interspersed with other moments of enjoyment both in and out of her sickbed. This tension between Wordsworth’s own experience of impairment within her familial community and the critical accounting of it provides a coherent account of the ways that discriminatory and exclusionary narratives about disability, which were coming into being in the Romantic era, came to dominate the discourse in the succeeding decades.

In untangling Wordsworth’s journals from this critical accounting of them, students see how these critical accounts can unwittingly reinforce notions of health and wellness that Wordsworth’s journals actually challenge and complicate. Through this work, students participate in Bradshaw and Joshua’s project of “disabling” Romantic texts, which requires, in their view, both “new reading[s]” of texts and “un-reading[s]” of traditional accounts of the canon (1-2). But the fact that much of Wordsworth’s late writing is available only as mediated through these secondary sources in academic journals or perhaps as pdfs available to those with institutional access to JStor speaks to two other issues of interest to scholars and students of Romanticism and disability: what is available to be read? And for whom is it available? These questions will allow the course’s major editorial assignment, with which the Wordsworth unit culminates, to arise naturally from our conversations about Wordsworth and her critics.

The class readings of both Wordsworth and her critics ultimately inform a final project in which students will propose—and make a prototype for—an online, accessible collection of Wordsworth’s work. Such a project, thoughtfully considered and executed, can foreground the ways that Wordsworth challenges our notions of health and wellbeing. This work requires students to develop a strong understanding of not only Wordsworth’s writing and its history of reception and dissemination, but also of important practices in digital publishing and web accessibility. Through this project, students will engage with disability studies not only as a set of analytical tools but also as a set of ethical concerns and practices that bridges the gap between scholars and students and breaks down barriers that can keep disabled people from entering our conversations. This assignment draws on Stephen C. Behrendt’s useful template for doing recovery work with students. Behrendt provides “hands-on opportunities to do some of the things we do as scholars” through assignments in which students participate in the work of recovery and publication (123). His students transcribe microfiche or pdf copies of unpublished eighteenth-century work to prepare them for online publication. Although he does not frame them as such, these assignments are in effect access labor. Microfiche in academic libraries present physical barriers to able-bodied and disabled scholars alike. PDFs remove many of the physical barriers incurred through geographical distance and the built environment, but they remain difficult to access for blind and low-vision scholars. By transcribing them, Behrendt’s students potentially make these texts more accessible not only to the data mining programs of digital humanities scholars and readers geographically separated from the library’s physical collections, but also to readers, students, and scholars who rely on screen readers or other accessibility technology to interact with digital materials. Behrendt’s assignments, then, offer a useful template for assignments that explore the potential access gains born from online publishing.[[4]](#footnote-5)

In undertaking such a project, students must not only recognize but also interrogate the critical and scholarly practices that shape our field. To prepare for such a project, students will assess the usability and accessibility of existing online publications. The [William Blake Archive](http://www.blakearchive.org/) enables comparisons across multiple extant versions of Blake’s illuminated works. The [Shelley/Godwin Archive](http://shelleygodwinarchive.org/) offers a distinct approach that highlights different authors’ additions and edits to manuscript materials. Dickinson College’s [online edition of Michael Field’s poetry](https://michaelfield.dickinson.edu/) uses the web to address a different challenge: how to offer twenty-first-century readers the context they need to make sense of Field’s ekphrastic poetry while maintaining something like the simple, unadorned white pages on which Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper chose to publish their work as “Michael Field.” Each of these online publications—and there are of course numerous others—offers students examples of web design choices that variously increase and limit access to information. Students—very much a key target market for these repositories—should be empowered to draw on their reactions to these texts to build a set of guiding design principles to shape a strategy for effectively publishing some piece of Wordsworth’s writing online.

After analyzing their own experience with these web-based publications, students will test them using WebAIM’s free [Web Accessibility Evaluation Tool](https://wave.webaim.org/) (WAVE), which tests any website for common accessibility failures. The program does not, of course, replace full usability testing with disabled users, but it does expose and display the many ways in which common web design decisions can create barriers to access (and proposes solutions to those problems). In the past, when my students have used WAVE to examine the accessibility of websites, they have found that much of what they consider to be generally bad web design is also inaccessible for disabled users.[[5]](#footnote-6) But they also find unexpected (and counter-intuitive) barriers in seemingly benign design choices. For example, a student once discovered that the “Buy Now” button on a major retailer’s website was hidden for screen readers, essentially making it impossible for the website to sell products to blind or low-vision visitors. I also often require students in my composition courses to use WAVE to assess the web design and digital writing they have done in the class; in this context, accessibility testing becomes an opportunity to consider audience, revision, and strategies for multimodal (re)composition. In “Romanticism and Feminist Disability Studies,” it would serve a similar purpose, but instead of only revising their own work, students will revise the scholarly practices of a wider field and use their findings to produce plans for new modes of publishing primary documents that would enable scholars to understand more fully the intersections of disability and gender in the Romantic period.

After comparing the strategies and outcomes at work in a range of online publications, students will work individually or collaboratively in small groups to produce a guiding ethic and rationale for e-publishing some of Wordsworth’s work in ways that increase accessibility for all readers. While students who code may use those skills on this project, groups without aspiring computer scientists can use tools like Wordpress or Omeka to create functional, accessible prototypes without digging into the code. This work would be informed by their research on previous approaches to publishing Wordsworth’s writing, from their initial appearance in biographies of William through the abridged versions of Wordsworth’s writing in the early twentieth century to Levin and Woof’s distinct approaches to scholarly editions in recent years. In order to engage critically with that history, students must connect their proposed editorial work to conversations about how gender and disability have shaped both the archive and its readers. Conversations about physical and institutional access allow students to derive an ethic of or rationale for new online editions of Wordsworth’s work. In addition to a traditional proposal, which includes both a rationale and an annotated bibliography of critical and editorial publications their project draws on and/or responds to, students produce a proof-of-concept page for a piece of Wordsworth’s writing—perhaps a set of poems and their various revisions or a series of journal entries.

Such an assignment could serve as a step on the path towards something like what Behrendt describes, in which students produce materials ready for online publishing, while also showing how such projects increase the accessibility of those materials. The project will ask students to address the lack of unmediated access to texts important to the literary history of disability. In so doing, it will reinforce many of the key ideas and questions raised by taking up Wordsworth as a figure of interest to the field. Scholars in disability studies and Romantic studies have done much work to recover marginalized authors and to reconsider history and literary production accordingly, but much work remains to be done. Attuning students to the limits of Wordsworth’s current archive serves as useful spur for students who now more than ever can be empowered to participate in that recovery work.

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1. Medical doctor Iris Gibson wrote an appendix for Robert Gittings and Jo Manton’s biography (1985). He offers a retrospective diagnosis that identifies Dorothy’s mental illness as “pre-senile dementia” (282). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Examples of this sort of reading include Robert Gittings and Jo Manton’s biography, which describes Wordsworth’s late poem “Thoughts on my Sickbed” as “the ghost voice of her true self, speaking from the ruins” (276). For Gittings and Manton, the act of recognizing that true self becomes “almost unbearably sad” (276). Their reaction to Wordsworth’s late-life mental health is emblematic of scholars’ general tendency to enforce a boundary between Dorothy’s more neurotypical mind from her mentally impaired mind. Gibson suggests that Dorothy’s habitual repetition of lines of poetry are “islets” into her previous mind (282). That binary distinction between the real Dorothy and the mentally impaired Dorothy echoes a similar divide that appears in Carl H. Ketcham’s 1978 summary of Dorothy’s late journals. Citing a bit of verse that appears late in her writing, Ketcham calls it the “appalling end of the more than thirty-five years of close intellectual and imaginative companionship recorded in Dorothy’s journals” (10). Pamela Woof’s more recent assessment of Wordsworth’s late-life journal pays explicit attention to her writing on illness and death, but nonetheless justifies her interest in that late writing in opposition to disability when she asserts that “[t]he reader knows that even in these final years there was more than imbecility to Dorothy Wordsworth” (175). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. In this way, these assignments participate in a recent move in disability studies pedagogy, in which access labor become formal classroom assignments. Georgina Kleege and Scott Wallin describe a series of writing assignments that ask students to participate in the production of audio description of images and video for blind and low-vision users. Such assignments require students to engage with debates about best practices and intent and then publish their resulting work online. The assignments, then, ask students to not only engage with but participate in the ongoing conversation around online access. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. In addition to highlighting unconsidered issues with accessibility, WAVE aids students in proofreading their web writing and design by catching basic issues like mis-used headline formatting or missing alternative text for images. Addressing these access issues also offers practice in writing, more generally. Proper use of headlines in web texts is better for both screen readers and visual design. In crafting effective alternative text for their images, students must both interpret the image and reflect on its purpose in their text. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)