Plan of Study

A recent article by Kathleen Bode calling for a "data-rich literary history" exemplifies a current shift in digital humanities research. Bode critiques pioneers of distant reading and literary macroanalysis Franco Moretti and Matthew Jockers, arguing that they too often disregard the provenance of the thousands of texts they use as proof of their arguments. As an alternative, Bode calls for an integration of computational research with the textual scholarship of fields like bibliography and book history. My dissertation answers this call by systematically researching all texts printed in England between the years 1789 to 1799, to redefine our understanding of the definitive works of this decade.

Late eighteenth-century literary production, as the writers of the period anxiously observed, was characterized by incredible volume. In the 1730s, the English Short Title Catalogue (ESTC) records roughly 16,000 titles published in England: this number triples, to 48,000 works, in the 1790s. The 1790s saw the emergence of popular novels, Romantic poetry, and radical political philosophy. In this context of what Michael Gamer describes as "exploding literacy rates accompanied by an increasingly bewildering and diverse collection of reading audiences" (32), it became ever harder to make sense of the literary world as a cohesive whole, and a selective literary canon began to take form.

My dissertation consists of two major experiments. The first experiment centres on the books and booklets (which I collectively term "titles") printed during this decade, to identify which titles are most popular by mutiple metrics, and to challenge past oversimplifications of popularity. I write my own small computer programs to combine the 1790s holdings of twenty databases. Because these programs do not need to be fully developed into software for general use, I can write them quickly and independently. I will compare which titles appear in which archives, identify reprints, and use topic modelling to categorize their general contents. This work will allow me to identify material (such as sermons) that has been systematically excluded from specialized digital archives, revealing how these archives re-inscribe a literary canon. This phase of the project has completed data collection and begun experimentation; analysis will be complete by March 2019.

The OGS would therefore primarily fund the second experiment, which will occupy the fifth year of my five-year PhD program. This experiment turns from texts to their makers, undertaking a comprehensive mapping focused on persons, rather than titles. In addition to distinguishing between 'high' and 'low' literary content, the 1790s saw a distinction between 'mainstream' and 'marginal' (usually politically radical) writers and publishers. However, the nature of the radicals' marginalization is in question. Building off of existing resources like the British Book Trade Index database and Linked Open Data frameworks, I will create a network graph of all authors, publishers, and printers operating in England 1789 to 1799. The primary technical challenge to this project, as in the first project, will be rendering existing data interoperable; I will again write small programs to adapt and manipulate this data until it is possible to visualize the social network underlying a decade of print production. I will then examine this social network to see if it does, indeed, display a distinct 'mainstream'. The graph may reveal one large interconnected network, or several separate networks of varying sizes; these networks may consist of highly distinct clusters, or evenly interconnected webs. Drawing on mathematical graph theory, I will analyse the shape the network ultimately displays, to either reaffirm or redefine our understanding of eighteenth century radical print culture.

The project as a whole builds off of scholarship in both the digital humanities and bibliography, providing missing links between disparate fragments of information. By correlating this information, I can revise our understanding of the most popular works during a volatile decade of literary history, and establish a methodology for future computational work.

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