Lawrence Evalyn

Dissertation proposal

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**The Digital Archive and Print Politics, 1789–99**

My dissertation seeks to determine, in as minute detail as possible, what the print landscape in England 1789-99 was actually like — in contrast to the version that is presented in filtered and interpreted literary histories, built up by scholars or later generations of writers — and how this print landscape is represented now, in current digital archives. My first chapter establishes the vocabulary and theoretical frameworks of the dissertation. Chapter two turns a critical eye on existing digital archives that feature material printed in the 1790s. Chapter three uses these corpora of 1790s literature to examine the idea of “popularity” as it is manifested by print culture. Chapter four introduces a second substantial experiment, a comprehensive mapping of the social networks underlying print production during the decade. Chapter five uses these networks to compare mainstream and non-mainstream printing practices. A possible afterword or coda may discuss the role of the Gothic across the textual landscape.

My first chapter sets out the vocabulary and theoretical frameworks of the dissertation, with an explanation of why I have chosen to focus on the 1790s. As this chapter will discuss, I follow the work of scholars like T.L. Cowan and Jasmine Rault in understanding my research as a kind of reparative work on archives. I hope to locate my project alongside others in the DH field, led by scholars who are seeking to develop less “extractive” and more anti-oppressive digital humanities methodologies. My first chapter will present a humanistic critique of the essentialist tendencies of some work in the field of DH, and discuss the pitfalls I have attempted to avoid in my own methodology. In discussing my methods, I will take up Johanna Drucker’s vocabulary of “capta,” rather than “data,” to emphasize that records are created, shaped by choices and by constraints, rather than neutrally “given.” I will apply insights from the emerging field of critical algorithm studies to reflect on the code I have written for the project, and the importance of engaging with digital projects at the level of code. I will also discuss my own preferred vocabulary around experiment design (modelling, sensitivity, fruitfulness), and its debts to Willard McCarty. Turning, then, from my tools to my materials, this chapter will also set out the limits to the project — material printed in Great Britain between January 1, 1789 and December 31, 1799 (inclusive). I will describe the importance of my selection of this this eleven-year “decade” to test my methods. A brief literature review of the literary output of the 1790s will highlight a decade-long focus on politics, the Gothic, and women writers. Finally, this chapter will bring together modern theories of the archive and my eighteenth century materials, by discussing the 1790s as a literary moment in which some significant literary canons begin to take form. When eighteenth century editors began to collect an English vernacular tradition posited against a Classical past and a French present, the “archive” of literary history was filtered into “canons” of texts, with connotations of merit and implications for national identity. The divergence between archive and canon motivates my return to the archive.

Chapter two takes up contemporary digital archives directly, examining corpora of eighteenth-century literature through the same critical lens by which anthologies and classroom teaching are often scrutinized. It makes the case that digital archives can implicitly shape scholarly research, and begins the process of revealing and interrogating their invisible assumptions. The chapter begins with a task somewhere between a literature review and a scientific meta-analysis. My first goal will be to survey as broadly as possible the accessible mass holdings of eighteenth-century texts (all those containing at least 100 works from the 1790s): simply putting all of this information in one place will be a useful way to review it. Adding a discussion of each archive’s selection criteria will bring it into the realm of a meta-analysis. I expect to find systematic exclusions where archives are investing more labour in their holdings, with necessarily narrower selections as they move from bibliographic data to facsimiles to scholarly transcripts. To contextualize these decisions about inclusion, I will research the history of how each corpus was formed. I will discuss and theorize the difficulties involved in researching these histories: drawing on, for example, my experience with HathiTrust’s codebase, I will critique the assumption that digital resources make all information transparent and accessible. Returning to the actual contents of each archive, I will discuss the nature of their exclusions, and consider paths to greater inclusivity. Then I will synthesize these disparate sources of texts and metadata, a substantial technical challenge, to see how the task may be accomplished, and to see what correlations between archives might illuminate the decade. I am particularly curious whether even one text will appear in all corpora, and, if so, which one it will be. Whichever texts appear most persistently will form the basis of my “case study” in this chapter. The second chapter thus establishes the corpora which will drive my argument in chapter three, and will shape the later phases of my research in chapters four and five.

Chapter three expands upon the findings of the experiment carried out in chapter two, to examine popularity as it manifests in print culture. Influenced by Lesser and Farmer’s articulation of “structures of popularity,” I will consider popularity in terms of total number of editions, frequency of reprinting, and market share.[[1]](#footnote-1) After determining how to calculate each of these metrics, I will ask: what was most popular during the decade, according to my corpora? How do the corpora differ in their answers, and why? I am particularly curious to see the place that chapbooks and religious tracts have in each corpus. My preliminary research suggests that many of the most reprinted works will substantially pre-date the 1790s in their composition. Accordingly, taking up David Brewer’s challenge to account for the increased “footprint” of some texts beyond the moment of their original publication, I will also pay attention to works originally written before the 1790s which nonetheless can be considered important “1790s literature” due to prominent reprinting. This inquiry’s first question is one of discovery: what works resurface in the 1790s? Its next question is one of close-reading and historical context: what makes them seem newly relevant? Restricting my inquiry only to the 1790s rather than nineteenth-century legacies, I will use my corpora to compare the publication output of various literary celebrities over the course of the decade. In addition to looking at the raw publication counts in the corpora defined in chapter two, I am currently exploring ways to use mentions in reviews and news articles to track prominence and reputation. The chapter as a whole, then, presents a sustained study of the relative popularity of the most prominent works printed during the 1790s, and seeks to answer how these prominent works might affect what we define as “popular literature”.

Chapter four introduces my second major experiment, a mapping of the social world of print production 1789-99. As in chapter two, it will be a substantial technical and research project simply to recover contemporary printing practices; this time, rather than asking what was printed, I will ask who it was printed by. A great deal of scholarly work already exists on eighteenth century print culture.[[2]](#footnote-2) My project will consult this scholarship to extract and encode connections between authors, printers, and publishers (but not patrons, readers, or other persons not immediately involved in the production of texts) in order to synthesize the implicit social networks underlying 1790s print production. I will begin my research for this chapter by encoding only a few existing studies, in order to evaluate the feasibility of my method at scale. It is possible that, rather than directly consulting the more richly historically-informed work of other scholars, I will instead fall back on inferring networks from the author and publisher metadata included with the corpora examined in chapters two and three. The resulting chapter will explain my methodology and its assumptions, and will provide a rich description of my resulting network graph. The graph I create 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, the chapter will explain the implications of whichever shape the network ultimately displays. It will also present an overview of the people I identify as the “major players” in the publishing world of the 1790s, both mathematically (looking for nodes with various kinds of centrality) and in the scholarship.

Having recaptured these complex networks in some depth, I can then examine them, in chapter five, for their relation to our current understanding of mainstream and radical — or as I am terming them “mainstream” and “non-mainstream” — printing circles. My network graphs will model individual political affiliation as a complex, socially defined practice rather than a taxonomy of concrete and unchanging ideological stances. This chapter will look for traces of affiliation in the print practices of publishers and of authors. I will consider individual printers with political allegiances, as in Dissenting societies, radical publishers, correspondence societies. This will then enable me to consider authors’ strategic choices as they publish with different printers. Having identified radical elements in the publishing world, I will interrogate the radicals’ claims to marginalization. I suspect that I might find that they were not as socially estranged from the mainstream as they describe themselves, and that their printed works may accordingly have been less marginal. I will discuss alternative print markets and alternative circulation, and what kind of “alternatives” they offer to the mainstream. The circulation of works in manuscript presents me two challenges which will be discussed here. The first challenge is methodological: the circulation of manuscripts clearly occurred, and may have constituted “publication” within social circles, but manuscripts fall outside my purview. This chapter will therefore discuss the nature and rough shape of the gap which the exclusion of manuscript works leaves in my study. The second task of this chapter is more theoretical: as queer and decolonial DH scholars note, there is an ethical choice implicated in the decision to systematically discover, collect, and expose communities which intentionally operated below the notice of state observation. Historical distance prevents me from worrying about causing direct harm through my work, but nonetheless I will critically interrogate my own research practices and contextualize my choices within the horizon of expectations of the radical circles I (and other scholars) expose. Finally, having discussed the networks of radical and mainstream publishing in the 1790s, I will also compare the position of radical publishers in the 1790s with their status in the corpora discussed in chapters two and three (where they may in fact be marginalized; I expect to find conservative works overrepresented in the corpora). Together, these approaches will further complicate the story of popularity which the dissertation challenges elsewhere, by suggesting ways to reassess of the popularity of radical works.

A potential coda or afterword could build on the work of Robert Miles and others to describe the role of the Gothic as a trans-generic mode which can appear across all print production (assuming that turns out to be true, of course.) Some of my earlier work suggests that Gothic modes of writing, unlike most literary content, can be “spotted” computationally. Since the Gothic operates by means of distinctive tropes and sensory appeals, the Gothic parts of a history and the Gothic parts of a picaresque can be distinguished from the non-Gothic parts of each by computational methods that could not distinguish a history from a picaresque. (Importantly, stylometric methods are not able to distinguish a parody of the Gothic from a “real” Gothic; as I theorize and interpret my findings, then, I would take up Horner and Zlosnik’s work on Gothic humour to discuss the problem of parody in taxonomy.) This final section could use a stylometric approach to identify and then search for “Gothic vocabularies” in full texts, computationally, in order to quantify the reach of the Gothic across my corpora. How many works can be identified as having Gothic influences? What kinds of literary production are most resistant to the Gothic? Does the Gothic appear differently in mainstream vs radical presses? This afterword would sketch out a preliminary map of the Gothic in the print world of the 1790s. This closing section would thus cite and build upon my prior work with the Gothic, in the context of the 1790s as a period when the penetration of Gothic modes into mainstream print had particularly complex political stakes.

1. Lesser and Farmer also include profitability as one of the four metrics relevant to popularity in the book trade, but profitability is beyond the current scope of this project. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I would likely begin here with Jon Klancher, *The Making of English Reading Audiences, 1790-1832*; Marcus Wood, *Radical Satire and Print Culture, 1790-1822*; and David Worrall, *Radical Culture: Discourse, Resistance, and Surveillance, 1790-1820*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)