The project described here featured in a unit on *Northanger Abbey* that I taught in Fall 2020 for an advanced high-school English class. In place of a conventional essay, the students and I co-authored an article on an obscure 1795 poem called “Bath: An Adumbration in Rhyme” – a playful satire of the city of Bath by the minor poet John Matthews (1755-1826). That article, [“A Day in Catherine Morland’s Bath,”](https://janeaustensworld.com/2021/01/04/a-day-in-catherine-morlands-bath/) went live on the popular blog *Jane Austen’s World* in January, 2021. After the class ended, seven of the thirteen students worked with me on the next stage of the project – a new critical edition of the poem designed specifically for readers of Jane Austen. That book was published in August 2021 and can be downloaded for free [here](https://pixeliapublishing.org/bath-an-adumbration-in-rhyme/). Below, I’ll explain how we went about researching and writing as a group and close with some brief thoughts regarding the benefits of this sort of student-teacher collaboration.

**The Class**

This project grew out of a senior-level elective called “Love Stories” at Stanford Online High School, where I teach English. The class sought to trace the evolution of love stories in English literature from the Middle Ages through the Romantic period. Our unit on *Northanger Abbey* was a chance to explore how the novel tradition brought love stories back “down to earth” from their medieval and Renaissance heights – whether through satire or realism, or through a focus on middle-class, non-heroic characters. You can view the [Canvas page for the class here](https://spcs.instructure.com/courses/6215).

**The Project**

I found the poem “Bath: An Adumbration in Rhyme” in ECCO the summer before I taught the class. The poem is a brief, humorous tour of Bath, with an emphasis on the opportunities for romance and matchmaking that the city afforded. My initial plan was simply to have students read the poem as a way of learning about the setting of *Northanger Abbey* (both the poem and the novel were written mostly or entirely in the 1790s). When I discovered the poem was virtually untouched by scholarship, however, it dawned on me that the students and I could write an original article that used the poem to shed new light on Austen’s Bath novels. By the time the semester began, the “Adumbration” project was central to the aims of the Austen unit and of the course. It was an opportunity to explore the context of *Northanger Abbey* more deeply and, in the process, make a real contribution to literary scholarship, learning the ropes of researching, writing, and editing along the way.

The key to this project was breaking it up into definable steps. Before we began, students had the benefit of a visit from a Stanford librarian, who showed them how to access the university’s online resources, and from Vic Sanborn, editor of *Jane Austen’s World*,who spoke about writing for a mixed popular-academic audience. Then, as a group, we brainstormed all the things we would need to do before we could write an informed, relevant article on our poem. These tasks included:

* Researching the life and work of John Matthews
* Transcribing and lightly modernizing the text of the poem (changing long s’s to short ones, for example)
* Learning more about Austen’s time in Bath
* Familiarizing ourselves with other satires of Bath
* Collecting public-domain images of Georgian Bath (caricatures, etc.) for use in our article
* Tracking down and glossing the poem’s many allusions to long-forgotten people, places, and customs

I broke the class into groups of 3-4, with each group responsible for one of the above tasks, except for the final one, to which every group contributed. Then, I fleshed out each of those general tasks with more specific research questions. My students were largely new to this kind of research, and while they certainly did not lack enthusiasm, I discovered early on that the more specific I could be about their research tasks, the more productive their efforts were.

Shortly after class, *Jane Austen’s World* posted our article: a description of a typical day in late Georgian Bath, with John Matthews as our guide. We would quote a section of his poem, and then follow it up with commentary explaining his many allusions and connecting them to *Northanger Abbey*. Here is an excerpt from the article, written mostly by my student Varsha Venkatram.

A page of a book

Description automatically generated with medium confidence

As work was wrapping up on the article, several students (and, admittedly, their teacher) felt there was more to say about Matthews and his “Adumbration.” So, we embarked on an even more ambitious project – creating a critical edition of the poem, specially designed for readers of Jane Austen. That part of the project was accomplished outside class, with about half the students staying on to complete it. The book that we eventually published – *Bath: An Adumbration in Rhyme. A Critical Edition for Readers of Jane Austen* – reintroduced the public to John Matthews and made some original contributions to the study of Jane Austen. Perhaps most importantly, it is the first work to seriously explore Austen’s relationship to the poetic genre of the Bath satire, which was popular in her day and clearly influenced her work. For instance, Isabella Thorpe, Catherine Morland’s superficial friend, has a close parallel in Christopher Anstey’s hugely popular *New Bath Guide* (1766), the poem that launched the fashion of Bath verse satires. Sir Walter Elliot from *Persuasion* is another recognizable character from that tradition – the washed up “macaroni,” or ridiculous man of fashion. These continuities are evidence that Austen was inspired not only by the “great” literature of her day, but by some of the ephemera as well – all the more reason to range widely in our teaching and study of Romantic print culture.

In addition to a biographical and a contextual essay introducing the poem, the book has a unique system of notes, designed by the students. Their idea was to have two columns of notes on the page opposite the text: the first for general commentary, and the second for connections to Austen’s novels. Here is a sample spread.

A page of a book

Description automatically generated with medium confidence

We published the book with Pixelia Publishing, an open-access, non-profit publisher founded by several teachers at our school and headed by Latin and English instructor Tom Hendrickson. Our edition has made, if not waves, at least a few ripples in the world of Austen studies. Positive reviews have appeared in several Austen-focused publications, including *JASNA News*, and another will be appearing here on Romantic Circles later in 2022. Meanwhile, paperback sales have recently topped 100 – a small number in absolute terms, but hugely exciting relative to our modest, tentative hopes. The book is also free for download at pixeliapublishing.org, and our data indicate that a couple hundred readers have found it that way, as well.

**Conclusion**

More and more educators are making the classroom a site for the creation of original, collaborative scholarship – with exciting results. For proof, look no further than the materials of the two winners of this year’s contest. These projects can take many forms – from an edited collection to a curated exhibit to (as in our case) a critical edition. Whatever the case, they have the potential to transform how we teach writing and research. When we collaborate with students, we can show rather than tell. Since we are involved in the project from beginning to end, we can offer guidance whenever challenges arise, rather than merely informing students in post-factum feedback what they *should* have done. And, perhaps most importantly, we stand a chance of showing students what academic work should and can be – not an intellectual performance that one puts on for one’s teacher, but a sincere attempt to inform and persuade an open-minded public.

Here are the links sprinkled through this page, all in one place:

* [“A Day in Catherine Morland’s Bath”](https://janeaustensworld.com/2021/01/04/a-day-in-catherine-morlands-bath/) – the article we published on the blog *Jane Austen’s World*
* [*Bath: An Adumbration in Rhyme, A Critical Edition for Readers of Jane Austen*](https://pixeliapublishing.org/bath-an-adumbration-in-rhyme/)– the book we published that built upon the article
* [The course page for Advanced Topics: Love Stories](https://spcs.instructure.com/courses/6215). You can browse it to see how the project was paced and integrated with our study of *Northanger Abbey*. Some features of the page, such as lectures, may not be publicly accessible.