

## Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



### Flanders, Julia. Women Writers Online

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Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola (1469–1533): Faith, Antiquity,  
and the Witch Hunt

Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola (1469–1533) : Foi, Antiquité et  
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**Flanders, Julia, project dir.**

***Women Writers Online. Database.***

Boston, MA: Northeastern University, 1999. Accessed 17 July 2019.

[wwp.northeastern.edu/wwo](http://wwp.northeastern.edu/wwo).

*Women Writers Online* (WWO) is a full-text database of English texts written by women or represented as women's work, such as the examinations of Anne Askew reported in John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*. It has a broad chronological scope, comprising works written between 1526 and 1850. WWO is published by the Women Writers Project (WWP), which was founded at Brown University in 1988 and moved to Northeastern University in 2013. A few small traces of this move remain on the WWP site—attempting to subscribe to the listserv generated an auto-reply that the request was being forwarded, for example—but these do not seem to affect its accuracy or usability. WWO can be reached from the main WWP site, which also provides a wealth of documentation and contextual information, or through a subscribing institution's library catalogue. Now in its twentieth year, WWO remains an exemplary collaborative transcription and editing project.

The textbase currently includes transcriptions of 416 texts, with around twenty-five new texts added annually in recent years. These transcriptions are best understood as minimally annotated documentary editions; neither facsimile images nor extended commentary are included within WWO (though both appear in the WWP's lovely online exhibition, *Women Writers in Context*), and the transcriptions record individual works without the introduction of variants or emendations as one would expect in a critical edition. WWO does not claim to be comprehensive but rather aims to capture a "substantial subset" of pre-Victorian women's writing. As such, its transcription priorities evolve based on the interests of database users, project researchers, and the WWP steering committee. A list of forthcoming texts and the status of each is also available. To date, WWO has focused on printed works, with a separate WWP pilot project refining methods for incorporating manuscript material. WWO's current editorial and technical practices are thoroughly documented on the WWP site ("About: Methods: Editorial Methods"). Texts are transcribed and encoded in TEI-conformant (if extended) XML ("About: Methods: Schema Customization"). The underlying XML is not directly viewable from the WWO interface, but the files are available from the project team for research purposes

upon request. Users can download version-controlled metadata records in MARC and MARCXML directly from the WWP website, where they are accompanied by recommendations for librarians at subscribing institutions (“Women Writers Online: Textbase Records and Metadata”).

Although WWO is a subscription service, license fees are reasonable: individual subscriptions cost \$50 (discounted to \$25 for students), and institutional subscriptions are priced on a sliding scale that accounts for the kind of organization and the number of users anticipated. Prices are published not only for colleges and universities but also for schools, public libraries, and other organizations, suggesting that WWO hopes to reach a wide audience, with more than 220 institutions that have already subscribed (“About: History”). Free trials are available to individuals and institutions. For at least the last two years, the site has been freely accessible during March for Women’s History Month.

WWO’s user interface is elegant and intuitive, with reading, searching, and browsing all in a single space (“Help: Using the WWO Interface”). The left scan column includes simple keyword searching (with an “Advanced search” link that generates a pop-up for more targeted searches), faceted filters, and a checkbox to “Show original typographical features,” such as long “s” and non-regularized “u”/“v.” The main content column includes “Results”: a list of all 416 texts, initially, that is responsive to changes in the left column. These results are also visualized in a narrow vertical timeline just to the right, and clicking on any of the data points further refines the results. One views a text by clicking its title in the “Results pane,” which generates a new column to the right of the timeline and shrinks the two leftmost panes somewhat. The reading pane presents texts in a clear serif font, and clicking a small icon expands the text area relative to the full width of the window. The site works well on mobile devices; although it was a bit cramped on my iPhone XR in portrait orientation, it was surprisingly usable in landscape, and presented no challenges on an iPad. I could print the text directly from Chrome and Firefox, but Safari users may need to copy and paste texts into a word processor or text editor to create hard copies or PDFs for teaching or annotation.

WWO is an invaluable starting point for discovering and exploring women’s writing through specific themes, time periods, or authors. Because annotations are minimal, it might not be an obvious source of teaching texts, but the WWP website offers helpful ideas about how it might be used effectively in the classroom. Similarly, scholars interested in specific works

or authors will likely be inclined to seek out the original documents, critical editions, or both after consulting the *WWO* texts. Alas, finding these original documents may prove tricky: although the documentation says that the *WWP* records information about the source copy used for each transcription, I could not find it anywhere in *WWO* or in the downloadable MARC records, which leads me to believe that this metadata is recorded in the XML transcription files but not displayed in the current interface. This is doubly unfortunate because the team has taken the time to transcribe and mark up copy-specific details like annotations that users may wish to study further. For example, the transcription of Lady Mary Wroth's *Urania* includes ownership inscriptions identifying Ann Morris, Roger Jones, and David Phillips, but the *WWO* user interface does not make it clear that this copy is held at the Folger Shakespeare Library (STC 26051 copy 1). Perhaps this information could be displayed more prominently in future versions of the interface. The encoded files themselves would seem to represent an exciting corpus for computational approaches, and the *WWP* Lab section of the *WWP* site demonstrates several possibilities ("Women Writers Online: *WWP* Lab"). However, unlike the *WWP*'s *Women Writers in Review* (*WWiR*) site, *WWO* does not offer an API, perhaps because of licensing restrictions. One must email the project staff directly to request access, which may inhibit experimentation.

These small quibbles aside, *WWO* is an important resource for scholars, students, teachers, and others interested in pre-1850 women's writing and women's history in the Anglophone world, produced by one of the most long-standing and preeminent projects in the digital humanities. *WWP*'s methodological and theoretical rigour, and its generosity in making its schemas and other materials freely available, cannot be understated. I look forward to seeing how *WWO* continues to evolve and to encouraging students to explore its riches.

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