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Digital Resource Reviews / Comptes rendus sur les ressources numériques[1]

Introduction: Special Issue, Women's Authorial Agency and Print Culture

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Digital projects in early modern studies are contributing to the revitalization of fields such as cultural history, literary studies, and women's studies. These areas of research share commonalities and intersectionalities that are worthy of investigation and review to inform future directions in early modern history. This special issue of *Early Modern Digital Review* brings together inspiring projects that address the impact of women's writing, authorial agency, and broader issues pertaining to print culture in early modern England and beyond. The reviewed projects look at literary print culture through the lenses of quantitative and qualitative data analysis, all the while investigating the impact of individual authors and intellectual groups through network analysis. The projects shed light on transnational cultural exchanges, notably by investigating book ownership, literary reception, and the circulation of ideas. In their unique way, each project invites reflections on the limits of borders, from the margins of the printed page to the intellectual debates of the Republic of Letters, to the ideological stances of pan-European recusants. Women writers and book collectors—traditionally underrepresented and undervalued historical figures—are featured through *Women Writers Online* (*WWO*), The Reception and Circulation of Early Modern Women's Writing (RECIRC), *Margaret Cavendish's Poems & Fancies* (*MCPF*), and Private Libraries of the Renaissance (PLRE). The two other reviewed projects, The Recusant Print Network Project and Mapping the Republic of Letters, draw attention to the political, ideological, and religious aspects of the written word through a variety of documents and case studies. Through each of these projects, users can search for traces of women's authorial agency and, in a broader sense, for tangible proof of women's involvement in early modern society.

1. These reviews are published in collaboration with *Early Modern Digital Review*. They also appear in vol. 2, no. 4 (2019) of *EMDR* (emdr.itercommunity.org).

As contemporary readers and researchers of a historical period, we must look beyond dichotomies and gendered divisions of power. One way of doing so is to seek out how early modern women established themselves in society by embracing the written word and navigating the networks of print culture. By investigating markers of women's innate power (agency), and deliberate acts of empowerment (agentic practices), the featured research projects highlight women's accomplishments and illustrate that female participation in cultural and scientific networks was both visible and intentional. These projects address unique aspects of women's authorial agency through the lens of early modern print culture as it is refracted or mediated by the modern scope of digital humanities. Each project thus points to methodological pursuits for future avenues in the study of early modern women, informing on how learned people networked through writing (Mapping the Republic of Letters), which authors were read (RECIRC), which books were collected (PLRE), and how ideology prevailed in the dissemination of knowledge (Recusant Print Network).

In her review of *Women Writers Online*, Erin McCarthy stresses that the full-text database is a useful starting point for research on women's writing prior to 1850. The project website even includes syllabi, lesson plans, and assignments meant to transform historical literary materials into modern teaching applications. Moving the debate on women's authorial agency and representation towards a discussion on editorial practices, Lara Dodds addresses how Liza Blake's digital critical edition of *Margaret Cavendish's Poems & Fancies* will allow researchers to reflect on the ways Cavendish's *Poems and Fancies* was significantly modified between its original publication and second edition. The attentive documentation process of numerous editions opens new avenues for research on the role of editorial and print agents in changing an early modern literary work.

In my review of RECIRC, I evaluate the project's ability to fill historical gaps on women's authorial agency through research outputs that target such questions as who read which texts in what location at what time. I include preliminary findings on the upcoming digital database, giving credit to the research team for documenting data on authors, aristocrats, and nuns alike. PLRE provides us with the ability to expand on questions put forth in RECIRC: to study who read works by female authors, we can look at who owned such books. Olga Stepanova maps out the distinctions between the print and digital databases of the PLRE project. Her review makes a strong case for the relevance

of booklists in research on authorial practices. Book ownership in the early modern period, a seemingly passive act, might in fact be one of the most important ways of documenting fame, hypertexuality, and the circulation of ideas.

Discussions surrounding transnational networks of correspondence and the circulation of ideas, people, and objects are at the forefront of the Mapping the Republic of Letters project. Catherine Medici problematizes data visualization for network analysis, reflecting on the value of visual representations for the study of early modern intellectual debate structures. Her review touches on issues of continuity and how digital projects need to remain accessible and interactive after funding expires. Data visualization is also at the core of The Recusant Print Network Project, and Eilish Gregory touches on the strength of the project's paratextual metadata for visual data analysis in her review. Like PLRE and RECIRC, this project provides researchers with data on book mobility and circulation—echoing the transnational networks of Mapping the Republic of Letters. As Gregory points out, the research outputs pay due attention to female agency within the recusant print culture. In a case study, project director Jordan Sly depicts women of varying status, with lay women and nuns alike documented as authors, readers, and translators.

Common features between these projects include the promotion of research on early modern women's writings and a committed effort to challenging historically accepted notions on the contribution of women and their writings to English and other literary traditions (such as *WWO*, *MCPF*, and RECIRC). PLRE and RECIRC feature structural and statistical understandings of literacy in the early modern period by documenting and analyzing texts and their paratextual and networked contexts (what was read and/or owned, by whom, in which location and at what time). As such, each project helps to situate historical figures' involvement in literary, cultural, and intellectual productions during the Renaissance period. Mapping the Republic of Letters draws together networked archives that reveal transnational literary, political/ideological, and intellectual agency through written words. These projects thus promote real change in research on the visibility and agency of understudied historical figures, women in particular (*WWO* and *MCPF*), but also members of often unacknowledged social classes such as servants (RECIRC publication list and Recusant Print Network essays). The reviewers show us how the projects construct historical analyses of literary data in various forms,

notably by making use of plural digital research methodologies. Appropriate network analyses and data visualizations in case studies further highlight the contributions of lesser studied actors in literary and cultural history.

The impact of digital projects can be measured in terms of quality academic publications and conference papers, but also with regard to local and international collaborative responses to historical inquiry. As users interact with these large-scale projects, they constantly reflect on the timely nature and scientific value of the data and analyses provided. As is often the case in digital humanities methodologies, the projects bring to the forefront opportune discussions surrounding the design and creation of new tools and databases structured around archival data that can be exported for further research. The reviewers here address various issues that can arise during the creation of digital projects, such as durability through stable PDF data visualizations and affordable access fees (*WWO*) to promote continuity.

The projects reviewed in this issue each bring forth crucial elements for the study of women's authorial agency and print culture, as mediated through digital tools and analytical methodologies. They draw attention to the transnational character of early modern intellectual interactions—once again reminding us that national boundaries are meant to be crossed through written and artistic exchanges. In thinking about the future of the field, digital humanities researchers and historians should challenge our understanding of the past while seeking new ways of structuring large data sets, whether quantitative or qualitative. Our academic and archival needs are adapting to new software, which is ephemeral and subscription-based. Attuning to the gaps in the field—from methodological tools to epistemological considerations in adapting to big data—informs interdisciplinary collaborations, public scholarship, and pathways for future archival and analytical practices.