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Women's Early Modern Letters Online [WEMLO]

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In 1748, the Anglo-Saxon scholar Elizabeth Elstob wrote to her friend George Ballard, reporting the loss of her books and manuscripts. She relates how the acquaintance to whom she had entrusted the documents had since travelled to the West Indies, and her papers had been lost in the process. The history of women's writing is full of significant losses, as books, diaries, records, and papers have become displaced or destroyed. Luckily, the survival of Elstob's letter ensures that we know more about her lost documents, as well as her life and research.

Elstob's letter to Ballard is one of approximately 2,300 letters described in Women's Early Modern Letters Online (WEMLO). The project and its website form part of the British Academy and Leverhulme funded project Early Modern Letters Online (EMLO). Supported by the Cultures of Knowledge project, WEMLO focuses on the correspondence of women from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries.

WEMLO comprises a finding-aid and editorial resource. Responding to discussions that took place in workshops during 2013–14, the project intended to provide a space for researchers to find and engage with other scholars of early modern women, and aspired to provide new ways for users to discover and search for female letter-writers. The result is an invaluable tool for researchers of early modern women, providing not only detailed information about individual letter-writers, but also abstracts, notes, and, in many cases, transcriptions and images for each letter listed in their correspondence.

One major strength of the site is the search tool. In addition to browsing all female correspondents catalogued through the EMLO project, users can easily find them individually. Users are also able to use the "Search+" function to seek the correspondence of specific women, as well as individual letters addressed to or sent from each letter-writer. What really enhances the tool's scholarly value, however, is the variety of filters through which users are able to find letters. In addition to searching by a correspondent or recipient's name, title, role, or occupation, or the date, place, subject, or keyword of a letter, users are able

to locate letters with more specific material qualities. For example, searching “black” in the “Seals” field reveals that in 1688 the Duchess della Corgna sent William Sancroft, Archbishop of Canterbury, a letter sealed with black wax.

By allowing users to filter correspondence by seal, watermark, enclosures, endorsements, or postage marks, WEMLO presents these women’s letters from multiple perspectives, enabling the discovery of parallels and meanings in their physical characteristics, and the development of a fuller understanding of the material contexts of their production. Cataloguing and recording physical features like this help to preserve contextual information, a consideration that is especially necessary for a project presenting material documents in a digital form.

In addition to the finding-aid functions, WEMLO also provides catalogue introduction pages for many of the women featured. These contain up-to-date biographical research, bibliographical recommendations, and introductory notes on the correspondence catalogue. Like every part of the WEMLO website, these introductions also clearly credit each contributor to the work, including consulted researchers, abstracts and transcriptions compilers, editors, and digital fellows.

These valuable introductory pages also serve to acquaint users with potentially unfamiliar early modern women. With this in mind, the categorization of these pages on the EMLO “Themes” list could be improved. The “Themes” list groups correspondents thematically, under titles such as “Theology,” “Poetry,” “Mathematics,” or “Medicine.” Finally, there is a group “Women’s Correspondence.” While this strategy reflects EMLO’s ambition to make female letter-writers discoverable without “confining them to a female-only digital silo,” more could be done to incorporate early modern women into these thematic groups. Of the women, only one (the mystic and prophetess Antoinette Bourignon) appears more than twice, while twenty-four male correspondents appear under three or more headings.

One factor may be that some groups are titled by trades (“Lawyers”) or institutions (“Fellows of the Royal Society”) which were not easily accessible to early modern women. Broadening some of these titles, and including more of these women throughout the “Themes” page, would introduce users researching by theme to further fruitful correspondence, and emphasize the varied interests of these female letter-writers.

As a digital resource that grew out of Early Modern Letters Online, WEMLO can be hard to disentangle. WEMLO pages frequently direct users to EMLO material, and the process of navigating back to a WEMLO page can be counterintuitive. On the other hand, the close relationship between WEMLO and EMLO encourages researchers to discover new letter-writers among the extensive records of both resources. In terms of accessibility, the project's web pages do provide alternative text for most images and links, although some pages have low contrast and particularly small text. The project's webpages indicate that WEMLO is still growing, and there are further plans for development. A "Networks and Resources" page will provide a hub for further information, including possible exhibitions, networking spaces, bibliographies, links, and images. There are also plans for new catalogues, and a call for users to contribute their own metadata on early modern women letter-writers.

This plan for continual development, based on user engagement and feedback from researchers, ensures that WEMLO can evolve and improve according to new research and potential demand. The project has an established social media presence on Facebook and Twitter, a strategy that not only allows the project team to stay up to date with relevant news, but reminds engaged researchers of the continuing utility of the resource.

Women's Early Modern Letters Online constitutes a significant contribution to the study of early modern women's letter-writing, and provides up-to-date and accurate information on the correspondence of many hundreds of important female writers. Beyond this breadth of information, particular strengths are the material and physical focus of the finding-aid, and the collaboratively produced introductory pages. The digital preservation of data on these women's letters and their contexts contributes to the recovery of letters like those of Elizabeth Elstob and ensures ongoing access to her words and those of other early modern women.

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