Transcribing Early Modern Recipe Books: Undergraduate Scholarship in the Classroom

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THE PROJECT

Students in ENGL 345 - Renaissance Women’s Writing - learned to read 16th- and 17th-century handwriting and worked on never-before-transcribed manuscripts. As a group, they participated in an international collaborative “transcribathon” sponsored by the Early Modern Recipes Online Collection (EMROC) and coordinated by the Folger Shakespeare Library’s Early Modern Manuscripts Online (EMMO).

UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH?

The Council for Undergraduate Research (CUR) defines UR as “an original contribution to the discipline” that is “publicly disseminated.” This is a high bar in the humanities, where original contributions usually grow out of years of expertise, and dissemination is usually restricted to significant peer-reviewed publication. Transcription projects offer smaller, appropriately sized opportunities for students to make a significant original contribution to the field and to see their work become publicly available.

WHY RECIPES?

For many reasons, women’s opportunities for writing were restricted in the 16th and 17th centuries. Fewer women than men were writing in traditional canonical literary genres (secular poetry, plays, etc.). Renaissance women’s studies has thus focused on expanding the canon by focusing in part on genres (secular poetry, plays, etc.). Renaissance women’s works have been particularly unacknowledged by scholars.

Recipe studies has thus focused on expanding the canon by acknowledging an important and previously unacknowledged form of women’s knowledge and expression in the period. Books are an important and previously unacknowledged form of women’s knowledge and expression in the period. Fewer women recipes require a basic sense of the likely chemicals and processes used in the period. “Green copris” is iron sulfate.

Cultural History

The Oxford English Dictionary tells us that the verbal phrase “miss of” meant “fails to get.” Some cultural history is required to explain why a woman’s failure to get something she craves during pregnancy is a medical emergency. The answer can be explained through the materialist psychology of the time. A woman’s imagination was thought to have a profound influence on a fetus. Birthmarks, for example, were called “longing marks.”

Lexicography

“Reads” is “Reds”: menstruation, especially excessive. English spelling was not standardized until recently, and early documents are full of oddly spelled words. Figuring these out requires the Oxford English Dictionary and a sound phonic approach to reading. Pedagogical research suggests that this process improves students reading skills across the board.

Experiential Learning

Recipes can be recreated, a recognized form of original scholarship that tends to engage students’ attention.

SKILLS LEARNED

Transcription of early material is not just a mechanical process. Understanding a difficult text requires the attention to detail and and wide-ranging research. It fits perfectly with our English department’s mission of teaching students by introducing them to complex problems shaped and solved by language.” Students must demonstrate amateur familiarity with:

- Lexicography
- History
- Ethno-pharmacology
- Botany
- Mathematics
- Theology
- Basic Latin
- Chemistry

INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION

Transcribing manuscripts is a labor-intensive process, often requiring significant expertise. The solution is crowdsourcing, with multiple transcribers working on every document. Zooniverse has been one solution, with projects like “Shakespeare’s World,” but in Zooniverse the individual transcriber can feel alienated from the product, fed random snippets of text. The Folger Library’s Early Modern Manuscripts Online (EMMO) has developed a collaborative software solution, Dromio, that allows more deliberate and visible collaboration. The Early Modern Recipes Online Collective (EMROC) began using Dromio two years ago as a tool for its biannual collaborative “transcribathon,” open to all participants including undergraduates.