



## NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

DIVISION OF RESEARCH PROGRAMS

### **Narrative Section of a Successful Application**

The attached document contains the grant narrative and selected portions of a previously funded grant application. It is not intended to serve as a model, but to give you a sense of how a successful application may be crafted. Every successful application is different, and each applicant is urged to prepare a proposal that reflects its unique project and aspirations. Prospective applicants should consult the Research Programs application guidelines at <https://www.neh.gov/grants/research/fellowships> for instructions.

Note: The attachment only contains the grant narrative and selected portions, not the entire funded application. In addition, certain portions may have been redacted to protect the privacy interests of an individual and/or to protect confidential commercial and financial information and/or to protect copyrighted materials.

Project Title: Paper Art and Craft: Victorian Writers and Their Materials

Institution: University of Louisville

Project Director: Deborah Lutz

Grant Program: Fellowships

Paper Art and Craft:  
Victorian Writers and Their Materials  
**Deborah Lutz**

This project considers the way that authors in nineteenth-century Britain used the materials of writing (and reading, drawing, note-taking, and handcraft) for inspiration, experimentation, dissidence, and, simply, creative composition. I apply these terms broadly: Charlotte Brontë and John Keats composing poems and diaries in the margins of printed books, George Eliot jotting ideas on her blotter, Elizabeth Barrett Browning sewing paper to paper as a means to edit her poems, or Jane Austen using straight pins for her “cut and paste.” Album culture plays a central role, as a space where writers such as Felicia Hemans, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Anna Atkins created text-and-collage gifts for friends or stored material memories. Notebooks, journals, and commonplace books were important tools for the work of George Eliot, Charles Reade, Michael Field, Emily Brontë, and Mary Shelley. Paper crafts and needlework served as text composition outside the bounds of paper, ink, and pen, especially in the case of samplers. The platforms on which writing and drawing happened—the desk, slate, paper, book, album, pattern, wall, etc.—mattered, as related to and generative of the themes of the work. This wider view of what creativity with textual (and material) things meant was common to the Romantics and Victorians, but the writers discussed here were excessive even among their self-reflexive contemporaries in their undoing, remaking, miniaturizing, encrypting, reusing, and transforming. The edge of the page, the width of the margin, the covers of the book, were limiting factors, but also provocations to push on further. Their attention to seemingly insignificant details has been largely overlooked, primarily because such details have been historically aligned with the feminine and domestic.

These authors saw writing as collaborative, theatrical, or performed in fiction through characters that mirror their authors. George Eliot, for instance, represented her male writing persona and almost-obsessive note taking in her fiction with writers such as Casaubon and his pigeonholes and synoptic tabulation. Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper wrote together as Michael Field, a “man” who impersonated Sappho. Emily Brontë drew herself writing on the sheet of paper she was writing, and she created Catherine Earnshaw as a self-conscious writer-in-the-margins. Some of these performances celebrated the traditionally feminine; others borrowed the greater authority and agency of the masculine or imitated male Romantic poets who easily roamed the world. Craft-like elements appear in these authors’ activities and works, tethering them to a domesticity that is expansive. Charlotte Brontë practiced various paper crafts, and her Lucy Snowe in *Villette* is hyper-aware of the page, ink, seal, and the quasi-magical power of letters, which required burying in the earth. Mary Shelley and Charles Reade saw that a novel was a pulling together of fragments—letters, ideas in notebooks, scraps of paper, relics of the dead, and fragments of numerous “bodies.”

The extant manuscripts by these writers and their methods of piecing them together—the paper, pens, and pencils they used, the spaces they wrote in and surfaces they wrote on, the desks or boxes they stored them in—contribute to our understanding of their craft in its most material form. Study of their creative acts expands our idea of the “book” and the “page.” Drawing, tearing, folding, and burning manuscripts released meaning in unusual ways. Sewing together one’s own codex using household waste, reusing paper patterns (for needle-cases and collars) to compose poems, and creating text using chemicals and sunlight opened up what writing and publishing could be. Paper had a strong relationship to the body and the domestic, with its high rag content and its reuse to wrap food before wood pulp became its main ingredient in the 1880s. Reduced to its material components, composition was a sort of paper art, not only a piecing together of notes from notebooks and other sources, but also of cutting and attaching parts using glue, cloth, pins, and needle and thread. The writers considered here practiced a mastery of the

contingent, the leftover, the incidental, and the whittled down, as means to reach both outside and deeper inside. Embedding was part of their process—writing about writing, sheet represented on sheet, paper inside a book (or box or album), book in a hand, and the body in a reading space. Collecting mementos in an album and weaving together a novel from disparate parts both involved curating what can be thought of as a box or museum of the self.

## INTRODUCTION

The introduction explores the theoretical underpinnings of the project, in particular its flourishing at the intersection of material culture and the history of the book. I examine why these artifacts and histories have been largely overlooked, and I also present reasons to take note. Part of this neglect comes from the already mentioned fact that attention to the granular and seemingly insignificant detail has been female coded, as Naomi Schor and Talia Schaffer have argued. Schor writes that “the detail is gendered and doubly gendered as feminine,” especially “the everyday, whose ‘prosiness’ is rooted in the domestic sphere of social life presided over by women” (*Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* [Methuen, 1987], 4). Some male writers during the period experimented in similar ways with the materials of their craft, yet the minute—even domestic—character of many of these acts has led to their being mostly disregarded. While certain arguments I will make in the following chapters apply to both male and female writers, others focus on craft linked to women’s activities.

## CHAPTER ONE: MARGINALIA AND OTHER FORMS OF GRAFFITI

This chapter ponders volumes from writers’ libraries that they have marked, autographed, and supplemented with matter such as pressed plants and locks of hair. These haptic texts, thickened with time and adaptation, gained singularity, with meaning developing when samples of the real were left behind. George Eliot, for instance, used some of her books to memorialize—to observe a passing moment, to remember a personal exchange—while in others she wrote comments, indexes, and other scholarly glosses. John Keats and Charlotte and Emily Brontë, contrarily, penned diaries, fiction, and poetry in their books, doodled in them, and generally defaced them. This thinking of the published, printed volume as paper with blank spaces inciting script, as a bearer of relationships and memory, as a magical object set in place and time, and as a space that could be inhabited, shaped these writers’ own creative acts. The paratextual for them stretched far outside the more traditional definition of the term, jumping the boundary of the book and the page altogether.

## CHAPTER TWO: COLLECTING

Chapter two examines Victorian albums as attempts to preserve the embodied moment, to capture and keep experience. Gatherings of pressed objects that could seem to spring off the page—moss, hair, ribbons, valentines, and more—these haptic albums, with their three-dimensional layers, required the hand as well as the eye. Artifacts such as theater programs, printed menus, lecture flyers, letters, and the like attached with paste, thread, or pins, needed to be folded out to be read. These sorts of assemblages influenced writers like Mary Shelley, E.B. Browning, Felicia Hemens, and Elizabeth Gaskell—collectors of personal ephemera who used their fiction and poetry to think about the salvaging of diverse remnants. Many of the authors discussed here experimented in albums and their own writing with devices to make the page into an unbounded space, through *mise-en-abyme*, *trompe l’oeil*, minute script, and asemia.

## CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCHING

Writers such as George Eliot, Charles Reade, and Michael Field kept commonplace books, notebooks, journals, diaries, almanacs, and other sorts of memoranda as fodder for their writing lives. Eliot, along with many of her contemporaries (like Anne Lister), inhabited the initially blank books that she bought at shops, and she recognized the ways they inhabited her. They often

came with pockets, attached pencils, and clasps, and were personalized by paper labels pasted on the front or inside, as well as newspaper articles and extra sheets. Users sewed on new covers, bindings were re-stitched, and tabs were cut out from fore-edges to alphabetize. Eliot's novels in particular evolved out of her magpie collection of quotes, poems, and the found texts of others. Additional types of research for writing will be taken up, such as "scrap" collecting, encrypting text, and shorthand.

#### CHAPTER FOUR: REUSING

Paper's rag content—usually worn-out clothing—meant recycling was embedded in the process of making the writing surface. This chapter traces the reusing of domestic items as part of the writing, creating, and reading process for many writers in the nineteenth century: rebinding books with repurposed clothing, ripping off a corner of a letter and using its blank side to compose a poem, or taking an old ledger and turning it into a souvenir album. In many cases of reuse, restricted choice (and space) enriched aesthetic decisions rather than limited them, especially when it came to Emily Brontë's manuscripts. Thinking of paper (and books) as more than a carrier of text (or as a carrier of just one text) brought fragments of everyday life into the creative process, something common in Elizabeth Gaskell's life and fiction, especially with scraps and other found text that emanate multiple meanings in *Mary Barton*.

#### CHAPTER FIVE: CRAFTING

The final chapter considers the uses of paper and text-related materials for talismanic, decorative, and artistic purposes that expand conventional ideas about what a manuscript, book, or text can be. Needlework materials and skills helped authors revise manuscripts or handcraft volumes. Writing needn't include ink, as Victorian women were adept at exploiting. Embroidery on paper, pinpricks through paper, cut-out silhouettes, pincushions with text in pinheads, and needle-books inscribed or shaped like books locate the work of women's hands in a continuum of craft. Samplers provided a mode of composition so labor-intensive that the makers sometimes invested them with messianic meaning. The Victorian novelist and botanist Anna Atkins, along with others such as the photographer Juliet Margaret Cameron and the women's rights activist and journalist Bessie Rayner Parkes, made albums of seaweed, ferns, flowers, feathers, and lace using Sir John Herschel's cyanotype technology, an early form of camera-less photography that marked the shadow of the object directly on the page. Atkins also made these "photograms" of her handwriting, turning text and autograph into ghostly absence. The conclusion comments on "new media" and its connection to nineteenth-century writing and crafts.

#### WORK PLAN

The book project is under contract with Oxford University Press, and I have received a one-month Mellon Fellowship for research at the Huntington library in May 2020. If I received an NEH for seven months, starting in February 2020, I would have a draft of the whole book, minus the introduction and conclusion, finished by the end of the fellowship year. Most of the research is completed, as is the first chapter. This summer I will be able to complete the second chapter, parts of which were given as a keynote recently. I have a sabbatical starting this September, and I plan to finish chapter three by February, parts of which have been given as invited lectures. Chapters four and five will be written from February to the end of August. The fall of 2020 I will have a fairly light teaching load, and I will be able to finish the introduction and conclusion. Revisions will happen during the spring semester, and I will send a completed draft to OUP before May 2021.

Selected Archives Consulted

Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Collection, Yale University: Albums; George Eliot journals and other MSS; 19<sup>th</sup>-century books with marginalia and other additions.  
 Berg Collection, New York Public Library: Emily and Charlotte Brontë MSS; George Eliot journals; E.B. Browning journals; Anna Atkins photograms.  
 British Library: Emily and Charlotte Brontë MSS and ephemera; George Eliot journals; albums; 19<sup>th</sup>-century books with marginalia and other additions; Anna Atkins photograms.  
 Brontë Parsonage Museum: Emily and Charlotte Brontë MSS and ephemera; albums.  
 Calderdale Archives: Anne Lister diaries, journals, and other MSS.  
 Dr. Williams Library: Books from George Eliot's Library.  
 Pierpont Morgan Library and Museum: Emily and Charlotte Brontë MSS; albums; 19<sup>th</sup>-century books with marginalia and other additions.

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