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Special Issue:

Teaching Nineteenth-Century Literature and Gender in the Twenty-First-Century Classroom

Guest Edited by Lara Karpenko and Lauri Dietz

Undergraduate Managing Editor, Linda Braus

Practicing Canon-Formation in the Digital Classroom

By [Livia Arndal Woods](#), Queens College, The City University of New York

<1> In the fall of 2014, I taught a senior seminar for undergraduate English majors at Queens College, City University of New York (CUNY) called “Why are We Reading This?: Investigating a (Digital) Canon.”⁽¹⁾ In this course, I asked students to trouble the authority of scholarly tradition and consensus in ways that I hoped would widen the space available for their own articulations of intellectual stake and authority. The class asked students to read “canonical” nineteenth-century literature alongside less frequently studied texts, to engage theories of canonicity, and to explore digital information about texts in the public domain. We discussed the ways in which ideologies of gender, race, and class inform notions of a literary canon—and inform, also, the ways that we challenge those notions.

<2> Early in the semester, I modeled the way in which creating a Wikipedia page affects the digital footprint of less well-known texts by creating a stub for Rhoda Broughton’s 1867 *Cometh Up as a Flower*.⁽²⁾ *Cometh Up* is not deeply noncanonical. Indeed, a 2010 Broadview edition signals ready availability and traces a coherent scholarly tradition.⁽³⁾ Nonetheless, at the start of the 2014 fall semester when I was teaching “Why Are We Reading This?”, *Cometh Up* still had no Wikipedia entry.⁽⁴⁾ As a result of the primacy of Wikipedia in Google search algorithms, the [stub](#) I created immediately became—and remains, despite its “stubbiness”—the first result in a Google search for Broughton’s novel (Figure 1).⁽⁵⁾

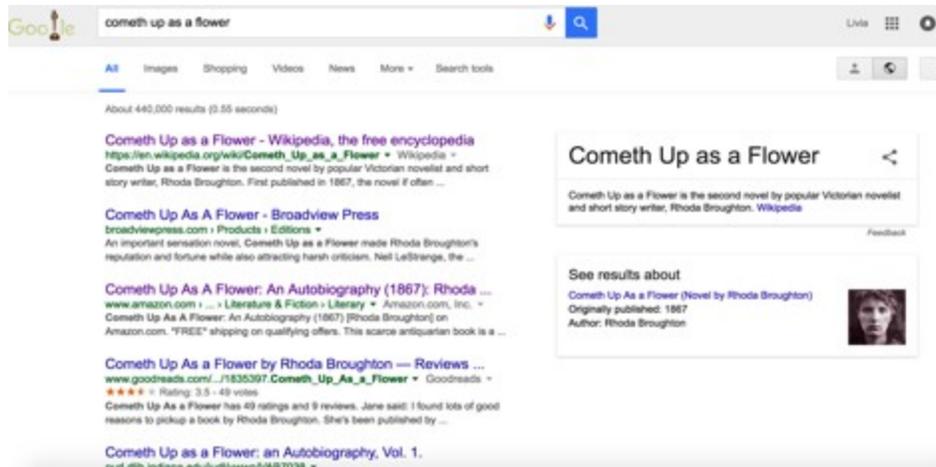


Figure 1 – 1 Mar. 2015 Google search result for *Cometh Up as a Flower*

<3> In the first week of the “Why Are We Reading This?” course, our class Googled each text we would read for the semester. We noticed the different Google results for Charlotte Brontë’s 1847 *Jane Eyre* (which we were also slated to read) and *Cometh Up*, and discussed the ways in which these results signaled the different canonical statuses of the two books. I created the Wikipedia stub after we had read *Cometh Up*, and then we Googled the novel again. All easily noted the stub’s effect on the novel’s digital footprint. Also noted by all was that this change had not been wrought by an expert on *Cometh Up*, Broughton, or digital knowledge production. I had read neither the novel nor the author before that fall and had never before created content on Wikipedia. I explained my position of unknowing as clearly as possible to the students in “Why Are We Reading This?”

<4> Indeed, in creating the stub, I used my own position of unknowing to model learning, with attention to the step-by-step practices of knowledge production—and, in this instance, the step-by-step process of navigating Wikipedia’s methods for page creation. I, then, asked students to move through the same steps in greater depth, creating not stubs but fully fledged Wikipedia articles for texts or authors without any Wikipedia presence. The work of one student group in creating a [Wikipedia page](#) for the abolitionist and writer Abigail Mott—and reflections on that work from a member of the student group in her final essay for the course—speak to the interrogation of canonicity that motivated “Why Are We Reading This?”

<5> “Why Are We Reading This?” engaged theories of canonicity with the help of Lee Morrissey’s 2005 *Debating the Canon*. Morrissey understands twenty-first-century pedagogical and extra-academic contexts to be in fruitful conversation with studies of literary canonicity:

Like Graff, I too believe that we ought to “teach the controversies,” although to Graff’s sense of critical debate in the classroom I would add the importance of heightening awareness that such debate is also central to the texts we read and discuss. In this sense, “we” are no longer teachers and students, but the larger community of readers and writers involved in the discussion. (1)

The location of a “larger community of readers and writers involved in [a] discussion” about text and context has shifted radically from physical spaces to digital ones since the “canon wars” of the 1990s and Morrissey’s publication of *Debating the Canon*. Clearly, digital tools change what we do as scholars and what we as teachers can ask our students to do.⁽⁶⁾ The role of Wikipedia in my 2014 course offers a perspective on the new opportunities for information sharing among communities that extend beyond “teachers and students”—opportunities that highlight the *practices* of canon formation.

<6> I argue that canon formation is a process of doing and undoing that can trouble the practical and conceptual boundaries that so often divide scholarship from pedagogy. I also argue that digital tools can heighten awareness of canon formation as practice and that our canon-formation practices should continue to teach the controversies of gender that inform critical debates about canonicity. Our British literature canon-formation practices should continue to teach the controversies, certainly, of race, class, and a series of other modern systems of power relations, though these systems will be of less central consideration here. This paper offers the “Why Are We Reading This?” course, as well as the work students produced, as an example of teaching the controversies in ways that can invest our own learning and student learning with identifiable stakes and the authority that inheres in active participation with cultures of knowledge. I emphasize canon formation as a set of practices that can motivate our scholarship, pedagogies, and learning to reflect on the methodologies of humanist study as we transition into increasingly digital realms.

Gender and Canon Formation

<7> Though “debating the canon” has never been about gender alone, feminist critics have posed significant challenges to notions of canonicity that tend to exclude writing by and about people with limited access to cultural capital.⁽⁷⁾ The Enlightenment period saw articulations of great literature as that which improves the reader morally.⁽⁸⁾ Matthew Arnold understood great literature as a selection of cultural “touchstones” that, as in F.R. Leavis’s notion of a “Great Tradition,” shape the moral development of the modern individual.⁽⁹⁾ Feminist challenges to notions of a Great Literary Tradition tend to highlight the exclusion of writers and works that do not fit gendered definitions of moral worth; literary traditions handed down in anthologies and syllabi tend to reflect gendered definitions of artistic and spiritual value that sideline women’s work and experience. Emphasizing the role of literature in the moral development of the modern individual, however, also points to the ways in which pedagogical concerns tend to shape theories of canonicity.

<8> David Kurnick recently articulated the “inevitable partiality of our own practice” in the selection of texts to study and teach, recognizing that “partiality” as a condition in any selection of texts or literary criteria should prompt us to look at the ways in which our partiality can be shaped. Though a small number of women writers—most notably among novelists Jane Austen and George Eliot, with some back and forth between Charlotte and Emily Brontë—tended to be included in class syllabi and anthologies of British literature during the first half of the twentieth century, unexamined partialities shaped by sexism, racism, and classism limited the scholarly viability even of authors consistently in print, such as Mary Shelley or Elizabeth Barrett Browning, not to mention authors whose works had fallen out of print.⁽¹⁰⁾ However, though feminist challenges to notions of canonicity that sideline

women's contributions to modern literature have revised the "partialities" of scholarly research, academic and popular publishing, and classroom syllabi over the past 50 years, gendered assumptions about literary value persist. These assumptions persist particularly with regard to literary genres coded feminine, such as the sensation fiction of the 1860s or contemporary romance novels.

<9> Feminist, sexuality, gender, and queer studies have been particularly influential in nineteenth-century literary criticism. This tendency reflects a response to the naturalization of sexism and heteronormativity associated with nineteenth-century realist novels, novels produced at the height of a British Empire that relied upon understandings of itself as civilized and civilizing and positioned strongly gendered distinctions between public and private as part of those civilized and civilizing structures. The relevance of feminist, sexuality, gender, and queer studies to Victorian literary criticism is also attested to by the large numbers of nineteenth-century women writers who responded to the historical limitation of middle class women's economic options as the domestic space became idealized as feminine and disconnected from market-driven labors.[\(11\)](#)

<10> Michel Foucault's understanding of sexuality as an invention of late modernity, Thomas Lacquer's investigation into the sexed meanings we ascribe to bodies, or Judith Butler's argument that gender is performative, for example, signal some of the ways in which feminist, sexuality, gender, and queer studies tend to emphasize not only the "partialities" of structures of meaning that we take to be natural but also the ways in which these structures reflect specific sets of practices rather than inherent, total significances. Thinking about the specific practices through which we participate in the naturalization of ideology gestures toward an intersection between gender and literary canonicity: one can participate in ideologies of sex, sexuality, and gender in ways that make that participation seem inevitable, much as one can participate in ideologies of literary canonicity in ways that make specific definitions of literary value that encompass some kinds of texts and not others seem inevitable. Gender and canon formation are intersecting practices of doing and undoing that we engage in when we research, write, and teach. Though it can be difficult to teach these practices as practices rather than as truths, digital tools can help us reflect on gender and canonicity in our classrooms in ways that continue rather than conclude the work of gender criticism.

Digital Practices and Classroom Practicalities

<11> Much is made, within and outside academia, of the danger and potential of digital realms and tools. In scholarship, we navigate a proliferation of possible sources and methodologies that enable engagement with entire catalogues and databases but that possibly limit the relevance of scholarly methodologies—such as close reading—in which many of us have been trained.[\(12\)](#) In teaching, we navigate smartphones in our classrooms, the online research habits of students, and students who lack access to digital tools at home. These engagements and navigations fuel professional and conceptual controversies, certainly, but they may also reflect practical realities that we cannot talk, write, or think our way out of. There is little we can do, for example, to assure that no student in a class will employ Wikipedia in their research. Teaching into the controversies of these likelihoods can help us reflect on the practicalities of the digital age in ways that share authority to shape our emerging digital

pedagogical methods and the digital footprint of nineteenth-century literature with the students whose educations are so often invoked as the rationale of canon formation.

<12> One of the ways we can signal students' authority in the practices of canon formation is by signaling the potential of digital work to reach an actual audience that extends beyond academia. As Bob Nicholson notes in his recent "Tweeting the Victorians," open-access digital spaces make communication between academics and "the outside world" possible in ways that can speak to the practical academic considerations inside institutional worlds.⁽¹³⁾ Nicholson articulates an interest in Twitter's ability to plug "professional scholars" into nonacademic conversations about their academic interests in ways that would not be possible through the "conventional channels" of the scholarly journal, edited collection, or monograph. Like Twitter, Wikipedia sets the bar for entry at a level that allows participation from those in positions of relative digital unknowingness.

<13> Cathy N. Davidson says, "Wikipedia is an educator's fantasy," and I understand why, though I also understand concerns about the role of Wikipedia in research: Wikipedia can make it easier to avoid completing reading assignments, provide skewed and even false information, simplify complexity, and undermine research practices. But it is also where we and our students often go first. Wikipedia is an apt tool through which to explore canon formation as a set of practices, not only because it allows for the very rough kind of quantification of a text's digital footprint that I will explore shortly, but also because, in some ways, Wikipedia is itself a noncanonical culture of knowledge in the university classroom. Teaching what Wikipedia is through close engagement (let's make a page) rather than firm prohibition (never cite this site) more clearly demonstrates the reasons for such prohibitions than the prohibitions themselves. This is why I used the presence of a Wikipedia page as the very rough working definition of a canonical text or author in "Why Are We Reading This?"

<14> Though it does not offer institutionally sanctioned authority, Wikipedia can offer a compelling impetus to reexamine the ways in which a nineteenth-century literary canon shaped by gender resonates with our twenty-first-century professional contexts. Contemporary scholarly interests in process and practice—interests that can be seen as "navel-gazing" concerns difficult to apply outside of specialist circles—can and should work in direct and constructive ways in our classrooms; quotidian pedagogical practicalities, such as the likelihood that our students will consult Wikipedia, can and should enrich rather than limit our contemporary scholarly considerations of process and practice (Best). Our scholarship and our pedagogies can and should work in conversation and controversy with our knowledge production practices.

<15> Because literary canon formation is a practice and the college classroom is the site of so much of that practice, when we debate the canon as scholars, we must take into account the practicalities of teaching noncanonical texts. Scholarship that seeks to recuperate the underread often notes the difficulties of incorporating noncanonical work into the undergraduate classroom. In *The New Nineteenth Century: Feminist Reading of Underread Victorian Fiction*, Barbara Leah Harman and Susan Meyer propose that at least some of the barriers to integration of underread works into the notion of a canon are pedagogical and that those pedagogical barriers have to do with the practicalities of teaching:

Given both the length of the average Victorian novel and the brevity of our academic semesters, we rarely find time to assign, or perhaps even to read ourselves, the many other Victorian novelists who were known and admired in their own day, and who were often tremendously productive both of fiction and of various forms of nonfiction.... (xxvii)

And who among us has not faced the pedagogical pull of canonicity when we think about how to serve our classrooms with limited time and, too often, limited resources? How much will a ready-made cultural capital discourse be worth? As Harman and Meyer's admission that "we rarely find time...even to read ourselves" suggests, these kinds of pedagogical choices do not exist in a separate sphere from our scholarly canon practices. The introduction to the recent *Rediscovering Victorian Women Sensation Writers: Beyond Braddon* underscores both the resistance of university classrooms to the incorporation of noncanonical texts and the work of pedagogical practices in shaping the canon:

Recoveries of forgotten, neglected or marginalized women writers have begun to transform the field and redraw the map of nineteenth-century literary studies. However, in certain fundamental ways, such recoveries have only served to demonstrate the canon's extraordinary resilience, particularly in terms of university curricula. If, as Roland Barthes suggested, the canon is essentially "what is taught," then, despite the recovery work carried out since the 1970s, if we consider the Victorian female novelists whose place in the canon today might be deemed unassailable and who regularly appear on university syllabuses, the picture is not so very different from the "Great Tradition" proposed by F.R. Leavis. (Beller and MacDonald 2)

How full-throatedly can we claim to "transform the field and redraw the map of nineteenth-century literary studies" with noncanonical texts if we are not transforming our teaching? Though we study and write about "forgotten, neglected, or marginalized women writers" with increasing frequency as part of scholarship, this shift is not always reflected in our pedagogical practices. We can fruitfully teach into this controversy, however, not only by teaching noncanonical texts but also by teaching them in conversation with wider digital worlds. When we look at the literary canon as a practice, we are more likely to consider overlaps in rather than divisions between scholarship and pedagogy. We are also more likely to consider ways in which gender is not a stable category of being but a flexible collection of doings, doings with which we are engaged on an ongoing basis.

Teaching *Cometh Up as a Flower* and *Jane Eyre*

<16> Considering the digital footprints of canonical texts alongside less frequently assigned and studied ones in "Why are We Reading This?" helped our class look at examples of the practices of literary canonicity and the ways in which the practices of gender that inform literary canons do not begin and end with the inclusion of women's work on syllabi and publication lists. *How* we read representations of female and feminized experience in these texts also signals what we are doing with gender and canon formations. *Cometh Up* and *Jane Eyre* share the subtitle, "An Autobiography," indicating both a first-person narration and a self-conscious play with narrative anxiety about readerly sympathy and (dis)identification. But the very different digital footprints of *Cometh Up* and *Jane Eyre* reflect the different value ascribed to the novels in systems of literary worth. The seniors taking "Why Are We

Reading This?" had all either heard of or read *Jane Eyre* before. They came to class with the sense that there was some authoritative consensus regarding the novel's importance and that this importance must reflect that the novel is "good," even if an individual reader might not enjoy it. None of the students had ever heard of *Cometh Up* Rhoda Broughton before that fall. Reading these two novels in combination pushed at the question Jane Tompkins uses to title the final chapter of her 1985 rethinking of canonicity, *Sensational Designs: "But Is It Any Good?"* Reading these two novels in combination pushed at the question about "goodness" in gendered ways.

<17> Many students in "Why Are We Reading This?" responded dismissively to Nell's feminized first-person narration: she is often immature, unintellectual, and unable to control her emotions. But Nell's narrative is aware of not being serious-minded, perhaps even of not being engaging or sympathetic:

Why do I tell my poor little story so circumstantially, I wonder? Will any one care to read it? Is a dissected heart worth looking at, even though it be rather a foolish one? They say that love is the recognizing something of oneself in another person. Will anyone, I wonder, recognise in me some of their own foolish fancies and thoughts and notions, and love me for being as silly as themselves, and for owning to them that I am? (Broughton 230)

Presciently, Nell "wonders" whether "any one will care to read" her "poor little story" and whether "anyone [will] recognise" themselves in her. And though Broughton's novel sold well upon publication, bolstered by the sensation fiction vogue of the 1860s that treated women's seemingly respectable domestic lives as potentially rife with intrigue and shame, for much of the twentieth century, few readers have "recognise[d]" literary value in *Cometh Up*. The canon in the "Great Tradition" vein reflects some "recognizing" of literary value that speaks to idealized individual development, and Nell's development makes its "silly" way along "circumstantially." Rather than narrating a progression toward maturity, Nell narrates a series of compromises that lead to her death at the novel's close. Canonicity works in part through admiration and the sense of recognition many of us experience in encountering, for seemingly the first time, a text that we have always already known. Without these reading safety nets, how much more likely are we to encounter a novel from a past that needs decoding and deem it "a foolish one"?

<18> As *Jane Eyre* so often does, Nell speaks here to her Reader as a potential antagonist.⁽¹⁴⁾ But where Jane's defensiveness is often unnecessary (she tends to have our sympathies, and her female *bildung* leads toward the affirmation of appropriate marriage), Nell correctly identifies the responses of most students in "Why are We Reading This?" to *Cometh Up*. I know that many readers sympathize with Nell, but my students, on the whole, found her frustrating and trivial, and did not deem the novel "good." Indeed, there are many ways in which teaching texts we might call noncanonical against the backdrop of canonical ones can reify rather than challenge the "Great Traditions" of literature. Teaching *Cometh Up* alongside *Jane Eyre* may have primed students in "Why Are We Reading This?" to attempt to "dismantle the master's house" with "the master's tools," a task that Audre Lorde deemed impossible in "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." Despite these limitations, reading *Cometh Up* and *Jane Eyre* side by side could prompt us to look at each of these novels with greater political skepticism and concern.

<19> My interest here is in the way in which access to information about a text can contribute to its being “good,” the possibility that by creating more points of access to novels like *Cometh Upwe* make them “better,” and the ways in which we allow more room for unknowing into our work as teachers and learners, opening up possibilities for a literary rubric not always in conversation with categories of value framed by canonical discourses. When we navigate “Great Works,” we have deep resource wells from which to draw, and increasingly, we access these wells through digital search engines, as do our students. As I write, there are 18,600 results for the Google search “Cometh Up as a Flower” and 7,670,000 for “Jane Eyre”; that is more than 412 times as many results for *Jane Eyre*.⁽¹⁵⁾ These statistics are neither particularly surprising nor, perhaps, even very interesting or important in and of themselves, but taken as the data of “cultural capital” that can inhere in texts, these statistics speak to the challenges of both identifying and critiquing the practices of canon formation. And those challenges and the ways we teach them *are* interesting and important. The more often we—students and scholars alike—read, write about, and teach underread texts, the more possible paths we create toward the “value” and “goodness” that cluster around one another and around notions of literary canonicity. Engaging texts whose goodness we agree on is not the only path toward intellectual or pedagogical significance. Grappling with the controversies of canonicity makes clear the significance of identifying that canonicity as an active practice in which we participate, requiring a willingness to stand in positions of unknowing. Digital realms can offer useful tools in these engagements with canonicity. These engagements might help loosen our reliance on “good” learning texts and offer, instead, models of engagement that emphasize an ability to articulate the practices of unknowing and networks of partiality that shape learning.⁽¹⁶⁾

<20> Because *Cometh Up* lives in the canonical margins—available in print and studied among a cohort of Victorian scholars but not widely assigned—the doing and undoings of canonicity are hypervisible, and new resources are more easily traceable. A new journal article is easily found in a database search; a new Wikipedia, SparkNotes, or CliffsNotes page can easily be noted. So when I created the *Cometh Up* stub on Wikipedia as an experiment in learning and teaching one quotidian way in which we can use digital platforms to *do* literary canonicity, I was able to practice canonicity in articulable ways and to demonstrate that practice for my students. This articulation and demonstration allowed the class to talk about knowledge production in specific rather than opaque ways—and to see knowledge production as within the authoritative reach of many rather than few. The creation of the stub by me and creation of Wikipedia pages by student groups opened up, in ways that no amount of reading could, the idea that literary canons might be something other than stone tablets handed down to us, complete and irrefutable. However, the *Cometh Up* stub has yet to be edited or added to two years after I created it, which speaks to *Cometh Up*’s position in the canonical borderlands. Borderlands, as a rich tradition of Chicano/a literary criticism has established, are sites of process and practice in which seemingly coherent categories are troubled, undermined, and redrawn. Much of women’s writing has long lived in the canonical borderlands, spaces in which unknowing can work as a method.⁽¹⁷⁾

Abigail Mott

<21> When the student group that created a Wikipedia page for Abigail Mott was first asked to articulate what kind of noncanonical text or author they wanted to recuperate, they agreed that the

work of an American woman of color living in the nineteenth century was the most shared interest. This project also spoke to discourses of race and gender that we explored in readings and discussed in class over the first half of the semester. In a recent presentation on the digital data analysis of large fields of literary text drawn from library catalogues, Natalie Houston made explicit the methods of unknowing that shape the practices of work outside of the canon. Houston asked, “How do we find unknown authors?” Once we are working outside of the canon, scholars and students often ask strikingly similar questions. In “Why Are We Reading This?”, students were introduced to some of the tools and methods available to them in searching for the unknown. Duncan Faherty shared his work on *Just Teach One* with the class, and I offered the *Victorian Women Writers Project* and Project Gutenberg’s search options as possible avenues for student research. But we also discussed the ways in which a certain amount of unknowing is necessary to the formulation of noncanonical projects, and I was interested in the ways in which this unknowingness seemed to heighten students’ awareness of process and practice in their work. When a person does not know exactly where she is going, sometimes she marks the path she takes with more care, like a cartographer mapping uncharted territory.

<22> The Abigail Mott group, as you may know if you have already followed the link to the Wikipedia page the student group created, did not find quite what they had gone looking for (Figure 2). It was Mott’s *Biographical Sketches and Interesting Anecdotes of Persons of Colour* that caught the group’s attention. However, their research led them to discover that Mott, “an American Quaker, abolitionist, and women’s rights activist,” was not herself a person of color (“Abigail Mott”). She was, however, a woman whose life and works had hitherto been almost completely digitally illegible, nestled at odd angles between sources on a twenty-first-century poet, Abigail Mott, whose webpage still beats out the Wikipedia page the Mott group created for first spot in a Google search for the term “Abigail Mott” (Figure 3). Though the student group did not canonize Mott, they created a path to her where no path had existed previously. In doing so, one group member also came to articulate the group’s practices of unknowing and canon formation in ways that I find striking for their detail and for how similar they are to established scholarly navigations of digital knowledge production.



Figure 2 – 13 April, 2016, Abigail Mott Wikipedia Page

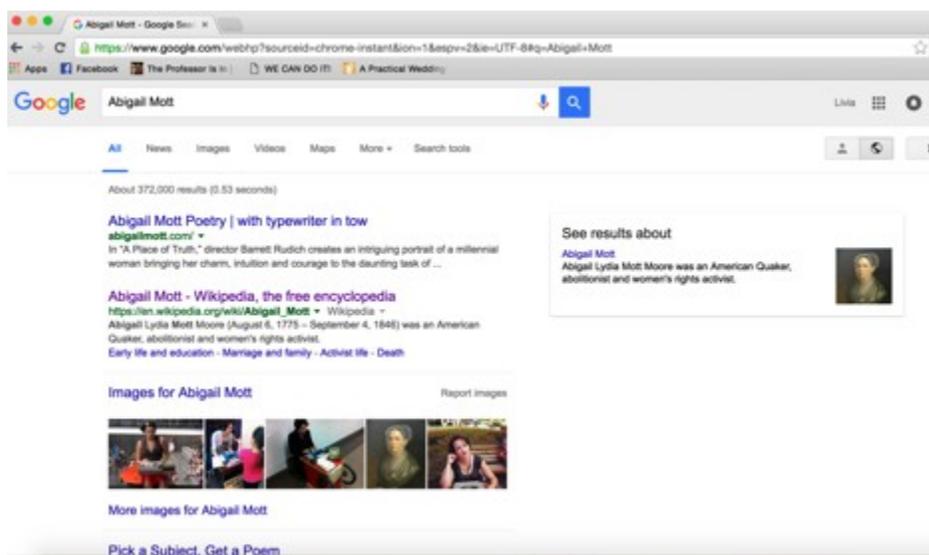


Figure 3 – 15 March, 2016, Abigail Mott Google Search

<23> Patrick Leary’s 2005 “Googling the Victorians” grapples with the “profound shift in our everyday working relationship to the Victorian past, a relationship now crucially mediated by digital technology” (73). Leary describes his efforts to understand the joke of a Victorian cartoon:

I tried googling the phrase, “remember the grotto”. After a page or two of irrelevant “hits”, the phrase popped up in a context that began to make its referent clear...Beginning with this crucial clue, the ordinary course of reading and library research ultimately yielded quite a bit of information...After a number of similar experiences, Google quickly became my first port of call for tracking down unfamiliar allusions met with in my research on Victorian periodicals, in many cases making resort to more specialized databases and reference books unnecessary. Indeed, since the time of that original search, the cartoon’s caption, and various aspects of the story behind it, have turned up in still more online texts where I would never have thought to look for them. (75)

In “Why Are We Reading This?”, students completed a final paper assignment in which they reflected on the work they had done with their groups to create Wikipedia pages. I would like to offer a long passage from Kristina Thompson’s final paper on the creation of the Abigail Mott page. I think that this passage—particularly when read together with Leary’s above—gestures toward the ways in which a focus on practice can shape and encourage both senior scholars and undergraduate students to participate in the “larger community of readers and writers involved in [a] discussion.” Leary writes about using Google in the way Thompson describes the process of sifting through Wikipedia for leads she followed elsewhere to build a conceptual and digital picture of a past hitherto only indirectly narrated. Both Leary and Thompson describe the process of their research with a level of detail that suggests using digital platforms might indeed offer possibilities for honing attention to practice.

<24> In “The Trials and Tribulations of Creating a Wikipedia Page: Incorporating a Non-Canonical Subject,” Thompson describes the work her student group did in creating a Wikipedia page for Mott:

During her research for a term paper, one of my group-mates happened to stumble across Abigail Mott's book [*Narratives of Colored Americans*]. In researching Abigail Mott...[t]he only reference we had to go on was a one sentence reference that... read, “Around this time, [Lucretia] Mott's sister-in-law, Abigail Lydia Mott, and brother-in-law, Lindley Murray Moore, were helping to found the Rochester Anti-Slavery Society.” So now we knew that Abigail Mott was Lucretia's sister-in-law, there was a brother-in-law by the name of Lindley Murray Moore, and “around that time” Abigail and Lindley were ““helping to found” an antislavery society in Rochester. With that dissection we were able to piece together another part of the Abigail Mott biography. She was also an author as well as an abolitionist and at some point she resided or at the very least worked in Rochester, NY. However, we couldn't have very well have built a Wikipedia page about Abigail Mott with just four facts that were only verified by another Wikipedia page....

Upon performing a Google search we learned that there is a woman by the name of Abigail Mott who wanders various towns reciting poetry. However, her YouTube video suggests she is modern and almost certainly rules out the possibility that she is the sister-in-law of Lucretia Mott....

[Thompson narrates their group's struggles to find information from good sources] All very good and pertinent information, but still only supported by a Wikipedia page. The next sentence, however, provided us with a little more...and it had a link to a non-Wikipedia webpage. The webpage, historic-structures.com, provided biographical information on a house built by Lindley and Abigail in Rochester, NY, which has been marked as a historic structure. This provided us with our first fact on Abigail Mott that could be verified by a reliable source....

We discovered and were able to verify that she not only attended the Farmington Quarterly Meeting for abolitionists, but also kept the minutes which suggested that she had a high ranking position in that group. We were also able to verify that Abigail and her husband, along with the cousin of known abolitionist and women's rights activist Susan B. Anthony, were indeed the founders of the Rochester Anti-Slavery Society. (Thompson)

The language of unknowing and investigation (“stumble,” “dissection,” and “onlys”) is marked in this passage. Thompson's focus on the step-by-step practices of her group emphasizes their awareness of the limitations of certain knowledge platforms (Wikipedia, for example) and their ability to use those platforms to move toward “a reliable source” (Wikipedia's requirement that new pages cite non-Wikipedia sources is, indeed, “an educator's fantasy”). Like Leary, Thompson describes an “aha” moment made significant because of the work each had already done in spaces of unknowing. Thompson's paper articulates the practices of canon formation in ways that communicate personal stake, and a claim of authority manifests, a turn toward a language of certainty (“fact,” “verified,”

“reliable,” and “indeed,” for example). When we have to dig for authority or claim it for ourselves, we are more likely to be able to articulate how and why we have gotten there.

Learning Unknowing

<25> In the “Learning to Read” Theories and Methodologies feature of the May 2015 *PMLA*, questions about how to read and how to teach reading (in the context of the Common Core Standard Initiative and its emphasis on boosting the reading skills—or, at least, the scores—of American children) often converge with matters of canonicity, such as questions about what to read. Stephen Arata, in making a case for the complications that arise from treating “information” as distinct from “literature,” connects these concerns about reading practice and reading material to the nineteenth century, playing with the art critic John Ruskin’s distinction between “books of the hour and books for all time” (676). For Ruskin, Arata notes, these distinctions needed to be drawn in response to shifting technologies:

Readers in the 1860s were not the first to feel that theirs was an age about to be submerged beneath “the staggering amount of information” now in circulation thanks to advances in print technology. What distinguishes mid-Victorian responses to the stress of information overload from those of earlier periods is the focus on developing pedagogies of reading adequate to this new landscape...that conversation persists today, if under different terms. (677)

Of course, that “conversation” about the need to establish “pedagogies of reading adequate to this new [technological] landscape” takes place most strongly today in relationship to digital technologies. Should our students be pulling up reading assignments (and whatever else) on their computers in class? Completing their reading assignments on a Kindle? Should we? What do we stand to gain and what do we stand to lose? Many things on all sides, no doubt. But when the verdict is a firm “no,” we certainly lose access to many noncanonical texts in our classrooms, and we lose some paths into the unknowingness that fuels reflection and makes coming to authority possible.

Endnotes

(1) Throughout this article, I will consider as canonical texts that are in print and widely taught and studied. References to “a” or “the” literary canon are meant to reference the notion of a coherent tradition of texts to be printed, taught, and studied rather than the existence of any single canon. (△)

(2) A Wikipedia stub is “an article deemed too short to provide encyclopedic coverage of a subject” (“Wikipedia”). The stub label differentiates these pages from articles that contain more thorough citation of sources and more comprehensive information. More generally, the value of Wikipedia in the classroom and in student research is widely debated. My decision to teach the controversy of the online encyclopedia was based on my perception of its ubiquity in student research, its prominence in Google search algorithms, and the “Why Are We Reading This?” course’s active engagement with troubling scholarly authority. (△)

(3) A library edition of *Cometh Up* was edited by Tamar Heller as part of Andrew Maunder's 2004 *Varieties of Women's Sensation Fiction: 1855-1890*. For more Broughton scholarship, see Heller's "That Muddy, Polluted Flood of Earthly Love': Ambivalence about the Body in Rhoda Broughton's *Not Wisely but Too Well*" and Pamela K. Gilbert's selected bibliography for the Broadview *Cometh Up* that cites, perhaps most notably, Marilyn Wood's *Rhoda Broughton (1840-1920): Profile of a Novelist*, Linda Peterson's "Mary Cholmondeley (1859-1925)" and "Rhoda Broughton: (1840-1920)," Lindsey Faber's "One Sister's Surrender: Rivalry and Resistance in Rhoda Broughton's *Cometh Up as a Flower*," Lisa Hager's "Slumming with the New Woman: Fin-de-Siècle Sexual Inversion, Reform Work and Sisterhood in Rhoda Broughton's *Dear Faustina*," and Lyn Pykett's *The Sensation Novel: From The Woman in Whiteto The Moonstone*.^(^)

(4) There were no SparkNotes or study pages (which, like Wikipedia entries, tend to pop up early in Google searches) dedicated to the novel, nor does it seem that #ComethUpAsAFlower has ever—to the best of my knowledge—been used in the Twittersphere, though #RhodaBroughton popped up once in 2013 (Bazell).^(^)

(5) Though its extent and causes are debated, there seems to have been some loss of Wikipedia traffic in recent years. For the most widely cited source on this, see Roy Hinkis's 2015 "[Is Wikipedia Being Hit By a Google Penalty?](#)" Nonetheless, Google's search algorithm still—as of this writing—positions Wikipedia pages toward the top of Google search results. For a 2010 study on student use of Wikipedia, see Alison J. Head and Michael B. Eisenberg's "[How today's college students use Wikipedia for course-related research.](#)" See Head and Eisenberg's first note for a series of scholarly and pedagogical responses to Wikipedia use by students.^(^)

(6) For examples of vibrant conversations about the stakes of the digitization of otherwise difficult-to-access texts, see Jennifer Phegley's "Rethinking Student Research and Writing in the Digital Age: The *Punch* Historical Archive: 1841-1992 and the NINES Classroom Exhibit Space," much of Andrew Stauffer's recent work with the "Book Traces @ UVA" and NINES projects, and James Mussel's *The Nineteenth-Century Press in the Digital Age*. In this article, my concern is less with the digitization of texts themselves than with the ways in which open-access digital tools allow us to practice canonicity/model canon practice actively in our classrooms.^(^)

(7) For John Guillory's theorization of the waning cultural capital of "traditional" notions of literary canonicity, see his 1993 *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*. Feminist challenges to the canon gained momentum with the emergence of feminist literary theory in the academy in the late 1960s and 1970s and gained momentum during the 1980s and 1990s. For feminist reclamation of the sensation tradition to which Broughton's *Cometh Up* belongs, see, for example, Winifred Hughes's *The Maniac in the Cellar: Sensation Novels of the 1860's*, originally published in 1981; Lyn Pykett's *The Improper Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing*, originally published in 1992; and Jenny Bourne Taylor's *In the Secret Theatre of Home: Wilkie Collins, Sensation Narrative, and Nineteenth-Century Psychology*. For a more recent example, see Anne-Marie Beller and Tara MacDonald's *Rediscovering Victorian Women Sensation Writers*. For feminist challenges to broader literary traditions that codify rather than expand upon what we read, study, and teach, see, for example,

Elaine Showalter's 1977 *A Literature of Their Own* and the 1985 *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women: The Tradition in English* by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. Gilbert and Gubar's influential 1978 *The Madwoman in the Attic*, though it does not take a feminist revision of the canon as its central concern, is the preeminent example of second-wave feminist scholarship on nineteenth-century literature. Similarly, Virginia Woolf's 1929 *A Room of One's Own*, though more explicitly concerned with establishing a theory of and a way forward for women's literature than with drawing underread texts into prominence, is a classic of first-wave feminist literary scholarship that helped establish a small cadre of nineteenth-century British women writers (Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters, and George Eliot are the most notable examples) in twentieth-century notions of a literary canon. More recently, the 1991 establishment of the [British Women Writers Association](#) (BWWA), the annual conference held under BWWA's auspices, and the 1995 [Victorian Women Writers Project](#), for example, have fueled access to and scholarship on underread Victorian women authors. For criticism of canonical traditions that exclude the experiences of colonial subjects and people of color, see, for example Frantz Fanon's 1961 *Wretched of the Earth*, Chinua Achebe's "Colonialist Criticism," and Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s 1992 *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars*, all excerpted in Morrissey's *Debating the Canon*.^(^)

(8)See Morrissey's *Debating the Canon* for the excerpts from Joseph Addison for *The Tatler*, David Hume's "Of the Standard of Taste," and Samuel Johnson's "Preface to the Plays of William Shakespeare" that Morrissey includes as useful examples of this Enlightenment model of thinking about literary canonicity.^(^)

(9)See Matthew Arnold's 1865 "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" and F.R. Leavis' 1948 *The Great Tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, and Joseph Conrad* for the critic's argument in favor of a tradition of literature that prioritized moral intensity and seriousness.^(^)

(10)For more on the history of fluctuations in Brontë readership and reception, see Patsy Stoneman's 1996 *Brontë Transformations* and Lucasta Miller's 2001 *The Brontë Myth*. For attitudes about the scholarly value of Elizabeth Barrett Browning prior to the widespread impact of feminist revisions of canonicity see, for example, my 2013 [interview](#) with Adrienne Munich, who recalls, upon being hired at her first job in the 1970s, that "one of [her] Victorianist colleagues was writing on Elizabeth Barrett Browning and someone said to [Munich], 'she has sacrificed the privilege of being taken seriously.'"^(^)

(11)For the shift in women's domestic roles from economically valuable to spiritually significant to the exclusion of financial value, see, for example, Ruth Perry's *Novel Relations*.^(^)

(12)For examples of work on digital methodologies, see, for example, Franco Moretti's *Maps, Graphs, and Trees* and Andrew Stauffer's recent work with the [Book Traces](#) project and [NINES](#). Paul Ricouer, Bruno Latour, Rita Felski, Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best, Elaine Freedgood and Cannon Schmitt, Franco Moretti, or Heather Love, for example, have explored surface/distance/descriptive methodologies as possible alternatives to the deep/suspicious/paranoid methodologies of reader that have proliferated in literary criticism.^(^)

(13)Nicholson argues:

Crucially, these conversations [on Twitter] need not be limited to professional scholars. Twitter allows us to connect with librarians, archivists, museum workers, journalists, TV producers, novelists, artists, genealogists, teachers, and history enthusiasts from the general public—few of whom engage with academic discourse through conventional channels. At a time when funding bodies increasingly require us to demonstrate the public “impact” of our research, this ability to communicate with a non-academic audience and make connections with other media outlets is particularly valuable. (256)([^](#))

(14) Jane Eyre famously addresses her “Reader” to express her recognition of the possible negative conclusions to which one might come about her intentions or actions. ([^](#))

(15) These search results reflect the use of quotation marks in the basic search so as to return only results in which these combinations of words appear together and in the titular order. ([^](#))

(16) There is an emphasis on practice in the digital humanities (DH) that enriches my consideration here of scholarly and pedagogical approaches to underread texts. Jessica Pressman and Lisa Swanstrom have argued for DH as shaping a big-tent “literary” that is as much about practice as text:

The “literary” is not limited to literature, to canonical texts, or even, for that matter, to texts and words. Rather, our focus on the literary assumes the inseparability of praxis and theory, art and criticism, and, of course, the operative binary in current DH debates—making and interpreting....
(Pressman and Swanstrom)

This framework for the literary as that which is of and between “making and interpreting” resonates with the ways in which I’m thinking about the practices of canonicity and the ways in which our scholarship and teaching both establish and analyze those practices. ([^](#))

(17) For more on Chicano/a borderlands theory, see, for example Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza* and *Criticism in the Borderlands: Studies in Chicano Literature, Culture, and Ideology*, edited by Héctor Calderón and José David Saldívar. ([^](#))

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