

“The vast ocean of infinity & eternity”: Creating the (In)finite Archive of *The Elizabeth Montagu’s Correspondence Online (EMCO)**

Nicole Pohl

To cite this article: Nicole Pohl (2023) “The vast ocean of infinity & eternity”: Creating the (In)finite Archive of *The Elizabeth Montagu’s Correspondence Online (EMCO)**, *Women's Writing*, 30:4, 439-456, DOI: [10.1080/09699082.2023.2266081](https://doi.org/10.1080/09699082.2023.2266081)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09699082.2023.2266081>




© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group




Published online: 31 Oct 2023.




[Submit your article to this journal](#) 



[View related articles](#) 



[View Crossmark data](#) 



OPEN ACCESS



“THE VAST OCEAN OF INFINITY & ETERNITY”: CREATING THE (IN)FINITE ARCHIVE OF *THE ELIZABETH MONTAGU’S CORRESPONDENCE ONLINE (EMCO)*^{*}

Nicole Pohl

Oxford Brookes University, Oxford, UK

ABSTRACT

This article explores the complexities of creating an archive – in our case, a digital archive of eighteenth-century manuscript letters, *The Elizabeth Montagu Correspondence Online (EMCO)*. Elizabeth Montagu was one of the most prominent and well-connected women in eighteenth-century polite society. *EMCO* faces a variety of challenges. Firstly, the project aims to trace all extant letters in different libraries and public/private collections; secondly, it seeks to amalgamate the extant correspondence into one digital repository and a comprehensive inventory; thirdly, it mobilises a team of scholars to transcribe, annotate and develop a critical apparatus; fourthly, *EMCO* seeks to develop digital tools that foster novel methods of scholarly research and debate. Taking recent scholarship on board, this article concludes by reflecting on the complexities of marrying a data-rich digital edition with literary methodologies that allow both close reading and analysis of the scope and materiality of the archive and its objects.

KEYWORDS “Infinite archive”; Elizabeth Montagu; Bluestockings; Jacques Derrida; Franco Moretti; close reading; distant reading; data visualisation

This article will explore the processes and methodologies involved in creating a digital archive comprising the eighteenth-century manuscript letters of Elizabeth Montagu, *The Elizabeth Montagu Correspondence Online (EMCO)*. It will engage, firstly, with the practical difficulties of curating a vast digital

CONTACT Nicole Pohl  Npohl@brookes.ac.uk

^{*}I dedicate this essay to the memory of Marilyn Morris, who passed away in August 2022 after a long and courageous battle with cancer. Once a documentary editor herself at the Franklin Papers, Marilyn Morris introduced me to the myriad complexities of eighteenth-century manuscript letters with great expertise and the necessary unique sense of humour. Some of this research has appeared in a different form in Caroline Franklin and Nicole Pohl, “An editor’s duty is indeed that of most danger: Editing Elizabeth Montagu,” *Chawton Studies in Scholarly Editing: Editing Women’s Writing, 1670–1840*, ed. Amy Culley and Anna M. Fitzer (London and New York: Routledge, 2017) 172–192.

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

archive of original letters that are scattered across different libraries and repositories. Relevant to the creation of the archive, a range of past editors, including Elizabeth Montagu herself, invested more in creating (auto-) hagiographies than careful preservation of the manuscript materials as historical documents. Any editor, therefore, faces challenges, including (self-) censorship (emendations, blackened or cut passages), lost or destroyed letters and incomplete correspondence – in short, the arbitrariness of the archive not only creates practical and methodological problems but demands skilled discrimination and interpretation. Drawing on current debate about the nature of the archive (the challenges as well as the benefits of digital technologies for literary and historical studies), this article will then point towards the decision-making processes behind *EMCO* in constructing, presenting and interpreting textual data. It will discuss the complexities of applying digital and critical methodologies to a data-rich digital edition.¹

I

Elizabeth Montagu (1718–1800) was a pioneering literary critic, business-woman, salon host and writer. Her vast correspondence with leading politicians, intellectuals, writers and artists spans nearly the whole century and represents an important historical corpus for literary and historical scholars of the eighteenth century. Her correspondence is comparable to the *Horace Walpole Correspondence*, also now made available online.² W. S. Lewis (1895–1979), the editor of the *Walpole Correspondence*, declared that:

the eighteenth-century scholar, be his subject what it may, must consult Walpole's correspondence. Politics, Society, Literature, and the Arts, are the subjects, which immediately come to mind when Horace Walpole is thought of, but there are as many more as there were divisions in eighteenth-century life. This edition, through its index, hopes to lead the scholar, whether the subject of his search is Dr Johnson or ballooning, to whatever Walpole's correspondence may have to say about it.³

Without disputing the centrality of Walpole's archive to scholarship, I would suggest that any archive is somewhat arbitrary; it is “on the one hand a history of conversation ... on the other, a history of loss”.⁴ Yet, as W. S. Lewis has previously suggested, the archive also preserves what it can *and* chooses to preserve. Paul J. Voss and Marta L. Werner similarly point up this paradoxical aspect: “The archive preserves and reserves, protects and patrols, regulates and represses”.⁵ Scholars of women's writing and women's history might agree that, traditionally, historical documents and archives have been used to exclude and suppress.⁶ In this connection, Marlene Manoff observes that the area of Women's Studies was developed

as one way of helping to write women back into the historical record – “to fill the gaps and correct the omissions in the archive”.⁷ The publication of Elizabeth Montagu’s *Correspondence* reorientates our understanding of history and culture, and this is important since we draw upon the authority of the past for today’s feminism. One of the key aims of *EMCO* is to highlight and present a more nuanced and complex view of women’s roles in eighteenth-century public life. Elizabeth Montagu’s letters indicate that elite women were well-informed about and interested in politics, economics, society and culture. And, in a similar way to the *Walpole Edition*, the correspondence of Elizabeth Montagu gives us insight into literary debate and a diverse range of other topics, including wars and politics, health care, interior design, fashion, garden design and agriculture, coal mining and, yes, ballooning.

Elizabeth Montagu was born in York on 2 October 1718 as Elizabeth Robinson. She was the fifth of nine children, and the first daughter born to Matthew Robinson (1694–1778) and Elizabeth Drake (c. 1693–1746). The Robinsons were a prominent Yorkshire family. Matthew Robinson’s direct relatives were heirs of the estates of West Layton and Kirby Hall, North Yorkshire. The other branch of the family had their estate, which was located at Rokeby Park, rebuilt in fashionable Palladian style in 1723 by Sir Thomas Robinson (1702/3–77). Elizabeth Drake was the daughter of Councillor Robert Drake of Cambridge. After his death, her mother married Dr Conyers Middleton (1683–1750), the famous Cambridge scholar and clergyman, in 1710. Elizabeth Drake is said to have been educated at the school of Bathsua Makin in London, and in turn made the education of her children a paramount concern, taking advantage of Middleton’s services several times a year. Middleton was also Librarian to Edward Harley, the 2nd Earl of Oxford and Earl Mortimer (1689–1741), one of the most significant book collectors and patrons of his time. Middleton introduced Elizabeth Robinson to the Harley family at Wimpole Hall, and this is how a lifelong friendship and correspondence with Margaret Cavendish Harley, later Bentinck (1715–1785), began.

In 1742, Elizabeth married Edward Montagu (1692–1776), the grandson of the Earl of Sandwich, MP and coal magnate, who was almost thirty years her senior. This favourable marriage established Elizabeth Montagu in polite society and in the court circles of her time. From the 1750s onwards, she began to host salons in London alongside other fashionable hosts such as Elizabeth Vesey (c. 1715–91) and Frances Boscawen (1719–1805). These gatherings became what we now know as the *Bluestocking Circle*.⁸ Frequent guests were Hannah More, Mary Delany, Margaret Bentinck, Duchess of Portland, Elizabeth Carter, Sir Joshua Reynolds and his sister, Frances, Frances Burney, Samuel Johnson, William Pulteney, 1st Earl of Bath, James Boswell, David and Eva Garrick, Edmund Burke,

George Lyttelton, Mrs Ord, Mrs Crewe and Benjamin Stillingfleet, amongst others. It was Benjamin Stillingfleet (1702–1771), the botanist and author, who possibly inspired the name, as he chose to wear informal blue worsted stockings to the assemblies. His preference for casual attire was not perceived as a detriment. Casual attire helped to signal that Stillingfleet was a modest, sober man. He owned no fine stockings; therefore, he was not subject to luxury.

The Bluestockings were successful, as testified to in a second generation of salon gatherings which continued the Bluestockings name into the 1780s. Together, these women, and the eminent men who attended the salons, practised a new kind of informal sociability and nurtured a sense of intellectual community and potential. The assemblies differed from the traditional card-playing gatherings of the time by nurturing intellectual pursuits, polite conversation, philanthropic projects and publishing ventures. They were somewhat similar to the French salons, also led by women, in their principles of polite sociability, limited social mobility based on merit, and equality between the sexes based on rational friendship and intellectual exchange. As such, they allowed middle-class and aristocratic visitors to exchange ideas about politics, literature and culture, also facilitating matchmaking between patrons and protégés.

In 1767, Elizabeth Montagu wrote, “I am a Critick, a Coal owner, a Land Steward, a Sociable Creature ... one must write”.⁹ Indeed, Montagu was prolific in her letter writing. From her teens until her eighties, Montagu dedicated some hours every day to composing letters, be they virtual missives about literature and the arts to her sister, Sarah Scott, and fellow female intellectuals; business letters to the stewards of her coalmines/estates and architects of her mansions; or family letters to her extended family. Montagu also corresponded extensively with leaders of British Enlightenment cotereries, such as Edmund Burke, Gilbert West, David Garrick and Horace Walpole, as well as the Bluestockings’ inner circle – Elizabeth Carter, Sarah Scott, Hannah More, Hester Thrale Piozzi, Frances Burney, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Elizabeth Vesey and Frances Boscawen. Like many female intellectuals, she revelled in the democratisation of pen and ink: “Of all fowl I love the goose best, who supplies us with her quill, surely a goose is a godly bird; if its hiss be insignificant, remember that from its side the engine is taken with which the laws are registered, and history recorded”, she noted.¹⁰ Barbara Brandon Schnorrenberg has described the survival of Elizabeth Montagu’s letters as “among the most important surviving collections from the eighteenth century”.¹¹ In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a limited selection of the letters were published and, in those cases, the letters were more often presented as excerpts and inaccurately compiled. Editions of Montagu’s correspondents, too, offer excerpts and often inaccurately assembled reprints of Montagu’s letters.¹²

The best part of the letters is at the Huntington Library, San Marino, California.¹³ There are 6,923 items (chiefly letters) in the Huntington Library – arranged chronologically in 117 boxes. There are hundreds more Montagu letters in the British Library, London, the Bodleian Library, Oxford, university libraries at Aberdeen, Manchester and Nottingham, as well as at the following US repositories: American Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University, Princeton University, Cornell University and the Houghton Library, Harvard. Other collections of Montagu letters and family papers are still held either in private repositories, in the special collections of local repositories or in private hands. To date, *EMCO* has identified twenty-five libraries and special collections that hold letters by Elizabeth Montagu.¹⁴

The Elizabeth Montagu Correspondence Online project has a number of ambitious aims: a) to trace all extant letters by Elizabeth Montagu – this process is still ongoing; b) to bring together all the extant correspondence into one digital repository; and c) to develop tools beyond the transcription/annotation process, fostering innovative methods of scholarly research and debate which utilise the opportunities offered by digital resources and methods.

II

Emily Climenson's (1844–1921) description of her laborious task of compiling an edition of her great-great-aunt Elizabeth Montagu's correspondence surely resonates with any scholar who has ever worked in archives to transcribe, edit and even order manuscript letters:

Owing to the enormous quantity of letters undated, the sorting has been terribly difficult, and I spent an entire winter in making up bundles and labelling each year. My grandfather made a variety of mistakes as to the dates of the letters. I hope I have atoned for some of his deficiencies, though a few mistakes are probably inevitable. He nearly blinded himself by working at night, and my grandmother had constantly to copy the letters in a large round hand to enable him to make them out.¹⁵

Climenson was realistic about her task; she knew that many dates allocated to Montagu's letters would remain provisional (Montagu rarely dated her letters properly), that numerous letters to and by Elizabeth Montagu had vanished and thus that any edition would be incomplete and contain errors. However, Climenson was sustained by the realisation that the extant letters were unique, and she struggled on. To her, the archive of Montagu's letters seemed infinite; to create any form of order was well nigh impossible. Her lament is reminiscent of Jorge Louis Borges' short story, "The Library of Babel" (1941), which illuminates the impossibility of originality, classification, order and absolute knowledge of the universe (or the

archive).¹⁶ Climenson, like the narrator in Borges' story, wrangled with "archive fever", the feverish desire to collect, order and classify historical/personal documents as memory.¹⁷

Nevertheless, unlike Borges' narrator, Climenson managed to publish two volumes of *Elizabeth Montagu, the Queen of the Bluestockings* in 1906. However, Emily Climenson was not the first editor of Elizabeth Montagu's correspondences. Elizabeth Montagu herself had been a careful editor, indeed curator, of her correspondence and strove to preserve her letters as a collection – authored and received. We mainly owe it to her forethought that we have so many letters available to us. Like many of her contemporaries, Montagu valued letters as essential forms of communication, as material objects and as tokens of patronage, and friendship.¹⁸ Therefore, she sought to collect and store them carefully. Montagu kept all letters sent to her. In the year of their marriage, Edward Montagu had already started to spend time "reading & sorting your letters, which always give me new pleasure, & which I shall preserve as the most valuable writings belonging to me".¹⁹ As Elizabeth Montagu was so long-lived, and because she had also carefully kept and sometimes copied the letters she had received from her friends, the collection was extensive when she died. In the absence of technologies of reproduction, Elizabeth Montagu ordered copies of her letters to be made by her sister, Sarah Scott, who oversaw the whole process of copying, which also involved other women in the household such as Dorothy Gregory, Elizabeth Montagu (née Charlton) and her niece, Sarah Elizabeth Robinson.²⁰ Once, before her death, Elizabeth Montagu asked Elizabeth Vesey to return her letters so as to circulate them: "I wish you w^d send me some of my letters back I mean such as you have read, I want the letters for a friend, I w^d have only such as are copied, the originals are hardly legible".²¹ This "social extra-circulation" confirms that letters were shared and read not only within the private domain of the family but beyond with friends and fellow intellectuals.²²

The episode demonstrates the extent to which Montagu used letter writing as a form of literary criticism, and as a way to collaborate and co-author literary works. To facilitate this extra-circulation, letters had to be conserved.²³ They were generally bound together by thread or wire into letter books, as copies or as originals, though, in Montagu's case, we only have a few thread-bound copybooks. Alternatively, letters were folded into neat rectangles and endorsed by a note on the back as to the recipient and contents. Then, bundles of letters were stored methodically in desks and chests, as this letter from Elizabeth Vesey indicates:

I have not been able to find much less to select Mrs. Carters letters ... Those fine ones I mention'd are lock'd up in a saving Box in Ireland particularly

that wrote upon her return from Miss Talbot's funeral which one day touch the Heart & improve the religious feelings of Posterity.²⁴

Like Vessey, Montagu Pennington (1762–1849), who was the nephew and executor of Elizabeth Carter, eventually published the correspondence between the Bluestockings Elizabeth Carter and Catherine Talbot. Pennington found the letters by Carter and Talbot carefully preserved:

regularly arranged, and bound up in volumes, with all such names carefully erased by herself [Carter] as she did not chuse to appear in them; and the letters to Mrs. Vesey were left just as she had received them after that lady's decease, with the Letter from Mrs. Vesey still lying upon them, in which she so earnestly recommends, and from such powerful motives that they should be given to the public.²⁵

Elizabeth Montagu adopted a slightly different strategy; she originally collated copies of her letters with the letters she received from her correspondents, creating an artificial yet logical sequence of communication between sender and addressee.²⁶ This form of archiving circumvented the historical sequence of events where letters often took days to be delivered, went astray or were read by others (not the addressees). Jacques Derrida terms this the “circuitous routes and detours of human communication and identity” of what is perhaps the most ephemeral mode of writing.²⁷ Montagu justified the collection of her own and received letters as a form of preserving personal memories. She wrote to her niece, Sarah Elizabeth Robinson, in 1783:

You did my letters undeserved honour in taking the trouble to copy them, as I am arrived at an age to look back on my past life with more pleasure, perhaps, than to future expectations, I have found some satisfaction in the recollection of former days, which letters then written presents to the mind in a more distinct & lively manner than memory can do. Whatever gave one great joy, or grief, leaves strong marks on the mind, but the soft & gentle pleasures like ye annual flowers in a garden, pass away with y^e season, unless thus preserved.²⁸

Given her early attention to preserving and controlling the circulation of copies of her letters, and collecting received letters, Montagu did something more than collect letters for her memory. Indeed, she “operated a sophisticated letter archive” that not only affected her copying and collecting practice but also coloured her writing style – in short, her epistolary performativity.²⁹ Unlike her sister, Sarah Scott, who instructed her executor, Mary Arnold, to destroy most of the letters and papers in her possession, and Elizabeth Carter, who gave very clear instructions about which letters should be destroyed and which returned to senders, Elizabeth Montagu made sure that the corpus of her correspondence had an afterlife.

If Elizabeth Montagu curated her letter archive, subsequent editors, collectors and archivists created “an archive of archives”.³⁰ Between 1809 and 1813, Matthew Montagu, Elizabeth Montagu’s executor, accumulated the collection of letters that we now find housed at the Huntington Library.³¹ It was usual for letters to be returned to the originator on the recipient’s death, and Matthew Montagu made every effort to trace extant letters. He published four volumes of letters with a selection of letters by Elizabeth Montagu and some of her correspondents to the year 1761, an edition heavily censored and edited. In 1817, Montagu Pennington, who was also Elizabeth Montagu’s godson, published Elizabeth Carter’s letters to Elizabeth Montagu, Catherine Talbot and Elizabeth Vesey as part of Carter’s biography. In 1873, John Doran, a popular editor and writer of miscellanies, used the autograph letters collected by the publisher, Richard Bentley (1794–1871), as the basis of his biography of Elizabeth Montagu (citing the predominately family letters extensively).³² After the death of Matthew Montagu in 1831, Emily Climenson inherited his corpus of letters. Volume One of her *Queen of the Bluestockings* takes the reader from Elizabeth Montagu’s birth through to 1751. Volume Two covers arguably the most prolific period in Montagu’s life, from 1751 to 1761. Her emotional investment in the Robinson/Montagu family also governed the selection of passages to be printed and published. She in turn left the letters to her friend, Reginald Blunt, who published two volumes of selected letters, completing the years 1762 to Elizabeth Montagu’s death in 1800.³³ The most recent print editions of Elizabeth Montagu’s letters again only focus on selections or, in the case of *The Letters of Sarah Scott*, on family letters written to Montagu.³⁴

Scholarship on the Bluestockings and specifically Elizabeth Montagu thus relied on heavily edited and censored, at times inaccurately transcribed, excerpted manuscript letters, unless scholars were able to access the different archives directly. One of the motivations for *EMCO* is to provide scholars and readers with open access to Montagu’s extant letters. Given that the Elizabeth Montagu Collection is one of the most used collections at the Huntington Library, a digital edition will help to preserve the fragile documents for future generations. If Montagu as well as her subsequent editors made archival decisions about letters, modern editors, librarians, archivists and readers, too, have left physical traces on the original manuscripts in terms of emendations, mark-ups, deletions, comments or the removal of sections of letters.³⁵ Emma Major reminds us that:

[t]he privilege of using manuscript letter collections means that layers of editing are made visible. Passages and names that descendants or editors thought should be permanently erased had been struck out in thick ink, while the different forms of handwriting that Montagu had used for her fair

copies of earlier letters highlighted the careful self-preservation involved in her epistolary practice.³⁶

These layers of archiving, editing, and reading allow scholars a glimpse into the editorial, archival, transmission and reception history of the letters. Blue pencil marks and asides, black pencil and ink comments in different hands, strike-throughs and deletions indicate past editors' and archivists' attempts to date, classify and identify Montagu's letters. The Huntington Library collection also keeps the multitude of observations from readers inserted on separate notes that comment on the date and location of Montagu's letters – a truly participatory “archive of archives”.

III

If Climenson was affected by “archive fever”, we too are fascinated by the aura that surrounds the physicality and materiality of writing on paper – its spaces, places, cultural practices, representation, tools and the symbolisation these carry with them as they disappear into history. Our increasing attachment to handwritten letters, postcards, notebooks, diaries, account books, ledgers, pen and ink, the postal system, cursive handwriting, the printed book and even the physical library are, yes, a reflection of modern medial changes of communication. Furthermore, epistolarity has been elevated to an expression of authenticity, based on the perception that the letter encapsulates a sense of immediacy and physicality. Digital editions of these “paper trails and eloquent objects” would, some might argue, disconnect us from the materiality of the object.³⁷ Indeed, digitisation, argues Arlette Farge, creates a mere *simulacrum* of physical objects, objects that are defined by their very physicality and soul – the poetics of the archive.³⁸ With digitisation, we lose the “unmediated lived experience” of the physical object.³⁹ However, vice-versa, we encounter problems too. Marie-Laure Ryan reminds us that:

[a] truly digital text, or narrative, is one that cannot be transferred into the print medium without significant loss. It depends on the computer as a sustaining environment, and it uses the screen (or any other display device) as a stage for performance.⁴⁰

Digital technologies and methodologies also add, according to Roy Rosenzweig, a “fundamental paradigm shift from a culture of scarcity to a culture of abundance”.⁴¹ Thus, as he argues, the digital age has catapulted historical research (and also therefore the creation of archives) from scarcity to an abundance of information, access to primary sources and, of course, data mining tools. In the case of *EMCO*, the digital archive originates from a vast number of non-digital sources – that is, original manuscript letters from the eighteenth century. A print edition on this scale would require

extensive financial investment by publishers, grant givers and academics to produce an edition similar to the *Horace Walpole Letters*. As a matter of fact, W. S. Lewis' editorship stretched across nearly 50 years (1937–83).⁴² A print edition would also preclude continuous corrections, adjustments and the participatory editorial processes that we find embedded in the use and reception of the Montagu Collection at the Huntington Library. In addition, a print edition does not easily allow for new discoveries. In 1948, the literary critic, William Powell Jones, lamented that there were very few letters outside of the Matthew Montagu/Climenson archive that were available to readers and scholars at the time.⁴³ Today, digital library/archive catalogues make it possible to source additional and hitherto unknown personal papers and manuscript letters, enabling (virtual) correspondences with scholars across the world, the sourcing and location of even more letters, and the instant digitising and sharing of those letters – potentially, an “infinite archive”.⁴⁴ And we have found more extant letters, family papers and deeds than we could ever hope for. Thus, our task is infinitely easier than Climenson's.

The goals of *EMCO* are, firstly, to fulfil Elizabeth Montagu's wishes for an “intentional archive”, to source, collate and bring together on an open access digital platform of all the extant letters written by (and in some cases to) Elizabeth Montagu.⁴⁵ Secondly, we will (diplomatically) transcribe, critically annotate and publish all extant letters by Elizabeth Montagu. The correspondence will be published in parts by correspondent, each part having its own critical introduction, maps and biographical section.⁴⁶ An inventory listing location, date and the author of extant letters will be the backbone of the edition, with updates provided on a regular basis. Images of the original manuscripts will be presented and made accessible, alongside the diplomatic transcription, via different tab functions. The *apparatus criticus* consists of explanatory footnotes, in-text links to references to people and places, allusions and notes on borrowings from literature. It is up to the user to access the *apparatus*; this means the edition will cater simultaneously to scholars and a non-specialist readership of researchers, educationalists, heritage professionals and students of genealogy and local history. Thirdly, we aim to develop tools beyond the transcription/annotation process, fostering novel methods of scholarly research and debate that utilise the opportunities offered by digital resources and methods.

The critical and methodological choices we made to construct, present and interpret the textual data were determined by a) the sheer scale of the project; b) access to financial funding to support the work; c) current developments in Digital Humanities; and d) the intellectual and scholarly interests of the section editors under the guidance of the General Editor. Elena Pierazzo calls editions such as *EMCO paradigmatic*

as they embed many alternative options for the same string of text in a non-linear way, as opposed to editions that can only display the text in one format (such as printed editions, among others), which could instead be called *syntagmatic* editions. Text encoding has in fact enabled editors to have their cake and eat it: features that were once normalized without mercy to produce reading, critical (or *syntagmatic*) editions can now be retained and simply switched on and off at leisure to please different audiences, thereby opening the way to new scholarship and readership.⁴⁷

Certainly, digital tools can provide the means to showcase multiple representations of the original document – facsimiles, diplomatic transcription, critical editions and copies in other hands. The transcriptions are searchable. Because Montagu's letters are scattered in libraries, archives and private collections around the world, the inventory of all the known letters written by Elizabeth Montagu will revolutionise how her letters are used. *EMCO* also develops and applies data-visualisation tools beyond scholarly digital tools. Users of *EMCO* can currently access geographical information via simple Google Map technology. However, we have started to apply more multifaceted tools to visualise the geographical and historical dimensions of Elizabeth Montagu's social and familial circles.

Firstly, we focused on the local. Elizabeth Montagu had many connections with Yorkshire. Her father's family, the Robinsons, had lived in the county since at least 1521, and had acquired the Rokeby estate by 1610. Elizabeth's husband, Edward Montagu, also inherited significant estates there, and she became sole owner of these after his death. We developed a participatory map, soon to be available on our website, that enables users to click on the places relevant to these Yorkshire connections. These points will lead users to historical descriptions of the locations and biographies of the people associated with them.⁴⁸

Secondly, we focused on the transnational. In collaboration with the *Correspondance d'Isabelle de Charrière / Brieven van Belle van Zuylen* Project, we are currently developing a dynamic tripartite data visualisation pilot that captures Elizabeth Montagu's and de Charrière's social connections through time.⁴⁹ In terms of network analysis, the pilot uses epistolary networks (letters as edges) to identify a temporal interaction pattern between the correspondents (users as nodes). This temporal graph offers perspectives on how the epistolary networks of both prominent *salonnières* developed and changed throughout the period investigated, and, furthermore, establishes if there are overlapping contacts or communities.

These technologies of data mining are useful. Whilst the actual number of Montagu's letters are ultimately finite, the future development of digital tools could make data-mining infinite. Yet there are also dangers and distractions; primarily, these technologies can favour the image above the source text, its context and genesis. Moreover, whilst data visualisation is a useful tool to

abstract specific data, it does not provide evidence *per se* and needs to be followed up by research questions and qualitative and quantitative analyses. Fundamentally, as Daniel J. Cohen reminds us, these applications can distract us from the very act of reading:

we find documents of interest for our research, we can manipulate them. We can combine information from a set of documents with details from another set. We can extract place names from a text and map them. We can overlay historical photographs on maps of existing neighborhoods to assess change over time. We can do good-enough (and bound-to-get-better) translations for quick skimming if our knowledge of a language is less than perfect alters how we read the archives – to data mine not to read the texts.⁵⁰

In the context of literary and historical study, these reflections link to “distant reading”, a methodology pioneered by Franco Moretti, which signifies this large-scale data-mining that seeks to identify trends and patterns in literary history (particularly world literary history).⁵¹ Moretti’s point of departure was to rethink, indeed revolutionise, the literary canon (determined by class, gender and race) by including the largest possible sample of world literature so as to arrive at valid assessments about the production and genesis of literature (he described the canon of forgotten books as a “slaughterhouse”).⁵² In opposition to what his critics assumed, quantification and macroanalysis were not Moretti’s paths to Borges’ infinite universe, but ways of challenging narrow literary research and historical coverage.⁵³ Earlier in this essay, we touched on the self-imposed censorship nature of archives and archiving. This is also relevant to curating archives. Noelle A. Baker and Sandy H. Petruionis challenge the documentary editors of today to look beyond the canon in their research endeavours and methodologies; they write:

How should we evaluate the fragmented writings of less celebrated figures? How do their damaged, coded or recently accessible texts shed light on the varied traditions of women’s writing? How might emerging theories of digital archival environments enable us to interpret and represent the physical features of ... manuscripts, their layered scribal witnesses, mixed genres and non-linear structure?⁵⁴

EMCO provides the data and the tools to recover a prominent figure such as Elizabeth Montagu – and her letters – for historical and literary research. These letters shed light on the crucial part middling and genteel women played in the Enlightenment. The keyword search function will allow users from different disciplines to collate primary source materials about eighteenth-century medicine, politics, history, craft and material culture, architecture and design, coal industry and banking. The letters will also enable explorations of epistolary forms and practices, including the relationship between manuscript and print cultures. Lastly, the geographical, temporal

and social diversity of the archive will facilitate new research into women's social networks. *EMCO* sees itself as a component of what Katherine Bode describes as "data-rich" literary history.⁵⁵ Bode's premise is that Moretti's and Jockers' quantitative literary analyses ignore the principles of textual scholarship.⁵⁶ On the other side of the coin, "close reading", indebted to New Criticism, perceives texts as autotelic and thus is blind to a multitude of important textual data and socio-historical codes embedded in the text. Bode sees a possible integration of quantitative analyses with the methodologies of literary scholarship, including close reading, into what she calls, the "scholarly edition" as expedient. The tenet of the scholarly edition, as Bode sees it, is critical self-reflexivity – a critical awareness of editorial and (digital) methodological choices arrived at, in short, not only through close reading but also through the construction and presentation of textual/digital data. Whilst Bode is specifically talking about scholarly editions of literary texts, her argument is also useful for documentary editions. Pierazzo, too, argues for new forms of documentary digital editions; she too sees value in the conversation between textual studies and digital technologies:

Different editorial frameworks may be suitable to different types of text or to different types of research questions. There might be some editions that are therefore more equal than others, but this attribution needs to be contextualized considering the type of document, the type of text, the research question, and so on. Attributing the supremacy of one editorial framework over another a priori would be an error. The diffusion of DDEs [Digital Documentary Editions] is offering the opportunity of opening new paths to scholarship, exploring and unpacking the bibliographic and "codicological codes" of our texts, with consequences to textual studies that have yet to be quantified but are hard to overestimate.⁵⁷

Conclusion

EMCO is an intentional archive. At the same time, it is a digital scholarly edition, guided by digital and textual paradigms in theory, method and practice. It makes available primary sources in their variants and copies to facilitate comparative textual analyses, and it develops data visualisation tools that enable the development of new research questions. Given the scale of a project that demanded the division of the work packages into sections (correspondents) edited by different editors, *EMCO* allows for a diversity of close readings. Indeed, close reading for us, the editors, is a given. We annotate, comment, date, discuss, read and re-read, close read, distant read, revise and debate. The editorial guidelines and the digital tools were developed as part of a collaborative process. We hope that users do the same so as to comment, date, discuss, read, re-read and share their findings with us.⁵⁸

The digital format of *EMCO* allows for continuous updates, corrections, debates and discussions, all of which are facilitated and enabled by the ongoing maintenance work undertaken by Swansea University and its Digital Humanities Department.⁵⁹

First and foremost, we are indebted to the foresight of Elizabeth Montagu to realise that her correspondence and personal papers are an invaluable historical source. We are also grateful to Matthew Montagu, Emily Climenson and the other previous editors of Elizabeth Montagu's correspondence. Whilst it is easy to criticise their archaic editorial methodologies, we need to put these into a historical perspective, yet also recover that which has been erased. As Peter Shillingsburg rightly says, "[e]ach generation seems to hope for the best answer and finds the effort of the older generations to be inadequate. Soon it will be our turn to have failed."⁶⁰

Notes

1. On the issue of data-rich literary histories, see Katherine Bode, *A World of Fiction: Digital Collections and the Future of Literary History* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018), pp. 37–58.
2. See <https://walpole.library.yale.edu/online-content/digital-resources/horace-walpole-correspondence> (accessed 23 January 2023).
3. W. S. Lewis, "Preface", *The Yale Edition of Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, ed. W. S. Lewis, 48 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937–1983) I, pp. ix–xxiv (xxi).
4. Paul J. Voss and Marta L. Werner, "Towards a Poetics of the Archive: Introduction", *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 32.1 (1999): i–vii (i).
5. Vos and Werner i.
6. On the "imperial archive", see Marlene Naoff, "Theories of the Archives from Across the Disciplines", *Portal: Libraries and the Academy*, 4.1 (2004): 9–25 (15).
7. Naoff 15. See also Ann D. Gordon, "Experiencing Women's History as a Documentary Editor", *Documentary Editing*, 31 (2010): 1–9.
8. For further information, see Nicole Pohl and Betty Schellenberg, eds., *Reconsidering the Bluestockings* (San Marino, California: Henry E. Huntington Library, 2003); Sylvia Harcstark Myers, *The Bluestocking Circle: Women, Friendship, and the Life of the Mind in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990); Elizabeth Eger, ed., *Bluestockings Displayed: Women of Reason from Enlightenment to Romanticism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).
9. Elizabeth Montagu to Sarah Robinson Scott, 26 December [1767], Huntington Library, San Marino, California, MO 5871.
10. Elizabeth Montagu to the Duchess of Portland, 3 September 1745, in Matthew Montagu, ed., *The Letters of Mrs. Elizabeth Montagu with Some of the Letters of Her Correspondents*, 4 vols (London: T. Cadell & W. Davies, 1809) i, p. 14.
11. Barbara Brandon Schnorrenberg, "Montagu [née Robinson], Elizabeth, author and literary hostess," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 23 September 2004. Available online: <https://www-oxforddnb-com.oxfordbrookes.idm>.

- odc.org/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-19014 (accessed 23 January 2023).
12. See, for instance, William Forbes' discussion of the Beattie letters, later published as *An Account of the Life and Writings of James Beattie: Including Many of His Original Letters*, 2 vols (London: Printed for E. Roper, 1824).
 13. See the Montagu Letters finding aid available online at: [https://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/tf767nb23s/?query=Montagu+\(Elizabeth+Robinson\)+Papers](https://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/tf767nb23s/?query=Montagu+(Elizabeth+Robinson)+Papers) (accessed 15 June 2023).
 14. See <https://emco.swan.ac.uk/project/funders> (accessed 15 June 2023).
 15. Elizabeth Montagu, *The Queen of the Blue-Stockings, Her Correspondence from 1720 to 1761*, ed. Emily J. Climençon, 2 vols (London: John Murray, 1906) I, p. vii.
 16. Jorge Louis Borges, "The Library of Babel," *Collected Fictions*, tr. Andrew Hurley (London: Viking, 1999), pp. 112–118 (112).
 17. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, tr. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996). Climençon's *The Queen of the Blue-Stockings* was not her only book. She also published *Passages from the diaries of Mrs. Philip Lybbe Powys of Hardwick House, Oxon. A.D. 1756 to 1808* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1899); *The History of Shiplake, Oxon.: With Allusions to Contemporary Events in the Neighbourhood* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1894); *A guide to Henley-on-Thames* (Henley-on-Thames: Sidney H. Higgins, 1896); and the novel, *Strange adventures in the County of Dorset, A.D 1747* (Reading: G. A. Poynder, 1906).
 18. See Elizabeth Eger, "Paper Trails and Eloquent Objects: Bluestocking Friendship and Material Culture", *Parergon*, 26.2 (2009): 109–38.
 19. Edward Montagu to Elizabeth Montagu, 21 December 1742, Huntington Library, San Marino, California, MO 1717.
 20. The first copying machine was patented in 1780 by James Watt and further developed by his son, James Watt. William Godwin used the machine to duplicate outgoing letters. See Pamela Clemit, "Commerce of Luminaries: Eight Letters between William Godwin and Thomas Wedgewood," *Godwinian Moments: From the Enlightenment to Romanticism*, ed. Robert M. Maniquis and Victoria Myers (Toronto and London: University of Toronto Press, 2011) 261–282 (264). The copies can be identified by the different hands and the lack of catchwords that some copies use. Furthermore, the copies can vary from the original letter. This is why EMCO decided to make available all images of the variants but only transcribe and edit the original if extant.
 21. Elizabeth Montagu to Elizabeth Vesey, n.d., Huntington Library, San Marino, California, MO 6557.
 22. Markman Ellis, "Letters, Organisation, and the Archive in Elizabeth Montagu's Correspondence", *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 81.4 (2018): 603–631 (614).
 23. See Nicole Pohl and Betty A. Schellenberg, "Sarah Scott, Elizabeth Montagu, and the Familiar Letter in Dialogue," *Women, Gender, and Print Culture in Eighteenth-Century Britain: Essays in Memory of Betty Rizzo*, ed. Temma Berg and Sonia Kane (Lanham: Lehigh University Press, 2013), pp. 123–44.
 24. Elizabeth Vesey to Elizabeth Carter, 25 January 1781, University of Manchester Library, Manchester, Mary Hamilton Papers, Ham/1/56/2/3.
 25. Montagu Pennington, ed., *A Series of Letters between Mrs. Elizabeth Carter and Miss Catherine Talbot from the Year 1741 to 1770: To Which Are Added Letters from Mrs. Elizabeth Carter to Mrs. Vesey between the Years 1763 and 1787*;

Published from the Original Manuscripts in the Possession of the Rev. Montagu Pennington M.A. Vicar of Northbourn in Kent Her Nephew and Executor; in Four Volumes, 4 vols (London: Printed for F. C. and J. Rivington, 1809) I, pp. iv–v.

26. The Huntington Library orders the letters by chronology and correspondent.
27. Diane Cousineau, *Letters and Labyrinths* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1997), p. 35. The ephemerality of epistolary communication is not only a structural problem but also a generic one. Critics struggle with the definition of the term “letter” in the eighteenth-century context where the genre ranges from the familiar letter to the commercial letter, the petition requesting patronage or political support, the “public” letter in the fashion of Jean-Baptiste le Rond d’Alembert and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and, finally, the “journal” letter. See Robert Halsband, Pierre Ribererette and Charles A. Porter, “On Editing Chateaubriand’s Correspondence,” *Yale French Studies* 71 (1986): 131–47; W. M. Decker, *Epistolary Practices: Letter Writing in America before Telecommunications* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); C. Porter, “Foreword,” *Yale French Studies: Men/Women of Letters*, 71 (1986): 1–14; Keith Stewart, “Towards Defining an Aesthetic for the Familiar Letter in Eighteenth-Century England,” *Prose Studies* 5 (1982): 179–92.
28. Elizabeth Montagu to Sarah Elizabeth Robinson, 31 December 1783, British Library, London, Additional Manuscripts 40663, fos 160–161.
29. Ellis 615. See Nicole Pohl and Betty A. Schellenberg, “Sarah Scott, Elizabeth Montagu, and the Familiar Letter in Dialogue,” *Women, Gender, and Print Culture in Eighteenth-Century Britain: Essays in Memory of Betty Rizzo*, ed. Temma Berg and Sonia Kane (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2013), pp. 123–44.
30. Ellis 613.
31. This letter corpus was complemented by additional letters acquired and eventually sold to the Huntington Library by the bookseller, A. S. W. Rosenbach, in 1925. To date, the library owns 3,500 letters by Montagu to her family and other Bluestockings, as well as c. 1,800 letters from a wider circle of friends, acquaintances and, of course, her family to her. The letters are in 117 boxes, catalogued, and, thanks to EMCO, digitised.
32. Richard Bentley’s collection of Elizabeth Montagu’s correspondence is housed at Princeton University Library. The library also has additional letters which were inserted by the lawyer, writer, autograph and book collector, Alexander Meyrick Broadley (1847–1916), into his own copy of Doran’s 1873 biography of Montagu. Broadley compiled 135 extra-illustrated or “grangerised” books such as *Doran’s Lady of the Last Century*. See <https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2012/english-literature-history-112408/lot.38.html> (accessed 23 January 2023).
33. Reginald Blunt, *Mrs Montagu “Queen of the Blues”: Her Letters and Friendships from 1762 to 1800*, 2 vols (Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1924).
34. Gary Kelly, ed., *Bluestocking Feminism: Writings of the Bluestocking Circle, 1738–1785*, 6 vols (London and New York: Routledge, 1999–2016); Nicole Pohl, ed., *The Letters of Sarah Scott*, 2 vols (London and New York: Routledge, 2016).
35. On the Elizabeth Montagu Letters archive at the Huntington Library, and its strategy of classification and ordering, see Ellis 603–31.

36. Emma Major, *Madam Britannia: Women, Church and Nation 1712–1812* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 83.
37. Eger 109–38.
38. Arlette Farge, *Le goût de l'archive* (Paris: Seuil, 1989), p. 18.
39. Heather Bamford and Emily C. Francomano, "On Digital-Medieval Manuscript Culture: A Tentative Manifesto", *Digital Philology: A Journal of Medieval Cultures* 7.1 (2018): 29–45 (35).
40. Marie-Laure Ryan, "Multivariant Narratives," *A Companion to Digital Humanities*, ed. Susan Schreibman, Ray Siemens and John Unsworth (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004). Available online: <http://www.digitalhumanities.org/companion> (accessed 15 June 2023).
41. Roy Rosenzweig, "Scarcity or Abundance? Preserving the Past in a Digital Era", *American Historical Review*, 108.3 (2003), pp. 735–62.
42. For the exhibition, "Rescuing Horace Walpole: The Achievement of W. S. Lewis", at Yale University, see <https://onlineexhibits.library.yale.edu/s/rescuingshw/page/intro> (accessed 15 December 2022).
43. William Powell Jones, "The Romantic Bluestocking, Elizabeth Montagu", *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 12.1 (1948): 85–98 (86).
44. See <https://emco.swan.ac.uk/home> (accessed 1 January 2023).
45. Daniel J. Cohen, Michael Frisch, Patrick Gallagher, Steven Mintz, Kirsten Sword, Amy Murrell Taylor, William G. Thomas and William J. Turkel, "Interchange: The Promise of Digital History", *The Journal of American History*, 95.2 (2008): 452–91 (457).
46. The decision only to edit and annotate Elizabeth Montagu's letters is a tactical one given the vast amount of letters. We make all extant answer letters available as facsimile. We offer diplomatic transcriptions but do not replicate the lay-out (ultra-diplomatic edition) of the letters in the transcribed versions.
47. Elena Pierazzo, "Digital Documentary Editions and the Others," *Scholarly Editing: The Annual of the Association for Documentary Editing* 35 (2014). Available online: <https://scholarlyediting.org/2014/essays/essay.pierazzo.html> (accessed 15 July 2021).
48. On the terminology of "interactive" and "participatory" digital tools, see Cohen, Frisch, Gallagher, Mintz, Sword, Taylor, Thomas and Turkel 460.
49. See <https://charriere.huygens.knaw.nl> (accessed 15 June 2023). We thank the British Academy for funding this pilot project.
50. Cohen, Frisch, Gallagher, Mintz, Sword, Taylor, Thomas and Turkel 455.
51. Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History* (London: Verso, 2005); Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (London: Verso, 2013).
52. Franco Moretti, "The Slaughterhouse of Literature", *MLQ: Modern Language Quarterly*, 61.1 (2000): 207–27. Katherine Bode is one of the critics of Moretti. See Katherine Bode, *Reading by Numbers: Calibrating the Literary Field* (London: Anthem, 2014). For a helpful summary of the debate, see Ted Underwood, "Distant Reading and Recent Intellectual History," *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, ed. Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2016) 530–3.
53. Matthew L. Jockers, *Macroanalysis: Digital Methods and Literary History* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2013).
54. Noelle A. Baker and Sandra Harbert Petruilionis, "The 'Almanacks' of Mary Moody Emerson: A Scholarly Digital Edition", *Documentary Editing*, 31 (2010): 10–24 (23).

55. Katherine Bode, “The Equivalence of “Close” and “Distant” Reading; Or, Toward a New Object for Data-Rich Literary History”, *Modern Language Quarterly*, 78.1 (2017): 77–106.
56. Bode, “Equivalence” 79.
57. Pierazzo n.p.
58. We publish blog posts on a regular basis that share new research emerging from the correspondence. See <https://emco.swan.ac.uk/blog> (accessed 15 June 2023).
59. We have a regular internship programme for young scholars in order to support new generations working with Montagu’s correspondence.
60. Peter Shillingsburg, *From Gutenberg to Google* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 153.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Nicole Pohl is Professor of English at Oxford Brookes University. She has published and edited books on women’s utopian writing in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, European salons and epistolarity and the Bluestockings. She is the Editor-in-Chief of *The Elizabeth Montagu Correspondence Online (EMCO)* project: <https://www.elizabethmontagunetwork.co.uk>. Address: Department of English and Modern Languages, Oxford Brookes University, Gipsy Lane, Oxford, OX3 6BP, England. [email: Npohl@brookes.ac.uk]