MARS 4P01
Sources and Methods in Medieval and Renaissance Studies
4th year undergraduate
September–December 2022
Brock University
Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies

Submitted by

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Reflection

**Information-Literacy Objectives:** Four information-literacy objectives were integrated into a course on Sources and Methods in Medieval and Renaissance Studies:

1. Research as Inquiry
2. Information Creation as a Process
3. Scholarship as Conversation
4. Searching as Strategic Exploration

We reached these objectives by foregrounding period primary sources in richly scaffolded term-long research projects. Students were invited to radically slow processes of inquiry (Objective 1) in order to reflect critically on how they were forming a representation of each object of study (Objective 2). They shared their growing expertise in a series of presentations that deliberately forestalled the performance of mastery to foster, instead, curiosity both about their object and constructive feedback to their treatment of it (Objective 3). After initial intensive study of and reflection on their primary source in Special Collections, students were introduced to the library’s open stacks—which none had previously entered (not least owing to multiple years of COVID-related online learning). With the objective of teaching how and why to explore physical holdings as well as the digital resources within easier reach, they were invited to develop and refine search strategies to locate relevant, credible secondary sources—which had the added benefit of helping them learn the affordances of the library’s new catalogue (Objective 4).

**Collaboration:** David and I grounded this collaboration in many years of team-teaching other class visits to Special Collections in this and other courses. Immediately pre-pandemic, we had planned to base 4P01 within Special Collections, focusing on a single volume (in part owing to our slim holdings); COVID, however, shuttered Special Collections and forced the course online. During the pandemic, David invited me to work with him toward identifying and acquiring a broader range of relevant books to support a 1-to-1 ratio of students to primary sources. This collaboration formed the cornerstone of our Fall 2022 4P01, which centered information-literacy skills from the initial hands-on encounters between each student and a single, unique object over which each student gradually became our local authority. David made this pedagogy possible by offering both orientating instruction and ongoing supervision in the handling of rare books. As well as a lengthy initial meeting in the reading room, he welcomed students undertaking ongoing study of their rare books throughout term.

**Class Composition:** This core course, offered by our small Medieval and Renaissance Studies program, is cross-listed to English and History; most students were majors in the latter subjects with little or no familiarity with the relevant periods and no reliable shared background in information-literacy skills. The diversity of student backgrounds was one reason the course was planned with a “ground up” approach, starting with
book artifacts as objects later studied for their textual content (in digital facsimiles and/or editions) and finally joined to a broader understanding via a critical exploration of secondary sources.

**Content and Design:** Learning goals included conveying differences between historical primary sources (early printed books) and later remediations in facsimiles, editions, and representations in scholarship and popular media. Disciplinary and information-literacy instruction dovetailed as students developed understandings of the period based on their close reading of a primary source and critical readings of secondary sources unearthed to support their study of it. Knowledge attained, and skills transferable to other disciplines, include the ability to differentiate bibliographic states of a source, and to appreciate the role of mediation in representing the past—specifically, representing book objects that students often know only through opaque modern editorial interventions.

**Student Impact and Assessment:** Disciplinary and information-literacy outcomes were integrated in all assignments, including the first visit to the rare books and two early written reflections on, first, questions raised by interacting with rare books and artifacts and, second, the diverse affordances of material artifacts and digital simulacra (see details in the attachment). These outcomes were further integrated in a series of brief presentations, where students’ growing expertise was deliberately scaffolded in order to maintain a spirit of inquiry and openness to scholarly conversation and collaboration. The term’s work culminated in a final project that expanded earlier work toward a deeper, firmer grasp of the books studied and their place in the cultures they came from. Progress toward these goals was assessed in low-stakes weekly assignments, written and oral, designed to provide iterative formative feedback and foster ongoing open-minded inquiry.

One student volunteered the following about the course’s impact: “I fell in love with perusing the pages of the *Herball* and learning about the other texts that folks were studying. The nature of the work we did in class and in our homework assignments was refreshing. I was bored and, frankly, unenthusiastic about my fourth year of undergraduate studies. I had grown tired of cookie cutter weekly discussion posts supplemented by three-hour long awkward seminars in which talking a handful of times guaranteed full participation marks. I felt the work in 4P01 was far more engaging. ... 4P01 was a highlight of my undergrad experience.”

**Instructional Impact:** This course has consolidated our confidence in the vibrant pedagogical possibilities of our modest collection of Medieval and Renaissance primary sources. David has since digitized all our medieval documents in an open-access Digital Repository that provides alternate access to the physical collections, while Leah adapted the approach taken in 4P01 the next term, by inviting another class studying a seventeenth-century poet to assess her influences through a similar close, critical engagement with the books of her era.
**Reusability:** While our students made use of the institution’s subscription to Early English Books Online’s Text Creation Partnership, those without a subscription might turn to the University of Michigan’s open-access instance of EEBO-TCP. Those lacking sufficient rare books might supplement available holdings with the many open-access digital repositories proffered by libraries around the globe. Although some affordances would be lost with reduced hands-on work with original artifacts, the course would be easily adaptable to online delivery; likewise, the scaffolded steps could be scaled back to deploy only selected elements in a course with a broader remit.
Overview of course syllabus

Sources and Methods in Medieval and Renaissance Studies
MARS 4P01
(also offered as ENGL and HIST 4P01)
Fall 2022 Brock University

Description: The medieval and Renaissance periods, if they ever happened, happened long ago. So how do we know about them? And how can we know for sure—or, at least, how can we work to support our knowledge with a degree of caution that is appropriate in scholarly historical studies?

These questions are too large for one course to address; however, in this course, we will at least learn to locate and work sensibly with a variety of primary and secondary sources, in various forms and settings, in order to engage in activities that advance research on Renaissance texts and culture. The aim will be to learn:

(a) about Renaissance book culture, through an examination of associated artifacts;
(b) how to handle delicate and rare historical materials with appropriate care;
(c) about these materials by consulting both them and scholarship about them; and,
(d) how to represent these materials accurately and insightfully by editing, annotating, and illustrating parts of them.

For the duration of the term, each student will take responsibility for studying and representing a unique copy of a rare book held at Brock University. Each student will teach the others (and the instructor) about their item in order to pool our understanding of them as exemplars of the culture from which they emerged. Each student will also seek to build on transferable insights arrived at by others in the class.

Schedule

Week 1, S.12
1. Introduction to the course and each other.
2. Overview of periods and places under study.
3. Introduction to focal materials (printed books) and approach (book history).

Week 2, S.19
1. Field trip: Meet on the 10th floor of the James A. Gibson Library in Archives & Special Collections. Bring a laptop or paper and pencil (not pen) for taking notes. If possible, bring a device for taking digital photographs; a phone is ideal.
2. Instruction on care and handling of rare books.
3. Interactive exhibit.
4. Initial assignment and discussion.
5. Study of individual adopted items.
Due at end of class: Preliminary notes on adopted item.

Assigned at end of class: Prompt for 500-word reflection on interacting with rare books and artifacts (5%).

Recommended work between Weeks 2 and 3: Transcribe and tidy your preliminary notes on your book; form a list of questions you’d like to address; label your photos.

Week 3, S.26
1. Discussion of reflections.
2. Tutorial on EEBO.
3. Activity: locating and working with digital simulacra of early printed works

Assigned at end of class (in Sakai): Prompt for 500-word reflection on comparing material artifacts and digital simulacra (5%).

Recommended work between Weeks 3 and 4: Read around in the Text Creation Partnership transcription of the EEBO digitization corresponding to your item.

Week 4, O.3
1. Discussion of reflections.
2. Tutorial on strategies and sources for identifying key secondary sources: e.g.,
3. OMNI; RACER; JSTOR; Worldcat; Oxford Dictionary of National Biography;
4. Oxford Reference; Wikipedia (gasp!); Google Books (horror!)
5. Field trip to James A. Gibson Library to locate secondary sources.

READING WEEK

Recommended work between Weeks 4 and 5: Prepare your presentation. Begin to assemble an annotated bibliography of secondary sources; to order key items via OMNI or RACER; and to check out materials from the library.

Week 5, O.17
1. Due: 3m presentation: Overview of adopted item (5%); follow template in Sakai.
2. Due: Courteous attention and constructive feedback to your peers’ presentations.
3. Tutorial on scholarly transcription and editing.

Recommended work between Weeks 5 and 6: Practise transcribing and editing. Exchange work with a peer, who might see errors you cannot; likewise, you will help them improve. Draft an editorial note. Begin to consider which passage might be the most illuminating to present in Week 7.
Week 6, O.24
1. Field trip: Meet in classroom to travel to Reformation Rare Books Room, Lutheran Seminary, 2:00 to 3:30 PM.
2. Discussion of materiality, mechanics, and meaning of the codex; books as objects and books as containers of text.

Recommended work between Weeks 6 and 7: Prepare your presentation.

Week 7, O.31
1. Due: 3m presentation: Brief transcribed, modernized passage and editorial statement (5%).
2. Due: Courteous attention and constructive feedback to your peers’ presentations.
3. Tutorial on scholarly annotation.

Recommended work between Weeks 7 and 8: Prepare your presentation.

Week 8, N.7
1. Due: 3m presentation: Second brief passage, transcribed, modernized, and annotated (5%).
2. Due: Courteous attention and constructive feedback to your peers’ presentations.
3. Tutorial on visual resources.

Recommended work between Weeks 8 and 9: Prepare your presentation.

Week 9, N.14:
1. Due: 3m presentation: Illustrations (5%).
2. Due: Courteous attention and constructive feedback to your peers’ presentations.

*** Due Friday, November 18 at 9 AM: 1-page outline of final project.

Recommended work from Week 9 on: Prepare a full draft of your final project. Finishing a draft early will make it easy to prepare your presentation for Weeks 11/12.

Week 10, N.21
One-on-one consultations on final essay/edition/exhibit (5%).

*** Due Friday, November 25 at 9 AM: slides for all final presentations.

Week 11, N.28:
Final presentations (half of group) (15%).

Week 12, D.5:
Final presentations (remainder) (15%).
Evaluation: The grade offered on all assignments will be a percentage of an ideal but achievable whole. Written comments will focus on ways to improve.

Reflections in Weeks 3 and 4 are written. Comments on these assignments, and grades earned for them, will indicate the kind of comments and grades likely to be earned on the final assignment if the quality of expression is similar and if errors and other issues are not addressed.

Presentations in Weeks 5 through 9 are oral but supported by written/visual documentation in the form of slides, to be shared with the instructor in Sakai; both the oral presentation in class and the slides will be assessed. As above, comments, and grades earned, will indicate the kind likely to be earned on the final assignment if issues are not addressed.

The consultation in Week 10 will be oral but supported by the 1-page outline submitted the Friday prior; both oral and written components will be assessed.

Components of evaluation

Week 3 reflection: 5%
Week 4 reflection: 5%
Week 5 presentation: 5%
Week 7 presentation: 5%
Week 8 presentation: 5%
Week 9 presentation: 5%
Consultation: 10%
Final presentation: 15%
In-class contributions: 10%
Final project: 35%

Materials: Reading materials may be found at the libraries on campus and online, at no cost beyond the internet connection required to locate them (plus late fines if you take books out and forget to return them on time). Most course readings will arise via your research; they are thus not listed here.
Sample Assignment Instructions

Because the term’s assignments offered scaffolded steps toward a single culminating project, I have included a selection of instructions for various steps in the process.

(a) Week 2 Instructions for Preliminary Notes on Adopted Rare Book

Before leaving Special Collections today, send the instructor some preliminary notes on your adopted item. This document offers guidelines on making the most of your first encounter with that item, and how to generate notes to guide your work with it throughout the term.

Remember that our overall aim is to consult specimens of Renaissance book culture that might help us learn about the culture they come from. You therefore need to frame and address research questions around the unique copy that is before you, with a view to representing portions of it afresh, insightfully, for an interested audience to whom you have the responsibility of acting as the informed authority.

During the work period, feel free to call over the instructors (Leah Knight and David Sharron) to address any questions that arise, or to draw our attention to interesting findings. You are welcome to arrange with the staff of Special Collections to return in future for further study.

1. Open a new Word document. Save it as “YOUR FIRST NAME notes about ____.” Give your object of study a brief, clear nickname (a short title). Atop the document, put your full name, the date, the place where you are (Archives and Special Collections, Brock University), the item’s nickname and its call number.

2. Get an overview of your book without opening it. Address a few of the following, and record your impressions:

   a. How big is it, roughly? Note all 3 dimensions.

   b. What does it appear to be made of? Note all materials. If you don’t know, guess, and give reasons for your guesses.

   c. What condition does it seem to be in: healthy or falling apart?

   d. Does the binding look original or added later? Is it plain, decorated, clean, roughed up?

   e. Are edges of the page block smooth or rough? (Check all.) Clean or dirty? Plain or decorated—and if the latter, how? Are any corners dog-eared?
f. Overall, does the book appear well used, cared for, rarely read, neglected?

3. Open your book safely, as instructed. Ask for help at any time. Check how loose or tight the binding is. Is it too tight to read the text? Does it open too easily and need support to prevent? Are boards off or gatherings loose?

4. As you continue to make and record observations about what your object is like, try to start with general observations about it as a material thing, then work toward characterizing its structure and content, as well as copy-specific details. Some matters to consider, as relevant (though others are also welcome):

(a) Do any parts appear better used than others?

(b) What do the paste-down and fly leaves tell you?

(c) Itemize and examine the front matter: frontispiece, title page, addresses to readers, commendations, dedications, table of contents, other indices.

(d) Itemize and examine the back matter: indices, errata, colophons, and so on.

(e) How are the contents organized? How is that organization conveyed?

(f) How are kinds of text distinguished? (e.g., by font type, size, ornament)

(g) Based on the lay-out and contents, does this seem a costly or a cheap book?

(h) What does it feel like to read? Important, special, or ordinary, practical?

(i) Who were the book’s makers? What do they say about its making?

(j) For whom did the book’s makers make it? Who actually used it?

(k) Are there manuscript or material additions: inscriptions, insertions, marginalia, underlining? What is marked, how, by whom, and why?

5. Hone in on one or more parts to represent in an edition (your final assignment in the course). You will need a rationale for selecting the part(s) you do, so make notes about it. Why is this portion worth reproducing? For what purpose, audience, or context? What might it clarify or bring to light, for you or others?

6. Photograph what you plan to edit. You might find it useful to paste small screenshots of selected images into your notes. Label these with page or signature number and captions.
7. Begin transcribing your selection of text. Preserve as many features of as possible: character usage, spacing, lineation. Itemize deviations from the original in an editorial note.

(b) Three sample prompts for written work

End of Week 2: prompt for reflection on interacting with rare books and artifacts.
In your 500-word reflection, reflect on the experience of working with the materials made available to you in class today. What questions did they raise for you? What have they already revealed about the period under study that you were not aware of before today? What possibilities for working with them spring to mind? How might time spent with such materials change your approach to contemporary cultural artifacts? Think about these questions and related ones, as well as consulting your own notes and thoughts based on today’s experience. We will discuss your responses next day.

End of Week 3: prompt for reflection comparing material artifacts and digital simulacra.
Take some time to compare the material original of your adopted item with its digital simulacrum in EEBO (and/or elsewhere, if you find a comparable or preferable version elsewhere). How do they differ? How do those differences matter? Which is better, and how? Which is worse, and how? Think about these questions, and related ones, as well as consulting your own notes and thoughts. We will discuss your responses next day.

End of Week 4: prompt and template for 1st presentation: Overview of adopted item
In Week 5, after Reading Week, each student will offer a presentation that provides an introductory overview of their adopted item; the presentation will be worth 5% of the course grade. The overview will be based on

- the material artifact (the unique copy housed at Brock);
- digital simulacra (in EEBO and/or elsewhere); and
- secondary sources, including later editions

Remember that you are the expert on your item; no one else has encountered it, so your overview should be a very basic introduction—a kind of handshake.

Use the following guidelines to structure your slides.
1: Identification of item: full bibliographic identification and colloquial “handle”
2: Identification of its overall nature: genre, origins, contents, organization
3: Key characterizing features: e.g., illustrations, indices, addresses to readers
4: Preliminary point of interest: a focal point for further research
5: Preliminary quandary: something you must solve in order to proceed

Aim to interest your audience, to convey an understanding of your item’s nature and significance, and to start establishing your authority as an expert on your book—while remaining open to the formative feedback offered by peers and the instructor.
(c) Final Project Instructions

The final project is to be a unified and polished revision and expansion of the work on your adopted item from prior weeks. It will feature four parts:

1. An essay on the item’s nature and significance (including copy-specific details).

2. An annotated modernization of three excerpts, each prefaced by a brief contextualization and enhanced with at least 3 kinds of annotation:

   a. historically-specific definitions
   b. identifications of specific people, places, or things; and
   c. paraphrases or interpretations of the content.

   Annotations should reflect on how the notes provided illuminate the text.

3. A curated exhibit of illustrations that enrich an encounter with the adopted book.

4. A bibliography.

Projects should show progress from earlier weeks, in the form of a deeper, firmer grasp of the books and their place in the reading culture of early modern England. This grasp will be based on further research in relevant secondary sources, thoughtful work with the primary source, and a lucid use of constructive criticism provided to date. The treatment of the book, the excerpts, and the exhibits should provide an engaging, insightful, evidence-based account of the item as an example of the kind of text some Renaissance people read and valued. The result should, overall, provide twenty-first century readers with a lucid and useful way in to understanding the book.