Katherine McKenna

Talk Transcript

Hi all, and welcome to the Center for Digital Humanities’ virtual Fellows Showcase! Here you will find a collection of mini-presentations put together by the Center’s 2019-2020 Andrew W. Mellon Fellows in the Digital and Public Humanities. This group comprises Vanderbilt graduate students, faculty, and postdocs in the Arts and Social Sciences with a shared interest in learning how to merge humanities-driven inquiry with computational methodologies such as geospatial mapping, network visualization, and story mapping. While we miss gathering with the Nashville DH community at our physical home in Buttrick Hall for the Showcase, we are happy to have this digital space in which to share an update on the exciting work completed by our fellows over the last academic year.

To start things off, I’m going to give a brief presentation on my digital project *Excavating Female Adria*, a network visualization project that traces mixed-gender intellectual circles in northern Italy and Venice during the Renaissance. (SLIDE 2) I’ll begin by introducing myself—my name is Katie McKenna. I’m a historian and a postdoctoral fellow at the Center for Digital Humanities, where I organized the 2019-2020 Mellon fellows’ seminar. I specialize in early modern European history, and I wrapped up a Ph.D. in that field in August 2019. The project I want to discuss today builds on lines of inquiry established by my dissertation, which analyzes the rise of feminist discourse in the Venetian Republic in conjunction with the movement of secular women writers into vernacular single-author print late in the sixteenth century. (SLIDE 3) Civic crisis, one of the central foci of my dissertation, was a major driver of this shift. During the 1500s, changing trade patterns and Mediterranean warfare with the Ottoman Empire diminished Venice’s economic and imperial footprint, rending holes in the fabric of Venetian claims to excellence. Vernacular civic myth filled the narrative vacuum opened by these events, and some educated women authors contributed to its production. The first single-author texts by Venetian women hit Italian bookshelves after the 1571 Battle of Lepanto, a monumental naval battle fought by Venice, its European allies, and the Ottomans for control of the Republic’s then-prize Mediterranean colony of Cyprus. While contemporary gender norms traditionally excluded early modern Venetian women from the public sphere of print and politics, the civic print boom sparked by Lepanto combined with the state’s increased reliance on civic myth as prop to state excellence opened a space for local women’s voices on the book market. Over time, Venetian women writers manipulated the literary space newly open to them to claim intellectual authority, experiment with genre, and question contemporary gender norms.

Mixed-gender social networks also played a role in this history, although the gaps and silences of the archive make their influence on the shape of the local book market harder to document. This is especially true where early modern women writers are concerned. Their small numbers and modest textual output relative to that of contemporary men along with their fraught relationship with the public sphere and high association with manuscript versus print production have curtailed their representation in the historical record. So too have archival preservation patterns and the inadvertent vagaries of time. Enter *Excavating Female Adria.* When scouring Venetian libraries (SLIDE 4) for the textual traces of premodern women authors as a graduate student, I realized that a widespread network of bookmen, diplomats, and *letterati* with an interest in women’s education and the female voice was active in the Republic and its mainland empire from at least 1560 on. Because Renaissance women are rarely listed by name in library and archive catalogs, I had to peruse letters, dedications, and book indexes for evidence of their authorial activity. If few Venetian women produced text published under their own names prior to 1600, evidence of their participation in early modern intellectual life can be glimpsed in the output of their male peers who engaged with educated women as recipients, dedicatees, and sometimes co-contributors to printed volumes published under the name of a male author or editor. (SLIDE 5) For example, in 1572 the Italian playwright and diplomat Luigi Groto decided to compile a lyric anthology whose contents were inspired by the Battle of the Lepanto. The majority of the poems that Groto selected for inclusion in this volume were written by his male friends, peers, and business acquaintances; also present however are bellicose verses by women, like this (CLICK) poem by Rosa Levi. Levi belonged to Venice’s Jewish community and was a pupil of Groto’s; Renaissance scholars also think she may have been his lover. Several years later, another one of Groto’s female students, the Rovigan poet Issicratea Monte, penned an oration in honor of a Lepantine naval hero and published it with a Venetian printshop frequented by her mentor. In doing so, she became the first female Venetian subject to produce a single-author civic work on the state’s behalf since the fifteenth century.

As this history indicates, when northern bookmen published snippets or tracts of women’s writing in the late 1500s, they often inscribed already flourishing social networks in the printed canon. Excavating these networks is difficult, but their analysis is crucial if we want to fully understand the condition of early modern women. (CLICK) With this in mind, I used my time at the Center for Digital Humanities to learn text analysis and data visualization techniques with which I could read sixteenth-century texts against the grain and study the cultural pathways by which Venetian women writers forged relationships and negotiated access to the book market late in the Renaissance.To give you an idea of what this process looks like, I’m going to use Groto’s aforementioned battle anthology *Trofeo della Vittoria Sacra* as a case study. Groto was a leading intellectual figure in his day and a prolific author, orator, and letter writer with a clear interest in women’s learning. As such, his corpus of surviving works constitutes a rich entry point into contemporary mixed-gender academic networks. (CLICK) In order to visualize the relationships preserved within Groto’s paper record, I had to complete three key steps: data collection, data cleaning—by which I mean the standardization and organization of data into a computer readable format, and graph building with a network visualization program. The spreadsheet shown on the left-hand side of this slide represents my first attempt at capturing the ego-network embedded in the *Trofeo*’s contents—essentially a list of its named contributors that specifies each person’s exact role in the book’s creation and delineates any secondary points of connection they had to Groto such as common membership in a Renaissance salon or academic society. I collected this data the old-fashioned way while learning OCR techniques for future use at Center-sponsored workshops on text analysis tools.

Here I think it is worth noting that expertise acquisition in the Digital Humanities requires both time and flexibility. At times, the classically-trained humanist will find that their habitual manner of organizing, interpreting, or synthesizing data may not align perfectly with the rigid structure of a spreadsheet or the analytic parameters of a computer program; some adjustment is necessary. The learning curve inherent to working digitally can be steep, but it is this mental process as much as any profound technical knowhow that helps DH scholars think outside the box and tackle their research questions from multiple points of inquiry. For me, this reality came to bear in relation to the Notes section of my spreadsheet. The research hours necessary to dig up the identities of the various writers who contributed to Groto’s *Trofeo* was by far the most labor-intensive task involved in making this spreadsheet; however, once I began to building graphs in Gephi, I quickly realized that this info has little immediate relevance to a computer. (SLIDE 6) In order to visualize the *Trofeo* as ego-network, I had to put this data aside for later use, probably at the writing stage of the project, and organize what remained into two new spreadsheets. The first of these is a simple list of the discrete individuals or nodes involved in the anthology’s creation. New spreadsheet number two documents the edges or connections between them. After saving a copy of my newly reduced but computer friendly spreadsheets as comma-separated-value files and checking their cells for any errors or variations in spelling, I was finally ready to upload my data into Gephi. I’m not going to get into the innerworkings of that program today; instead I want to show you the final product of this process. (SLIDE 7)

The graph shown here depicts Groto’s literary network as preserved in the pages of his Lepanto battle anthology. The nodes of the graph are sized according to their connectedness; as the *Trofeo*’s contriver and editor, Groto is represented by the large node situated at the center of the graph, shown here in blue. I have color-coded nodes according to role; for example, lyric contributors to the volume are represented by purple nodes while the book’s publishers are shown in red. Connectedness also dictates the graph’s spatial layout; the most connected nodes after Groto ring the outside of the graph. These comprise contributors as well as outside parties not directly involved in the *Trofeo*’screation but tied to this ego-network as additional points of connection between Groto and his literary clients. (Slide 8) If we look to the graph’s far left side for example, we see a node labeled Accademia P.F., which is shorthand for the Accademia dei Pastori Fratteggiani, a prestigious sixteenth-century literary academy to which Groto and multiple *Trofeo* contributors along. If we zoom in on this grouping, we can also see nodes representing two of Groto’s female literary contacts, the aforementioned author Issicratea Monte and Moderata Fonte, now one of the most famous women writers of the Renaissance. While neither woman contributed poems to the *Trofeo*, both participated in Venetian civic discourse in the 1570s and 80s. Their positioning between two distinct clusters in this network is indicative of why data visualization is useful: it helps scholars arrive at new research questions and theories. For instance, while scholars do not currently perceive Fonte as an associate of the Pastori Fratteggiani, her positioning here indicates some relationship with the Academy was likely. As I upload additional spreadsheets into Gephi and build expanded network graphs based on both Fonte’s surviving works and Groto’s much larger extant corpus, other points of connection may emerge. Thus by combining digital tools with the historical praxis of reading against the grain, I hope to shed new light on mixed-gender networks in Renaissance Italy and the paths by which contemporary women writers traversed the Venetian intellectual scene and print market in the late sixteenth century.