

Celebrating Early Women's History and Women Writers
A Month-Long Research Project for 100-level English Courses using
Women Writers Online (WWO)

Step 1: Understanding the historical construction of female authorship

- Get to know the Women Writers Online database (see WWO Research Worksheet for basic instructions).
- Select **five (5)** works that you find interesting and look through the paratexts (e.g., title page, authorial introduction, editor's introduction, prefatory advertisement).
- Use the WWO Research Worksheet to compile a list of adjectives or nouns that these works apply to women writers. You may also select terms that writers use to describe their writing.
- Submit your *completed WWO Research Worksheet* for feedback.

Step 2: Visualizing the historical construction of female authorship

- Produce a [word cloud](#) of the words or phrases you have found.
- Present your *word cloud* to the class for feedback and group discussion.

Step 3: Engaging with scholarly voices

- Read the excerpted passage below from the essay "Female Authorship," by Wendy Wall. **Then, answer the critical thinking questions located immediately below the essay excerpt.**

Perverse as it may at first sound to some, the first term in "female authorship" also requires more examination than is often granted in criticism. Does making sex the precondition of an analysis stabilize an inherently unstable category? What counts as "female"? What difference would it make if the Copy of a Letter were "discovered" to be written by a man? If the goal were to document the history of women's lives and the ways in which early modern women critiqued male privilege in print, then this re-attribution would matter tremendously. But if the goal were to track the strategies, conventions, and discourses through which gendered authority was circulated, the signature attached to the Copy ("A lady") would have relevance independent for any historical writer. Persona, characters, figurations, and voice have been pivotal for scholars seeking to understand the textual means through which agency and power were gendered in the early modern period, regardless of their point(s) of origin.

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We might additionally wonder if scholars tend to "discover" female authors based on preconceived ideas of gender. While we are quick to acknowledge authorship and gender as imposed constructs in the early modern period, we find it harder to recognize the constructions we make in the critical present. Do we selectively shape

literary history when we accentuate writers whose anger, alienation, and resistance qualify them as proper feminist ancestors?...

Finally, scholars are beginning to grasp not only the broad range of media used in early modern intellectual productions but also the ways that attention to these media pressures us to revise our frameworks of interpretation. As critics have come to appreciate a widened notion of what counts as “writing,” the word “author” has seemed an impoverished descriptor. Juliet Fleming’s work on the deep-structured materiality of early modern poesis has steered us to see how inextricable meanings were from the matter into which they inscribed (2001; see also Hackel 2005; Laroche 2009). “Texts” such as tattoos, sayings inscribed on serving platters, and graffiti defy explanation, in some key ways, as authored artifacts. Offering further evidence for this point, Susan Frye (2010) analyzes the verbal and visual works comprising “women’s textualities”: stitched samplers, calligraphic manuscripts, and embroidery patterns. Early modern recipes, I have found, present a similarly overlooked domain of cultural production and poetics; for not only were recipes artifacts through which creators could exercise wit, represent emotions, and indulge in aesthetic pleasures, but they also recorded domestic “writing” that extended beyond paper to food. Lettice Pudsey’s recipes collection, for instance, testifies to “kitchen literacies” that involved posies etched into marzipan desserts and faux representational foods, “texts” whose ephemerality and consumability gave them meaning (see Wall 2015). What might we call the maker of sewn, consumed, and etched worlds resting in the artifacts of daily life?

Reading Citation (in MLA format)

Wall, Wendy. “Female Authorship.” Catherine Bates, ed. *A Companion to Renaissance Poetry*. Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2018. 128-140.

- On a separate typed paper, you should compose a response to the questions below. Your response to each question should total **about 50 words, for a total of 150 words**.
 - (1) What is the author’s main purpose in this passage?
 - (2) Which problem(s) does this piece explore?
 - (3) What is the author’s opinion or argument?
- Submit your responses for instructor feedback.

Step 4: Entering a conversation

- In an essay of about **4 pages, double spaced (about 1,000 words)**, answer the following writing prompt question.

Writing Prompt: In her essay, “Female Authorship,” scholar Wendy Wall asks whether “making sex the precondition of an analysis stabilize[s] an inherently unstable category.” Based on your research in the Women Writers Online database, and using a second relevant source, explain

whether you think the term “female author” is a meaningful category. Make sure to answer the following questions:

1. How do these early texts signal that the author is female?
2. How do the descriptors break down into positive and negative categorizations? Do any words repeat, and what might that repeated language signal about how women writers developed authority as authors? Use your word cloud as a reference to track linguistic trends. You may also want to have another look at your WWO Research Worksheet.
3. What do we mean when we refer to “female authorship,” and what should we be seeking to discover (e.g., questions we are attempting to answer) when we study female authors?

In your final submitted work, make sure to include the following:

- Your essay response to the writing prompt should include at least **TWO (2)** primary text quotations from the works you studied on Women Writers Online.
- Your essay should also quote at least **ONE (1) quotation** from Wendy Wall’s excerpted essay above. (You may use your answers to the questions posed in Step 3 in the body of the essay.)
- Make sure to include your word cloud with your completed essay.
- Include a Works Cited list in MLA format. This list should include at least seven works: all five works you studied from Women Writers Online (cited according to the website’s instructions); Wendy Wall’s essay (see citation above); and the secondary source you have chosen.