"Manuscript circulation doesn't signify privacy"

An Interview with Marie-Louise Coolahan

by Biljana Dojčinović

Marie-Louise Coolahan teaches courses on Renaissance and early modern literature, Milton's Paradise Lost, eighteenth-century satire, and theories of literary history, at the English Department at National University of Ireland, Galway. She also teaches 'Early modern print and manuscript cultures' for the MA in Literature & Publishing, as well as coordinates the Structured PhD module, 'Theory/Methodologies: Humanities'. She has been Secretary of the Management Committee, and Leader of Working Group 2 (Tools and Interconnectivity), for the collaborative European research network, 'Women Writers in History: Toward a New Understanding of European Literary Culture' within COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology) program since its outset in 2009.

Q: Marie-Louise, the interest in women's manuscripts and data bases seems to have been very important in your work. Could you, please, tell the readers of our journal when did it start?

My doctoral research was focused on both areas from the start! I was a doctoral researcher with the Perdita Project, which was concentrated on researching English women's manuscript compilations, compiled between 1500 and 1700, and producing a searchable online catalogue that would provide detailed bibliographical information about those manuscripts for researchers. The project was inspired by the work of scholars such as Margaret Ezell (*Writing Women's Literary History* (1993)), who drew attention to the vast amount of manuscripts containing women's writing of this period – manuscripts that were not known (in many cases, were not known to scholars at all) because of the emphasis on print culture. It had become clear that, due to a range of social prohibitions, women tended to avoid print in this period, preferring to circulate their writing by means of manuscript, and we wanted to investigate that. The Perdita Project was founded in 1996 to address this question, to discover and catalogue the manuscripts compiled and authored by women, and publicise their existence. By the time the project formally concluded in 2007, we had located 500 manuscripts, the vast majority of which had not been known before. The main electronic output of the Project was the free-access descriptive catalogue, available here: http://web.warwick.ac.uk/english/perdita/html/.

My doctoral research provided a great training in archival research, visiting the libraries where manuscripts were held, understanding how manuscript culture worked, how to interpret material features of manuscripts, etc. Manuscripts remain under-used; they are a rich source of early modern women's writing, in many countries. If scholars assume that what is printed is the only evidence of literary activity (whether by women or men), they

are missing out on the vast range of writing that continued to circulate in manuscript across Europe right down to the eighteenth century. Manuscript circulation was much more common than we assume, and it doesn't signify privacy – many works circulated this way were influential and made an impact.

To come back to databases, my contributions to the Perdita catalogue involved me in digital humanities issues, including encoding (although encoding is now far more sophisticated than it was in 2000, when I concluded most of my work for the project). Since then, a further digital outcome, *Perdita Manuscripts: Women Writers, 1500-1700*, has been published by Adam Matthew Digital (unfortunately, only available via a library that has purchased it). This is, however, a really valuable addition: it provides digital facsimiles of 230 of the most important manuscripts, keyed to the Perdita catalogue, and with valuable scholarly essays.

Q: How would you describe the relation of manuscripts and digital technologies? What are the conditions needed to connect these two different media, and what are the advantages you find in using digital tools?

As with using early modern print resources, the most obvious impact of digital technologies has been access to facsimiles of original texts that are relatively rare and scattered across the globe. This can be particularly valuable in the case of manuscripts, which are always unique copies, even if the text itself is also copied in a number of other manuscripts. And it's even more the case when unique manuscripts are held privately, or when they're too fragile for the holding institution to allow easy access to them.

But there are other possibilities for synergies between the two fields. For example, there is a research project on English convents that were exiled to Continental Europe following the Reformation, which makes great use of digital technologies. It's called 'Who Were the Nuns?', and led by Dr Caroline Bowden at Queen Mary, University of London. Researchers working on this project negotiated access to private convent archives in order to retrieve information about the membership of those convents – 22 convents in all, founded specifically for English women between 1598 and 1800. And the sources they've used are mainly manuscript histories, annals, chronicles which would not be publicly accessible. The information is now collected in an online database (open access) and there's also a section of the website that provides online editions of many of the texts produced in the exiled convents: http://www.history.qmul.ac.uk/wwtn/. Print technology has not been entirely abandoned, however! Pickering & Chatto have recently published six volumes of hitherto unpublished works – again, manuscripts – composed by exiled English nuns. So, this is an example of an inventive research project, that harnesses digital technology to make research results freely accessible and more public than would otherwise have been possible.

Q: Do you use only the manuscripts available in libraries, or do you also search for texts you suppose exist somewhere else? And, if so, where do you, or where would you go in search for them? Monasteries, private collections? Have you had a case like that?

It varies a lot. Most known women's manuscripts are known precisely because they're now held in libraries such as the British Library, the Folger Shakespeare Library, the Huntington Library (to name the largest collections for early modern anglophone scholars). Of course, the fact that many such manuscripts have only been discovered in library catalogues relatively recently is largely due to the fact that nobody bothered looking for women's texts in those catalogues before! But there are also other locations for archives and some are held privately. As I mentioned above, in the case of convent archives the researcher has to negotiate individually, and there's no guarantee of being admitted – this is why a project like 'Who Were the Nuns?' is so useful. I've worked on the autobiographical writing of a seventeenth-century woman called Alice Thornton, who was raised in Ireland as daughter of the English Lord Deputy (the Lord Deputy was the English monarch's representative in Ireland), returned to England as a teenager following her father's death, and wrote about her experiences of civil war, childbirth, illness,

marriage, and more besides. Thornton wrote four different manuscript versions of her life. One is now lost – Yale University has a microfilm copy of it. Another two manuscripts were held by a private collector, who allowed one scholar (Ray Anselment) to see them and write about them, but wouldn't allow them into the public domain. Happily, these volumes were acquired by the British Library in 2009. So, the reality is there may well be original, exciting, female-authored manuscripts out there – we may not know about them! I'm sure all I've been saying about the UK/Irish context must apply also to the Serbian context – there must be manuscripts out there that nobody's looked for yet.

Q: Your book *Women, Writing, and Language in Early Modern Ireland*, published by Oxford University Press in 2010, and awarded 'Honorable Mention' in the Society for the Study of Early Modern Women Book Prize (2011), was about native-born Irish women, Irish women in exile, and English and Anglo-Welsh women who resided in Ireland in the 16th and 17th century. You shed light on women writers in your culture which had been neglected. Do you feel that your book has started or has made an important change in that aspect?

I hope so, although only time will tell! I think it is important to have a solid monograph on the topic, as this draws more attention than articles or book chapters. I'm happy to report, however, that it is a burgeoning field; there are ever-increasing numbers of scholars working in the area, most notably, perhaps, Naomi McAreavey, Ruth Connolly, Betsey Taylor-Fitzsimon – and a number of emerging doctoral researchers. So far, however, the field remains gendered, insofar as women writers are not yet fully integrated into scholarly narratives of early modern Irish writing. Important exceptions are works published by Deana Rankin and Anne Fogarty, which include discussion of women's writing alongside that of men in this period. Another change I hope I've contributed to is the shift from Anglo-centric approaches to literature in English – some of the authors I wrote about in the book lived and wrote in Ireland but this dimension of their work had been neglected by scholars, who discussed them as straightforwardly English writers. This isn't a simplistic, nationalist issue! Rather, it's a question of understanding more fully the complexities that inform a woman author's writing in this period.

Q: In your book you researched the "cross-fertilization" between these women authors, and female networking has also been, in the largest part, the idea behind the COST Action Women Writers in History, which has just ended. How would you evaluate your participation - the benefits and investments, in this project? How has this project fit into your previous work? How has it helped you shape your future plans?

On so many levels, I've gained a tremendous amount from being involved in this COST Action. As you say, networking has been the main thrust of the Action. It's been wonderful, on the first basic level, to meet and collaborate with researchers of women's writing across Europe – yourself amongst so many others. It's been enlightening to be exposed to the richness and depth of research being conducted everywhere. I think that

another valuable element has been the support; sometimes, one can feel isolated working on women writers – coming together to meet researchers elsewhere provides that sense of community that might otherwise be lacking. For me, more specifically, two key groups have arisen. A group of researchers working on the early modern period – myself, Vanda Anastacio (Portugal), Nieves Baranda (Spain), Nicole Pohl (UK) and others – have come together to collaborate, and I'm hopeful that future opportunities to produce work together will emerge from that. I've also benefited from working with colleagues in Working Group 2, which brings together developers and academics working in digital humanities to look at more technical issues relating to the WomenWriters database. This has re-engaged me with digital humanities as a discipline. As you know – because you're one of the partners! – it has also led to offshoot research projects, such as COBWWWEB.

In terms of my individual research plans, the COST Action has definitely influenced the direction my work has taken. As well as conference papers (presented at COST conferences and others), at least three articles/essays are very directly related to the Action: one published last year, 'Transnational Reception and Early Modern Women's "Lost" Texts', *Early Modern Women: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 7 (2012), 261-270; another to be published in 2014, 'Quantitative Methodologies and the Reception of Early Modern Women's Writing' in a Palgrave essay collection edited by Ros Smith and Patricia Pender, *Material Cultures of Early Modern Women's Writing: Production, Transmission and Reception*; and another I've written with Danielle Clarke, 'Gender, Reception and Form: Early Modern Women and the Making of Verse', in Elizabeth Scott-Baumann and Ben Burton (eds.), *The Work of Form: Poetics and Materiality in Early Modern Culture* (which will be published by Oxford University Press).

Q: What is the topic of the book you are currently writing?

The book project I'm currently working on is about reception and early modern women's writing. As currently conceived, it aims to examine different modes of reception – transnational religious and correspondence networks, the appropriation and compilation of women's writings (especially in the manuscript miscellany, a category of manuscript in which miscellaneous materials by diverse authors are compiled). I've just heard that this project has been awarded a European Research Council Consolidator Grant; this will allow me to recruit five postdoctoral researchers to work together over a five-year period and allows me to pursue the project on a large scale, leading to much more than one book, including the production of data that can be disseminated via the WomenWriters database. The project's title is 'RECIRC: The Reception and Circulation of Early Modern Women's Writing, 1550-1700'. The focus is on women writers who were born or resident in Britain and Ireland – this is for logistical reasons. But it also includes women writers born elsewhere who were received and read in Britain and Ireland – this facilitates a more international perspective. It's my hope that the methodologies we develop will be transferable to the study of reception in other countries.