Between hard covers and the 'cloud'. Is a canon to be found?

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It is undeniable that libraries are crucial in the process of canon-formation, in the sense that these are sites where choices are made, concerning policies of book acquisition and donation acceptance, and where librarians feel the pressure of space management. The current research project aims to examine the University of Lisbon Faculty of Letters Library's canon, concerning the collections in English, within the more restricted framework of British Victorian women writers.

Although the research expedition undertaken, and still ongoing, included the online catalogue and the manual catalogue, and also the Library's deposit, the 'Ancient book' – aiming at every item in that category –, one must ask if, in a contemporary library, is print the sole content to be approached, when a vast digital content is available to the reader? With growing access to digital databases from the Library, one has necessarily to take into account e-books and academic journals, thus the former question turns into a rhetoric one (meaning 'is print content the sole to be approached?', the answer being it is not); the library's positioning in nets of knowledge created to connect similar institutions is also pertinent, once they expand enormously the scope of information the readers' community has at their disposal, challenging a more traditional concept of literary canon; furthermore, one has to be aware of the unsettled environment of contemporary libraries, as Andrew Stauffer defines it.

> Because digital projects are more process than finished product (i.e., they are never 'done' in the way a book is), they have tended to elude the reviewers. As a result of this unsettled environment, digital scholarship still abides in the shadows of the printed monographs, articles, and editions by which we have long measured achievement in the field.[1]

Thus, one cannot overlook the innumerous possibilities that the emerging field of Digital Humanities offer to the research in Humanities in general, as the researcher involved in such activities perceives when engaging in his own research and the others', as one acknowledges with the appearance of groups and platforms that unite such researchers, such as The Digital Humanities Network, based at the Cambridge University[2] or HASTAC[3], just to name two. As Anne Burdick *et al* put it, «Digital Humanities is a compact, game-changing report on the state of contemporary knowledge production».[4] This emergent field of scholarship is making its way through the 21st century, challenging researchers and scholars to articulate their former fields of expertise into new methods, which may provide new insights to those areas of study. This also strengthens scholars' push towards interdisciplinarity, that is so common in Cultural Studies, with which it intersects.

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[1] Stauffer, Andrew. Review Essay: Digital Scholarly Resources for the Study of Victorian Literature and Culture. Originally published in ***Victorian Literature and Culture*** 39:1 (March 2011). Accessed in http://www.nines.org/exhibits/VLC_review.

[2] The Digital Humanities Network homepage. URL: http://www.digitalhumanities.cam.ac.uk/.

[3] Humanities, Arts, Science and Techonoly Alliance and Collaboratory. URL: http://www.hastac.org/.

[4] Burbick, Anne, et. al. *Digital Humanities* (2012). The Mit Press. (2012).

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In this sense, this is what our current research undertakes, intersecting former research in the scope of Victorian Studies, focused on women writing, and the Digital Humanities, once they provide new data to work with, and which will, we hope, enlighten new angles or, confirm contemporary knowledge. Ultimately, the inquiry will be if Digital Humanities may reveal to researchers dedicated to this area a different Victorian Era than the one we have known till now, *i. e.* in paper based research?

The research environment

Undertaken within the broader field of the Research Program *Libraries and Canon-Formation* of the University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies (ULICES), later called World Cultures in English. Digital Humanities, Libraries, Schools, Social Development (*Culturas do Mundo em Inglês. Humanidades Digitais, Bibliotecas, Escolas, Compromisso Social*), the ongoing research matches the purpose of my own work – as a researcher (therefore, a library user and not a librarian) – in the preceding years, focusing on women authors, in different literary genres, as well as reform action, in the Victorian Era.

The next step will be – during the course of the current data expedition – to find out if the digital sources provide a new insight into the Victorian Women Writing, for instance by revealing unknown or lesser known authors or, on the contrary, if it replicates the canon found in the physical library. At this point, the vastness of sources available and the amount of information would point to a wider scope of the corpus. However, this vastness can be misleading bacause, instead of broadening the scope of authors represented, the digital points out to the existence of a canon, mostly a replication of the one found in the paper-based library.

Time frame

Before approaching the library's collections, the creation of a corpus of writers proved to be useful for this inquiry, using references such as *The Victorian Web* (VW) and *The Victorian Women Writers Project* (VWWP), just to name two, as well as anthologies of the same period, in order to create a starting point upon which to confront the Library's catalogues. Curiously enough, one might add, researching ancient catalogues showed several difficulties, among which finding out the gender of lesser known authors (relevant information to this research), that have no Wikipedia page written about them. The 'social cataloging' site Goodreads[5] provides a precious help, including information about the gender of the authors indexed.

Being the focus British Victorian women writers, it was fairly easy to gather a relatively small number of names, in the sense that, be they fiction writers or other genres authors, they are outnumbered by male writers. George Eliot, the Brontë sisters and Jane Austen (although the latter definitely a pre-Victorian author, due to the 1837-1910 time frame established to the Victorian Era, acknowledged for the sake of researcher's comfort) hold a secure place, echoing choices made by their contemporaries, by critical theorists and by Victorian communities of readers and from then on.

The very designation of the Victorian Era, as well as the dates that limit its boundaries, is a consequence of the belief that this period in History had unique features, granted by the Industrial Revolution, the Empire, legislative production, public reform and franchise, as well as social mobility, namely, in an intensely dynamic and innovative cultural framework.

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[5] Goodreads. URL: www.goodreads.com (Accessed 9.3.2014).

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The scope considered ranges from 1837 to 1901, as noted before, which guided the search for authors' production and dates of publishing. Nevertheless, publishing until 1914 was considered, as it is generally accepted that the referred era extends to the outbreak of World War One. However, as Walter E. Houghton underlines, the scope of the era is not a strict one:

> (…) the attitudes here under scrutiny are those which were conspicuous from about 1830 to 1870; which is to say that taken together and interrelated, they provide a definition of Victorianism. (…) I cannot doubt there was a common culture for which the term Victorianism, though in a wider sense that it usually bears, is appropriate. After 1870, while many of its characteristics persist through the century, (…) their dominance and their particular coherence were breaking down. Victorianism was dying, and a new frame of mind was emerging, a *late* Victorian frame of mind, which pointed forward to the postwar temper of the 1920's. (Houghton 1975: xv).

These dates, long established as boundaries of the Victorian Age, have been more recently challenged by Kelly Boyd and Rohan McWilliam, in the Introduction of *The Victorian Studies Reader* (Boyd, McWilliam 2007: 2), namely by quoting Richard Price, an author included in the anthology, who argues that the so-called Victorian attitudes are, in fact, deeply rooted in the past. The discussion about the time frame of the Victorian Era would be, however, another debate. This debate is one of the several that engage contemporary Victorian Studies, which witness intense academic production and critique.

Moving among catalogues within the library

A library is a space inside which the reader has to learn how to move. Once you become familiar with its catalogue(s), and where they can be accessed, one realizes how this space has broad 'avenues' and narrower 'streets', due to the obvious dichotomy of the visible/invisible books and authors. One might even venture to state that the library has its visible contents, and the reserved ones, and even theses ones distinguishable due to different layers and access permission.

Back to the Library's contents, the online catalogue provides a quick access to the main collections; aside from that, one cannot overlook the manual catalogue, a vast one and only accessible by special permit. Being organized according to the author's family names, it raises difficulties to the researcher, in the sense that often the author's initials are not enough to inform about their gender, requiring a more thorough inquiry, since the scope of this project only includes women writers.

The possibility of existing translations in English of books of non-English authors poses a new problem, when both authors and translators are often referred to by their family name, preceded by the initials of first name. Again: are these women or men? And, above all, are they British (or, for that matter, British Empire subjects)? The research will not be completed, however, with the access of the manual catalogue. It still requires further searches in the Library's deposit funds, where a good number of volumes contemplate the scope of the years to verify (1837-1901, the Victorian Era), mainly concerning travel writing, a much cultivated genre in the referred period.

Discussing the canon. Choice, canon-formation and power

Having established a corpus of names that can stand for a Victorian canon, it is inevitable to approach the debate concerning the canon and also the non-fixedness of the concept itself. This perspective is indebted to Paul Guillory, who points out selections—namely considering which authors are representative of a certain period in

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History and in Literary Theory—are not innocent and unveil a discourse in themselves, resulting in choices and exclusions:

> Literary critics (…) detect beneath the supposed objectivity of value judgments a political agenda: the exclusion of many groups of people from representation in the literary canon. (Guillory 1990: 233).

Naturally, and mainly due to budget limitations and space constraints (not speaking of the focus of the area of studies itself), libraries are places where choices have to be made. Librarians have a crucial role in these choices, and their criteria derive in a process that pretends to ascertain what is relevant for the reader, thus in canon-formation. Thus, as Julianne Buchsbaum states, it will be important to the local culture of the college or university and the broader society as a whole for librarians to become more aware of their part in this process and the social construction of knowledge and for us to take into consideration the difficulty of balancing the needs of present and future scholars (Buchsbaum 2013: 1). From the reader's perspective, it will be fair to ask if a library with a strong canon is good for the reader. For, in the sense that it will mean exclusions, it will narrow his reading options? And, therefore, a more embracing collection would be more enlightening for the reader?

And, before that, what contributes to inscribe women writers in and out of the canon? The answer to this question involves not only the circumstances themselves, surrounding the author, the themes approached in the books – some of them critical issues for the era, like divorce, suffrage, feminism and women roles, as well as book circulation. And namely different positions concerning the Woman Question in the Victorian Era, the ongoing Victorian discussion about women's nature and societal role, as Thompson argues.[6]

However, theme choice was not the only not the only reason for an author getting include or excluded in the Victorian canon, an issue I have developed in my thesis, approaching the case of Harriet Taylor Mill.[7]

In fact and as stated before, the assumption that the digital canon replicates the paper-based library's canon is supported mainly on directions conveyed do volunteers for the digitalization process or general guide lines of sites where e-books can be found, namely Project Gutenberg, but also A Celebration of women writers, a comprehensive site, with links to titles and book contents, if digitalised.

The librarian's task

Once the librarian chooses the contents of donations, according to criteria of relevance, his options will lead to the narrowing of the choices available to the readers.

Furthermore, how does a librarian as the one in question meets the needs of such a large scope of interests as the professors', the researchers' and the students' communities of the Faculty of Humanities? And the librarian being a gatekeeper of culture, what will his attitude be concerning the extra canonical works of a period in which the choice is made? Facing the librarian and the power he holds in the decision making process, and a strict policy of acceptance of donations—in what concerns ancient or second hand books, as well as purchase policy of contemporary items, within a concern to create a core collection—fringes, or extra-canon books are not likely to

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[6] Thompson, Nicole Dianne, ed (1999). *Victorian Women Writers and the Woman Question*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1.

[7] Baptista, Cristina. *Mulheres na sombra. Great Victorian women behind great Victorian men* (2011). Doctoral thesis in English Studies. University of Lisbon.

appear. In this regard, Charles A. Gardner adds another issue into the discussion, inquiring who should have control in the purchase policy: the faculty or the faculty librarian himself? (Gardner 1985).

In the case of the library in question, being both a heritage library and a contemporary one, in the sense that its collections range from institutional and private donations to acquisitions, the contents of this library result in a mixed component and derive from different policies undertaken along its history, by subsequent managements. The librarian's procedure must be framed in the broader policy of the University of Lisbon Faculty of Humanities, knowing that most of the researchers needs are met by the research centres acquisitions, and the Main Library concerns being the undergraduates needs.

At this point, in a contemporary library, the process of digitalization of contents is likely to subvert this equation concerning policies of donation acceptance and acquisition.

With online access to databases, encyclopedias, e-books and journals, the library has expanded immensely the scope of the collections, opening a wide range of possibilities for readers. The offer is overwhelming, not only to read, but also to listen to, with sites dedicated to audiobooks. So, what could be faced as a narrowing process can, with current digital resources, be transformed in a widening one in which the concept of canon is totally eroded. Also, different means of production go beyond the digitalization of print books and making them readable online, and have introduced video, television and the social nets in the creative process, resulting in the so-called transmedia, that includes different media in the creative process, including or not the book.

In such circumstances, is it legitimate to invoke the canon?

Findings

It remains to reveal what were findings for this essay concerning the manual catalogue, since the deposits have not yet been entirely scrutinized: travel writings, mostly, and Empire writing, in what concerns information, mostly geographical, about the colonies, and also novel, a most cultivated Victorian literary genre.

Being the canonical British Victorian women writers represented in the library shelves, searchable in the online catalogue, the appearance of other authors is framed under the category of 'curiosities', in the sense that their inclusion does not represent consistent criteria of relevance in the line of acceptance of donations/acquisitions policy. Furthermore, these books, included in the manual catalogue, are not available in the library shelves.

Going into detail, one can establish, at first, a range of authors. Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters, George Eliot, Alice Meynell, Christina Rossetti, Dorothy Wordsworth and Maria Edgeworth are represented in primary and secondary literature, and names such as Anna Eliza Bray, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, W.H. Davies, Grace E. Hadow, Vernon Lee and Beatrice Web are represented in literature or essay.
Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Rhoda Broughton, Josephine Butler, Elizabeth Grey, Florence Nightingale, Elizabeth Gaskell, Felicia Hemans, Fanny Kemble, Harriet Martineau, Hannah More, Cornelia Sorabji, Olive Shreiner and Ann Radcliffe are represented in critical works.

Other (very) few names appear in the manual catalogue, such as Evelyn Ashley, Gertrude Atherton, Valentine Baker, Anne Blunt, Ouida and Alice Gardner, among others, that join the names common to the digital catalogue/manual catalogue, George

Elliot, Jane Austen and Elizabeth Bowen. A selection of Queen Victoria's letters can also be found.

If the first ones are, so to say, obvious choices, others expose a random or no intended choice of the Library. How each of them arrived in the premises remains to be known, information that will desirably provided in a further step, that is intend to be taken as the research will evolve.

Popular, prolific and successful Victorian writer Anna Eliza Bray (1790-1883), a name in the Libraries Main Catalogue, is a striking discovery, as a benchmark. She is the object of her autobiography, edited by John A. Kempe (the writer's nephew); Bray is not acknowledged by the VW, nor by the VWWP, much less by Harold Bloom, whose approach acknowledges only nine Victorian women writers (Bloom 1994), or the other selections referred to before. Yet, Bray published, in her long life, a great number of books, *The Borders of the Tamar and Tavy* (1836) being considered her most notable one. This author published mainly novels, one of which *The Moor of Portugal* (about foreign life). Her major work being described in the novel and anthropological genre, among a great number of titles, so, in due justice there is no argument for exclusion. As an argument more, this author's representation in the British Library is extensive, from primary sources to critical production about her work.

So, according to the indexing of the author's work by the British Library, it being clear that the autobiography is not her most relevant title, its presence in the Faculty of Humanities' library can only be explained by the work of chance and not of a consistent acceptance of donation/acquisition policy.

Cornelia Sorabji is another case, this time not of underrepresentation, as Bray, but of non representation, with the exception of a master thesis, thus secondary literature.[8] Being an author with an extensive corpus, ranging from the autobiographical genre to the anthropological accounts, a British Indian Victorian reformer, her knowledge of India in her time can be equaled only by a few contemporaries. Furthermore, Sorabji's writing goes beyond other British woman more common travel writing, due to her deep social reform commitment and political concerns for the development of the country, that shape her writing. Not forgetting her tireless efforts towards Indian women social condition, whereas other writers remain in a strict folklore report, attractive as it might have been to their contemporary readers.

This anglicized Indian born author is also depicted as a witness of a changing world, as well as of an in-betweenness experienced by subjects with a double allegiance (Britain and India), as this was the case. So, much can be said about her relevance and as a source of a counter-discourse in her times, diverging from main-stream and Home Rule prevailing discourses, such as Gandhi's. An example is Cornelia Sorabji's *India Calling*, her *memoirs,* only recently brought to renewed attention by different biographers and researchers. Not being represented in the Library, its unique perspective of the Empire during the Victorian Era will not be available for readers, certainly a loss in the opinion making process about the subject.

As for this writer's relevance in a contemporary perspective this enquiry would be answered when quoting her addressing issues such as domestic violence or gender discrimination in the professional ranks, two major issues that have not yet been

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[8] Baptista, Cristina. *O encontro colonial nas memórias de Cornelia Sorabji*. Masters' degree dissertation. Lisbon: Faculty of Humanities, 2007.

overcome in contemporary Europe, namely from the site we stand in, Portugal, much less in India.

Grace Eleanor Hadow is another name overlooked in the British origins lists, namely the VW, and present in the Faculty's Library, as an anthology organizer and editor. Another curious case is Beatrice Webb, although underrepresented in the Faculty of Humanities' Library and only in secondary literature. As a well known case of collaborative production, involving Beatrice and Sidney Webb as political essayists, this author of unquestionable relevance is not singled out in the VW list of women authors, although quoted in many articles within this site.

Conclusion

The bottom line, at this stage of the research, is that a wide Victorian literary canon is fairly represented in the University of Lisbon Faculty of Humanities' Library. This means that a contemporary assessment of what is relevant to be read not just *from* but also *of* Victorian women writers is available to the average student reader and researcher in the Library.

My hint, so far, is that the digital available replicates the canon of the paper-based library. This is on the one hand, disappointing, in the sense that one might legitimately expect to find a wider fan of contents – and to certain extents that happens – but, on the other hand, it happens that names considered relevant (like Cornelia Sorabji), unrepresented at the Library, is underrepresented in the digital.

A few more ancient books, published during the Victorian Era, that have not survived the test of time, thus relegated to oblivion, can be found in the content of the manual catalogue or/and the deposits—not available to every reader and only under special requirement. Here will be found a randomized number of books, not only precious ones, but also under the epitome of curiosities, namely coming from donations, thus corresponding to previous individual owners and revealing their own particular choices.

As stated before, the Library's collections within the scope of this research match the more relevant, thus canonical, woman authors, if one compares this collection with lists of names in a number of sources, ranging from the considerably comprehensive VW, taking into account the considered authors, to the much more selected Harold Blooms' choice, but including—for the sake of suggestions—other sources, such as the VWWP, dedicated to less known authors, the Virginia Blain's *Victorian Women Poets. An Annotated Anthology* and Harriet Jump's *Women's Writing in the Victorian Period 1837-1901: An Anthology*.

As is the case with Sorabji, whose appearance in the Faculty of Humanities is due to a seminar devoted to women writing in the British Empire, undertaken in the mid 2000's, as other less known and non canonical writers come to the front of the current research, be they theme of masters dissertations, or doctoral thesis. This circumstance can be explained by the acknowledged effort concerning innovative themes underwent by post-graduate studies programs, as a wider faculty policy.

This policy has had obvious consequences on the Library's collections, broadening their scope, and including names and themes that otherwise would not be represented in the catalogues, in the sense that they do not represent necessarily a consensus of the Department of English, or the Library's acquisition policy, but a more individual attitude, be it the researcher's choice, but considering also the tutor's advice. As stated before, the Library of the Faculty of Letters, founded in 1859, prides itself of a content ranging from rare ancient books to a vast contemporary collection, either

originated in donations or acquisitions, in several fields of knowledge within the scope of the Humanities.

In conclusion, the library contents, as far as contemporary acquisitions and donations, depict the relevance of Victorian Era as it is perceived today. The fact that the authors' relevance might and is reevaluated by different and subsequent reader communities is stressed by Salman Rushdie, in his allusion to Jane Austen, an all times novelist (since her appearance in the publishing market), also revived in contemporary cinema and television. In his recent *Joseph Anton. A Memoir*, Rushdie criticizes Austen's approach of the Napoleonic wars, to the extent as this author ignores the conflict and the participation of the British Army, as an attitude impossible for a writer to uphold today, when, says Rushdie, it is impossible to separate the political from the personal (Rushdie 2012: 54). One might conclude, therefore—adding to the argument of the canon not being a fixed category—that Austen is not included in Rushdie's canon as a novelist, because of her writing not resisting a contemporary reading, according to his perspective, and the requirements of today writing, namely in a post-colonial era, when geographical frontiers fall and human experience has broadened immensely.

According to the scope of our current research, one might state that the library responds to its function, providing relevant reading about the Victorian Era, with a fair bulk of relevant authors; the representation of non-canonical authors, with a short number of names, as the ones referred to before, may be attributed to random choices or donations, and not to a coherent acquisition policy, undertaken and consolidated with time. Nonetheless, this is a fact in itself, a challenge for researchers and an issue for future attention.

Works found outside the main canon represent fringes of the publishing at the time, although pointing out to the consistent stream of novels, travel writing, anthologies, geography and the anthropological genre, much cultivated by women writers at the time. This, nevertheless, does not indicate that the library has done a choice to specialize in these or other theme. Resorting mainly from donations, these few titles reveal the choices of the previous owners of the private libraries they come from, rather than a choice of library policy.

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