

# OPPORTUNITIES WITH OMEKA COMMONPLACING THE EARLY TUDOR READING EXPERIENCE

ALISON HARPER

COMMONPLACING IS A historically based method of reading and re-appropriating texts that was common in the Middle Ages and Early Modern period but continued into later centuries and is also practised today in largely digital formats. The type that I use here is one of the broadest; simply “the unstructured compilation of verse and prose passages.”<sup>1</sup> It has been more rigidly defined and understood in very different ways, as the specific practices of commonplacing changed with the changing technology of the book. The increased access to paper, the gradual shift from manuscript to print and the evolution of a large-scale industry in creating and disseminating books to the general public—all of these changes affected the way commonplacing was used.<sup>2</sup> As a teaching method, the great advantages of

---

1 Victoria E. Burke, “Recent Studies in Commonplace Books,” *Recent Studies in the English Renaissance* 43 (2013): 153–77 at 153.

2 Often used in the early Tudor period as a classroom tool, it became in subsequent centuries more wholly a tool to aid memory; in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the practice focused on excerpting small pieces of larger texts as a way of remembering the whole, thereby “reducing vast amounts of knowledge to a manageable form”; Lucia Dacome, “Noting the Mind: Commonplace Books and the Pursuit of the Self in Eighteenth-Century Britain,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 65 (2004): 603–25 at 603–4. Later the practice became more focused on collecting common sayings, proverbs and aphorisms and gained a reputation for being dull and platitudinous, Adam Smyth, “Commonplace Book Culture: A List of Sixteen Traits,” in *Women and Writing c. 1340–c. 1650: The Domestication of Print Culture*, ed. Anne Lawrence-Mathers and Phillipa Hardman (Woodbridge York Medieval Press, 2010), 90–110 at 109. Today, there are numerous digital platforms that market themselves as online commonplace books, such as Evernote and Notion. But the old paper format is still in use: in March of 2022, Charley Locke wrote an article in the *New York Times* titled “Commonplace Books are Like a Diary Without the Risk of Annoying Yourself” and discussed the author’s long-term habit of using a notebook to jot down beloved fragments of literature. *New York Times* March 22, 2022, [www.nytimes.com/2022/03/22/magazine/commonplace-books-recommendation.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/22/magazine/commonplace-books-recommendation.html).

---

**Alison Harper** is a PhD candidate at the University of Rochester. Her particular research interests are late medieval popular literature in England and reading practices during the late fifteenth–early sixteenth century period of mixed media manuscript and print production.

commonplacing are in both the variety of texts which are introduced to the student, and the organizational structure imposed on them. Teachers can build on this basic structure when constructing a class syllabus, and, I argue, can most effectively do this using a digital platform such as Omeka. A fairly simple content management system, Omeka is used to store digital versions of artifacts such as texts and images, allowing users to curate thematically related collections. It was first conceived and used as a tool for displaying museum objects in collections to anyone with access to the internet. Originally described as a “small history museum,” it has long been open to curators, enthusiasts, teachers, and students as a means of collecting and showcasing interesting, rare, and beautiful items—not simply to be stored as in a database, but actively exhibited in dynamic and exciting ways.<sup>3</sup> It requires the user to consider the structural metadata of every object before publishing online, and therefore is frequently used as a teaching tool in college classrooms. This chapter will explore how the platform can be used to map out commonplace books: late medieval and early modern manuscripts composed of many varied pieces of texts. Omeka lets the user treat every text both as a unique Item, and as part of a group, contained together with the Collection function.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, it is not so daunting for students to try and apprehend hundreds of texts at once, and understand the historical compilation of the material, when using Omeka’s digital tools.

## Omeka Literature Review

Teachers and scholars have discussed at length how digital tools like Omeka can become integral parts of the academic classroom. Part of this conversation turns on the question of metadata and the extent to which it can be utilized by students or non-experts in a classroom setting. Jane Zhang and Dayne Mauney have discussed the ways in which increasing digitization of content has affected archival practice and the need for adapting archival descriptions systems to more consistently use standard digital object meta-

---

**3** Tom, “Beyond the Museum.” Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media. 2007. Accessed February 2019, <https://omeka.org/news/2007/11/19/beyond-the-museum/>.

**4** ‘Item’ refers to the artifacts that are uploaded to the site, ‘Collection’ refers to the grouping of Items in a digital ‘box’ and ‘Exhibit’ refers to a guided tour through chosen Items that may come from a number of Collections. I will be using these terms throughout the chapter.

data.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, Lincoln Mullen, assessing the value of metadata as a teaching tool, argues that the exercise of creating new, nonstandard metadata vocabularies is a valuable pedagogical activity as his students “learned to be suspicious of categories” but also to “deploy their categories to learn new things anyway.”<sup>6</sup> Even more daringly, Edward Benoit III suggests that traditional metadata could be supplanted or at the least strongly supported by nonstandard crowdsourced social tags.<sup>7</sup> More recently, however, Kimmo Elo has reviewed the modern tendency to support user-generated metadata and pointed out the flaws of creating metadata without expert knowledge and intensive research into the historical context of the original material.<sup>8</sup> There has also been in recent years a particular focus on Omeka as a popular platform for this kind of work. Omeka has frequently been used in tandem with history and archaeology courses, with students being assigned the task of creating or adding to an existing project; in the course of this work they uncover and explore problems relating to the contextualization of historical artifacts.<sup>9</sup> Jason Jones agrees that digital platforms like Omeka are well adapted for “juxtaposing text with digital objects” to allow for thought-provoking interpretations of material.<sup>10</sup> Similarly Allison Marsh has acknowledged that, although using Omeka in the classroom sacrifices the opportunity for students to learn actual programming skills, the easy-to-use plat-

---

**5** Jane Zhang and Dayne Mauney, “When Archival Description Meets Digital Object Metadata: A Typological Study of Digital Archival Representation,” *The American Archivist* 76 (2013): 174–95.

**6** Lincoln Mullen, “Using Metadata and Maps to Teach the History of Religion,” *Transformations: The Journal of Inclusive Scholarship and Pedagogy* 25 (2014): 112–18 at 116.

**7** Edward Benoit III, “#MPLP Part 2: Replacing Item-Level Metadata with User-Generated Social Tags,” *The American Archivist* 81 (2018): 38–64.

**8** Kimmo Elo, “Big data, Bad Metadata: A Methodological Note on the Importance of Good Metadata in the Age of Digital History,” in *Digital Histories: Emergent Approaches within the New Digital History*, ed. Mats Fridlund, Mila Oiva and Petri Paju (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 2020), 103–11.

**9** Esther Liberman Cuenca and Maryanne Kowaleski, “Omeka and Other Digital Platforms for Undergraduate Research Projects on the Middle Ages,” *Digital Medievalist* 11 (2018): 3, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.16995/dm.69>; Allison C. Marsh, “Omeka in the Classroom: The Challenges of Teaching Material Culture in a Digital World,” *Literary and Linguistic Computing* 28 (2013): 279–282 at 281.

**10** Jason B. Jones, “There Are No New Directions in Annotations,” in *Web Writing: Why and How for Liberal Arts Teaching and Learning*, ed. Jack Dougherty and Tennyson O’Donnell (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014), 251.

form “allows them to concentrate on content and interpretation.”<sup>11</sup> Focusing on the student experience, Deborah Vanderbilt suggests that the challenge of trying to use unfamiliar digital tools like Omeka in English classes drives students to think about a broader range of approaches to the subject, and stimulates their intellectual curiosity; Dominic Morais agrees and suggests that the hands-on approach greatly improves student motivation in class.<sup>12</sup> More practically, Jeff McClurken, Stephen Robertson, and E. Leigh Bonds argue that tools like this prepare students more effectively for the modern workplace.<sup>13</sup>

## My Archive

While these tools can be used for classes covering all periods of commonplacing, my Omeka project is an archive of miscellaneous late medieval and early Tudor material which can serve as an example for how teachers and students can create their own archives.<sup>14</sup> In this chapter I examine how the

---

**11** Marsh, “Omeka in the Classroom,” 280.

**12** Deborah Vanderbilt, “Doing a Lot with a Little: Making Digital Humanities at a Small College,” *CEA Critic* 76 (2014): 327–35 at 334; Dominic G. Morais, “Doing History in the Undergraduate Classroom: Project-Based Learning and Student Benefits,” *The History Teacher* 52 (2018): 49–76 at 69.

**13** Jeff McClurken, “Teaching and Learning Online with Omeka: Discomfort, Play, and Creating Public, Online, Digital Collections,” in *Learning Through Digital Media: Experiments in Technology and Pedagogy*, ed. R. Trebor Scholz (New York: New School and the MacArthur Foundation, 2011), 137–149 at 138; Stephen Robertson, “The Differences between Digital Humanities and Digital History,” in *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2016*, ed. Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), <https://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/read/untitled/section/ed4a1145-7044-42e9-a898-5ff8691b6628##ch25>; E. Leigh Bonds, “Listening in on the Conversations: An Overview of Digital Humanities Pedagogy,” *CEA Critic* 76 (2014): 147–57 at 148.

**14** The medieval and Tudor texts included in the archive are not fully representative of the medieval or early modern period and are not intended to be in any way comprehensive. I built the site as an offshoot of my doctoral studies since these were the manuscripts I was studying; my aim, at the time, was to make the content more generally accessible. My Omeka site consequently has a very narrow focus, although the content would potentially be useful to classes focusing on medieval literature read by early Tudor Londoners. It contains items from the following manuscripts: London, Lambeth Palace Library, MS 306, Oxford, Balliol College, MS 354, Huntington, Huntington Library, MS HM 144, Oxford, Bodleian Library, Codex Ashmole 61, London, British Library, Harley MS 2551, London, British Library, Harley MS 2252 and London, British Library, Lansdowne 762. I obtained these sources in the following ways: Balliol College MS 354, Lambeth MS 306 and Huntington MS HM 144 are freely available

features of Omeka can usefully draw out interesting aspects of the historical commonplace book in ways which galvanize student discussion on historical reading practices and modern archiving methods. In the four sections of this chapter, I move from techniques for viewing the commonplace book as a whole, to building the metadata of distinct texts, to editing the user interface via tagging, and finally to using the Exhibit function in order to create unique commonplace books.

As has been frequently noted, one of the most intriguing aspects of early Tudor commonplace books is their idiosyncratic organization, “reflecting the widely differing interests and backgrounds of their compilers.”<sup>15</sup> Medieval and early modern scholars have spent much time and energy in discovering the character, interests, or purpose of the person who made the book, based on their choices in reading material. The vogue for learning about anonymous historical figures’ history through their pocket libraries has resulted in various ‘thematic readings’ of these books which come to conclusions such as that the compiler was a Lollard sympathizer, or more nebulously, that the “compilers’ most persistent desire is to stimulate hope.”<sup>16</sup> Regardless of the compiler’s identity, the construction of the book serves the needs and desires of this first reader, who in making the book takes on the role of a creative anthologizer, if not outright author. In this way these

---

online at <https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/e0d10554-db39-4b58-a944-45da5e66248e/>, [https://images.lambethpalacelibrary.org.uk/luna/servlet/detail/LP\\_LIBLPL~17~17~178964~124985?qvq=q%3AMS306&mi=44&trs=45](https://images.lambethpalacelibrary.org.uk/luna/servlet/detail/LP_LIBLPL~17~17~178964~124985?qvq=q%3AMS306&mi=44&trs=45) and <https://hdl.huntington.org/digital/collection/p15150coll7/id/41008/rec/1> respectively; the manuscript of Codex Ashmole 61 is not available online, but the texts can be found as part of the University of Rochester’s TEAMS series at <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/shuffelton-codex-ashmole-61>; the digitized manuscripts of British Library Harley MS 2551, British Library, Harley MS 2252 and British Library, Lansdowne 762 I have bought privately. I reference this site in this paper as a working exemplar of how similar digital archives can be created and used in literature classes. It is not possible at the moment for teachers and students to add to it, but similar archives can be created as part of classroom exercises, perhaps using material that has been bought by the university libraries attached to the course. The process of creating a similar site is straightforward, and thanks to the generosity of many libraries today, there are hundreds of digitized manuscripts available online that could be included on similar archives.

**15** Fred Schurink, “Manuscript Commonplace Books, Literature, and Reading in Early Modern England,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 73(2010): 453–69 at 453.

**16** Ralph Hanna III, “‘Miscellaneity and Vernacularity: Conditions of Literary Production in Late Medieval England,” in *The Whole Book: Cultural Perspectives on the Medieval Miscellany*, ed. Stephen G. Nichols and Siegfried Wenzel (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 37–53 at 46.

books can be compared to contemporary social media platforms like Pinterest, with its shareable boards of found text, video, and art, or BuzzFeed pages with their links to eleven photos of different actors who could play the next Batman, based on the ruggedness of their jawlines. These sites, creatively augmented by mainly anonymous contributors, overwhelmingly feature the products of popular culture; but were medieval and early modern commonplace books that different? Maybe the latter include more recipes for horse liniment and the correct form of Sunday prayers, but they also used romantic tales, bawdy ballads, and gnomic proverbs of the day not that dissimilar from a millennial blogger's "inspirational quote of the day." Functionally, the commonplace book is a record of "textual fragments" and a certain style of reading that saw the practice as "a harvesting or mining of the book for its functional parts"<sup>17</sup> like "serviceable topics, fragments tagged for future use."<sup>18</sup> When studying the commonplace book, students can work from a starting point of the question "what is most useful to you?"—and, by interpreting the interests and values of the historical readers, give voice to their own sense of what is practical and desirable. The various features of the commonplace book and its use of pragmatic reading can be easily represented in an Omeka-built archive of historical material and lend themselves to specific classroom exercises.

### Figuring Out the Historical Organization of Texts

A monumental part of studying these miscellanies is drawing interpretative connections between the texts. While this kind of reading exercise could be performed with a paper version of the commonplace book, it can only be aided and improved upon with the digital version. Using Omeka, the archive I have built treats every separate commonplace book as a Collection, a function of the site which keeps all texts, or "Items" of the books, together in the order in which they originally appear. This allows users to broadly view the organization of the material. This organization often highlights early modern readers' concern with placing similar items together, as if creating distinct chapters in a book. Often medical recipes (such as *For the pestilence*, *For the biting of a dog*, or *For the pin in a man's eye*) will be collected together, as in Collection Balliol MS 354, where they are gathered in groups of about

---

**17** Marjorie Swann, *Curiosities and Texts: The Culture of Collecting in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 153.

**18** Richards and Schurink, "The Textuality and Materiality of Reading," 352.

eight to fifteen items, or in Collection Lambeth MS 306, where over 90 percent of the medical recipes are collected together in a separate booklet sewn into the rest of the manuscript. However, the Items within the Collections can be viewed in several ways, as they can be sorted by date added, title, and creator, as well as via the search function, which allows more specific avenues for narrowing down the material. In this way, Omeka gives students several options for reading them, separately and together, and in finding discrepancies, inconsistencies, and oddities. When searching Items for the word “Recipe,” for example, differences may not at first jump out, since over a hundred Items have “Recipe” in their Titles. The actual Items are, to a modern sensibility, a mix of different genres. Scanning through the list of Items, students can see that the Subjects in this section differ from Medical Recipe to Culinary Recipe to Household Recipe, and in content, from curing apoplexy to dying cloth or making vinegar. However, awareness of the Coverage, or spatial placement of the texts (which can be used as a modifier in the search) shows how these texts were originally placed together by the compiler. This aspect of the manuscript provides opportunities for looking at textual organization. A classroom exercise could ask: “Why do these items all appear in one place, when they are not all the same kind of text?”

This kind of question stimulates active reading because there is no answer which is definitively the right one. A student could suggest that these items were gathered together because of their practical usefulness, as separate from the hymns and narratives elsewhere in the manuscript. Another student could respond that these texts are all concerned with housewifely activities—for cooking meals, repairing clothes, and soothing cuts and burns. Other texts of practical usefulness are found later in the book, such as a method for training a hawk; arguably this was a more masculine activity, and consequently it may have been kept apart from the “women’s work” of the earlier content. A student who was unconvinced by the thematic relationship of the contents could notice that all of these recipes are short (no more than four or five lines long). It might have been easier for the compiler to put all the short texts in the same place so that he did not have to worry about finding space as he might do if mixing together long and short texts. Building on this idea, a student might consider that there are outlying aspects in every data group and suggest that since most of the texts are medical recipes, the booklet is more properly a medical handbook, with a few other short texts added in where they would be sure to fit. Since we cannot know the real intention of the compiler, the exercise can continue for as long as it seems useful, where the purpose of the class is to better understand early modern reading practices.

## Categorizing the Relationships between Texts via Metadata

A physical book may contain a table of contents with some degree of detail about each individual item, but a digital archive combines this detailed approach with the easy ability to search for, access, and link various items together. This is particularly demonstrated by another function of the archive, made possible by Omeka's use of Dublin Core metadata in its databases. Dublin Core metadata is a very simple and therefore broadly used means of explaining and categorizing digital resources.<sup>19</sup> While it could be useful to liaise with the library services and to ask a librarian to lead a workshop on metadata, there are only fifteen elements in the basic version, which is the version used in Omeka. Students and instructors looking for a wider array of categories will be able to find them, but it will not be necessary to go beyond the original fifteen, which can easily be discussed in the classroom. There are also merits to keeping metadata simple. Asking students to use a pre-designed element set of this type forces them to think about the larger readership, who will have to navigate the site using metadata.<sup>20</sup> This has been established as a beneficial part of using Omeka in the classroom: discussing the value of using Omeka as a teaching tool, McClurken argues that when creating or adding to digital projects, students learn to "write for an audience of more than one."<sup>21</sup> Cuenca and Kowaleski emphasized the level of responsibility students held in accurately recording the metadata of their artifacts.<sup>22</sup> However, it is not always possible to achieve complete or unambiguous accuracy, and profitable discussions can be had over how to

---

**19** In 2013, Zhang and Mauney completed a representative survey of 276 digital collection sites, finding that 73 percent of these sites used Dublin Core and noted that it "remains on top of the list of metadata schemas adopted to organize and represent digital collections"; Zhang and Mauney, "When Archival Description Meets Digital Object Metadata," 182. In 2021, Katja Müller reviewed four decades of digital archival work and reported that while "databases without Dublin Core...are technically possible...these modes can be understood as being outside the currently prevailing technological frame for digitizing cultural heritage"; Katja Müller, "Deciding on Digital Archives: Improvement through Collection Management Systems," in *Digital Archives and Collections: Creating Online Access to Cultural Heritage* (New York: Berghahn, 2021), 57–99 at 92n9.

**20** The Dublin Core metadata set includes fifteen elements: Contributor, Coverage, Creator, Date, Description, Format, Identifier, Language, Publisher, Relation, Rights, Source, Subject, Title, and Type.

**21** McClurken, "Teaching and Learning Online with Omeka," 138.

**22** Cuenca and Kowaleski, "Omeka and Other Digital Platforms," 8.

fit the element set to what may be nebulous, strange, or uncertain about the manuscript text.

Some of the simpler aspects of metadata may be obvious to students and can be addressed first, in order to build confidence about their ability to identify Items: the Language is (usually) self-evident, the Subject requires a little discussion, and some preliminary research on the internet or in a library database can generally determine if there is a named Creator. However, this Dublin Core also includes less straightforward metadata like Relation, which in its most basic form is simply “A related resource,” and has a lot of potential as a resource for students to identify more precise relationships between different texts in the archive.<sup>23</sup> A classroom exercise could ask the question: “Which texts in the archive correspond best to which aspect of the metadata Relation, and why?” This requires a much closer, more attentive review of the texts, for while some relationships are relatively obvious, some are much more opaque. One clear example is in Balliol MS 354, which includes four separate texts titled *A Business Letter*, *A Formula of a Business Letter*, *A Business Letter (French)*, and *A Formula of a Business Letter (French)*. This addition in parentheses gives away the relationship between these four texts: two of them are business letters, and the other two are French translations of those letters. The translations, while separate Items, can therefore be labelled as having the Relation “isVersionOf.” Omeka allows for the texts to be linked directly to each other with URLs, making it easy for students to find and view both, even though they are physically separated in the book.

This linking function is helpful here, but in other cases might be entirely necessary, as with a certain curious set of items in the same Collection: *The Trental of St Gregory* and *This Talle of Pope Gregory*. The first text, a romantic story of Pope Gregory tasked with the quest of saving his mother from Purgatory, was copied into the book by the main compiler, Richard Hill. The second, a THREE-line text, was written by a later reader beneath the “Finis” of the earlier one on the same page of the book and is, in effect, a denunciation of the first text, averring that it is without truth. Clearly the two items have a strong relationship with each other, and the second makes no sense without the first. The requisite Relation metadata option is “references,” an ambiguous label defined as “The relation in which the creator of a source resource cites, acknowledges, disputes or otherwise refers to a

---

**23** For example, a classroom exercise could introduce students to more sophisticated forms of the metadata Relation: isPartOf, hasPart, isVersionOf, isFormatOf, hasFormat, references, isReferencedBy, isBasedOn, isBasisFor, requires, isRequiredBy.

target resource.”<sup>24</sup> Working with this straightforward relationship, students can deliberate over whether, for example, the second Item needs the Relation of ‘references’ and the first Item needs “isReferencedBy,” or if there is a better option.

Other kinds of texts demand an even more considered approach to quantifying the relationship; a more obscure example is in Collection Codex Ashmole 61, which includes two verse items, each called *The Ten Commandments*. One of these items contains the full text, i.e. all ten commandments. The other, some five folios after it in the manuscript, contains only the first stanza, with a few textual variants. A brief classroom exercise on the Relation between items could ask the questions: “Why might this have happened?” or “What is the most appropriate way to explain the relationship?” As the exact type of Relation called for would depend on the explanation for the second text (called a “false start” by the most recent editor of the manuscript), the archive could be altered several different ways based on the students’ responses.<sup>25</sup> For example, would it be “isPartOf”? This label describes the “False Start” Item as part of another, i.e. as only the first stanza and the beginning of the full list of the ten commandments. However, since there are textual differences between the two versions, perhaps it should be “isVersionOf” instead? Or “isBasedOn”? And wouldn’t it depend on which one was written first (not often possible to determine)? The uncertainty surrounding this case study makes it useful for an involved classroom discussion. Helpfully, Omeka allows URL links to be created between Items so that a user can instantly jump from one Item to the other, making clear that there is a definite relationship between the texts. However, the choices involved in how to categorize that relationship build students’ awareness of archival practice. As several teachers have attested, tasks like this will allow students to “gain an understanding of the ways that scholars approach, contextualize, and interpret sources.”<sup>26</sup> Using metadata in this way can be quite challenging. When discussing the relationship between texts in a more traditional academic form, such as a paper, vagueness and idiosyncratic descriptors are allowable (even *de rigueur*). However, when the goal is to create a clear and globally recognized categorization, as Dublin Core asks, students must learn to be decisive.

---

**24** Dublin Core Metadata Initiative. *RDF Schema Declaration of Relation Types*. Accessed February 2019, <http://dublincore.org/documents/rdf-relation-types/>.

**25** George Shuffleton, *Codex Ashmole 61: A Compilation of Popular Middle English Verse* (Kalamazoo: Middle Institute, 2008), 73.

**26** McClurken, “Teaching and Learning Online with Omeka,” 143.

## Remediating the Relevant Content of the Texts for Modern Readers

The use of metadata and the URL links for associating Items are fairly precise means for students to draw relationships between texts. The Omeka platform also offers another way of doing this which encourages more informal participation in describing and editing the archive: tagging. Without changing the main content of Items, students can be invited to impose their own judgment by employing this deceptively simple reading strategy. Social-media-savvy young adults will be familiar with the process of tagging objects with words or phrases, since this is a major feature of tweets, and pictures on Facebook or Instagram. Of course, as teachers have commented before, it is a mistake to assume strong digital expertise for all students; nonetheless, the difficulties students can face in these classes tends to be because “they tend not to apply the digital skills they do have to their academic studies.”<sup>27</sup> The tagging function in Omeka is a fairly simple tool, and allows students to choose any word or phrase to describe the Item. As one can use a hashtag on Twitter to clarify a topic or theme, and link individual tweets to broader conversations, the tag function in Omeka allows students to informally connect any Item to any other Item based on similarities they perceive. Students could use this to describe aspects of the texts that are not readily available via the metadata and make them searchable keywords. Esther Cuenca and Maryanne Kowaleski’s classroom-based Omeka project *Medieval London*, similarly encouraged students to create individual tags for the Items; this activity “made the students consider how their objects or sites might fall into particular categories rooted in specific historical moments,” including reigning English monarchs or historical periods like “Saxon” and “Tudor.”<sup>28</sup> Such an activity—which not only reads but remediates the text—is a modern twist on the practice of writing marginalia and other kinds of notations in manuscript folios.

As most commonplace books can attest, readers have frequently marked up various texts by adding corrections, extra details, denials or confirmations of the content, in ways which aided future readers as well as themselves. In the margins of London, Lambeth Palace Library, MS 306’s *List of Kings*, one early Tudor reader has copied the names of important personages like Queen Gwendolyn and the king’s brother Locryne, next to where their names appear in the text; similar to the modern practice of highlighting

<sup>27</sup> Vanderbilt, “Doing a Lot with a Little,” 327.

<sup>28</sup> Cuenca and Kowaleski, “Omeka and Other Digital Platforms.”

important information. In other cases, the reader wrote brief descriptions of narrative progression; the story of a female saint, *The Life of St Winifred*, is repeatedly marked with plot points like “she dyed the iijrd day of decembre.” Like modern notes, these markings indicate one way to read the text, by suggesting what was most important in the story’s structure. In London, British Library, Harley MS 2251, an early owner wrote marginal comments next to 26 percent of the texts in the book that are entirely focused on the texts’ readability, such as: “Reade thys agayne,” “Reade thys agayne and agayne” and “Do not reade thys but hyde your eye.” Whether informative or evaluative, it is similar to the modern practice of tagging social media posts with the names of people in photos, or briefly describing a meal as “foodporn” or a first date as “instalike.” A basic classroom exercise would be to use the tagging system embedded in the Omeka platform to similarly augment the archive, and to build discussion activities around the language choices students make in creating the tags. This would open the archive to reflections based in modern and future taste; as Benoit argued, “tagging is a dynamic process that...[reflects] the ever-changing interpretation of records.”<sup>29</sup> The significance of these choices is accentuated by the outward-facing nature of the digital project. Instead of creating a paper or written work only to be seen and marked by the class instructor, students have to think about how their judgments will be an indelible part of a digital archive, visible to anyone with an internet connection. While students may be used to creating this kind of online permanency as a part of social media, an academic-based project like this might force them to think about the long-lasting effects of their words.

Analysing tags can encourage students to consider how they might condense a text to its key ideas. To start with, they could consider a relatively simple Item like Oxford, Balliol College, MS 354’s *Household Recipe to Take Birds* which describes a method for catching wild birds. Elements of this method for bird-catching include a recipe for a drug, and the process of drugging the birds; appropriate tags could therefore include “hemp seed,” one of the ingredients, and the action “drugging,” or possibly a more involved description like “hiding drugs in food.” This practice of tagging involves a close degree of reading and attention to detail on students’ part that is similar in some ways to their work with the metadata, but for which there are a broad number of possible responses. One of the ingredients in the drug is “wort,” which unlike “hemp seed,” is not a term I would expect most people

---

29 Benoit, “#MPLP Part 2,” 45.

to be familiar with now. As readers and users of the archive, students could engage in a classroom discussion about how to treat potentially ambiguous or confusing tags. Should other users be expected to find their own definition of wort? One solution the students might suggest is to include a basic explanation in the tag itself, e.g., the tag “wort (plant).” Students could also use multiple tags which reference different ways of viewing the same object. Teachers have discussed before the value of digital projects as a means of creating and exhibiting “collective reading” whereby students can access each other’s opinions on the textual material and subsequent classes can build on the pre-discussion inherent in the digital text.<sup>30</sup> Jones, in discussing the concept and practice of annotation, claims that the universal nature of digital annotative practices such as tagging makes this a form of learning highly accessible to modern students. Larry Swain has explicitly commented that this kind of “participatory learning” that emphasizes collaboration is a key aspect of how teaching the Middle Ages is becoming rejuvenated.<sup>31</sup> Like the medieval and early Tudor reader leaving marginal comments, the students are brought to think about how they can most helpfully edit the archive for future users, and practise exercising their own judgment—something which is invaluable in a classroom.

The tagging feature, applied fairly consistently across the archive, can be a highly useful tool for finding other Items and surveying the archive via “distant reading.” The practice of “distant reading,” as developed by Franco Moretti, takes a “quantitative approach to literature” and reimagines large collections of textual data as visualizations—over the last decade, this idea has been popularized through programs like Word Cloud and Voyant.<sup>32</sup> Something similar to these visualizations is provided by the Omeka platform, since once a tag is created, it is included on an easily accessible separate page with every other tag ever created. This means that students can use previously created tags to explore the Items, and, through looking at the visualization, realize the most and least popular tags at a glance. It is also another way to search for connections between texts which might not otherwise appear obvious; for example, I used the tag ‘jousting’ for both the romance narrative *Lybeaus Desconus*, where it is mentioned as a chivalric activity, and in the prose account *The Dimensions of the Lists at Smithfield*,

---

**30** Jones, “There Are No New Directions in Annotations,” 253.

**31** Larry Swain, “Past, Present, and Future of Digital Medievalism,” *Literature Compass* 9 (2012): 923–32 at 932.

**32** Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees* (London: Verso, 2005), 4.

which is a detailed description of how lists for jousting were built in London during the reign of Henry VIII.

## Disassembling the Compilations

Finally, the Omeka platform can be used as a tool for not only containing but also remixing the contents of medieval books. The idea of ‘remixing’ medieval books is not a new one, and has been practised by owners, users, and students of manuscripts right up until the modern day—although this has mostly not been a good thing. Various unscrupulous collectors over the centuries, and especially during the Gothic Revival in the 1800’s, have damaged manuscripts by cutting out the parts which they liked best (illustrations, decorations with gold leaf, illuminated figures) and keeping them for themselves. In some cases, pages of medieval choirbooks have even been remade into household items like lampshades. Even the more well-intentioned kind of dis- and re-assembly is essentially destructive. The seventeenth-century scholar Árni Magnússon repeatedly took apart Icelandic medieval manuscripts and reassembled them in loose thematic collections: for example, putting together copies of the same text. This was meant to be an aid for future scholars and readers, and it did help his students with understanding the material—but at the cost of destroying the original constructions.

Standards are more rigorous nowadays, and no reputable library will let you permanently take apart their 500-year-old books. However, the principle of disassembly remains useful for students. Scholars still mentally plan such fragmentations in order to better understand the connections between the different parts of the book. Critics call this “Museology,” where sections of the book (like separate texts) can be thought of as objects in a museum collection. They are currently arranged in one organizational pattern, but they can be rearranged to fit different interpretations about how the books were used—like the clues in a criminal investigation which the detectives fit together in new ways to support different narratives of how the crime might have been committed. So naturally, the advent of digital technology upon manuscript studies has been of immeasurable benefit. Now, we can take apart those 500-year-old books and put them together in new ways, while leaving the physical book untouched. Omeka is geared to make the most of this, and reworking collections by adding, editing, and rearranging items, is a fundamental part of the platform, and a key part of any class that uses it.

But why is this a valuable activity for students? To start with, remixing and reworking the original content which the students have already read strengthens their impression of the texts. Repetition is powerful. By re-

enacting the work of the original medieval readers, while interposing their own judgment for how the Collections should be organized, students can creatively optimize their reading. George Shuffleton, in describing the process of compilation, explained that “the act of compiling a miscellany was not so different from reading one, a series of sudden discoveries that created a flexible, evolving sense of order out of bewildering diversity.”<sup>33</sup> It is just this sense of discovery which will drive students’ active learning. Remixing also allows students to both take a closer and a broader view of the texts. Omeka is ideally positioned to present individual Items in a way which offers opportunities for adding more information about them, but also for re-presenting them according to the student’s individual judgment. Several of the classroom activities mentioned earlier include open-ended questions, to which there is more than one right answer. If students disagree over the most correct way to describe the metadata of an Item, which Items it should be linked with, or how to position it in relation to other Items, they should be free to pursue their own interpretations, without affecting the learning prospects for the other students.

This is where the Exhibit function comes into play. This is an important aspect of the Omeka platform, and along with Item and Collection forms the main tripartite structure of the archive. An Exhibit is similar to a Collection, but with some essential differences. Items in Collections cannot be shared with other Collections, since they are unique objects only found in this particular place. There may be several versions of a certain text in the archive which come from different manuscripts (there are three of John Lydgate’s popular medieval guide to good behaviour, *Stans Puer Ad Mensam*); nonetheless, each of them is a singular object with its own textual variations, marginal notes, and mise-en-page. Exhibits, on the other hand, are free to share the same unique Item, which can be copied to multiple places. One text from Codex Ashmole 61, such as *The Knight Who Forgave His Father’s Slayer*, can be used by different students for their individual Exhibits. Since each Exhibit would itself be a different compilation of Items, this text would appear in a different light according to its various thematic associations with an idiosyncratic selection of other texts.

These students’ Exhibits are not necessarily different versions of the original Collection. With this function, students can also mix the contents of different Collections together: for example, like Árni Magnússon, they could

---

**33** George Shuffleton, “The Miscellany and the Monument” (PhD diss., Yale University, 2002), 43.

collect different versions of the same texts, for the purposes of easy comparison. They could also create their own Items, as individual versions of those already in the Collection. Disagreeing with the metadata, they could produce a corrected version, or make more substantial changes: viewing the digitized image of the manuscript page themselves, they might come up with an alternative transcription of the contents. More simply, they could present the Items with their own explanation and interpretation of what it might have meant to the early Tudor reader—or what it could mean now. Earlier in the chapter I argued for the usefulness of the Dublin Core metadata Relation as a means of clarifying a specific relation between two objects, such as one being a version of another, or referencing another. This allows for very narrow readings that can help train attention to detail and precision; however, students also need the freedom to explore less restricted forms of relationship between texts. A classroom exercise could ask the questions: “What are your favourite texts in the archive?” or “Which aren’t worth re-reading, and why?”

A more focused Exhibit could result from a student’s particular research interests. For example, say a student was particularly interested in the strong strain of anti-feminism and misogynistic texts in early Tudor commonplace books. They would, by viewing the items in the Collections, make their own decisions about what would be most relevant to include in their Exhibit: *Of all creatures women be best*, *Women women love of women* and *Whan netills in wynter bere rosis rede*, texts with similar content that originate in three different Collections. But placing certain texts together is only a first step in creating the Exhibit. The Exhibit function asks the user to decide on a relatively simple layout, which can prioritize the Items themselves in a visual display, or prioritize accompanying descriptive text which they write themselves, or offer a balance between the two. Unlike the Collections, which only present the Items by themselves, the Exhibit Page allows the student to comment on, explain, or present an argument about one or more of the objects. Using the above example of anti-feminist texts, a student could note that each one a) criticizes women’s unfaithfulness and lack of trustworthiness and b) expresses this with sarcasm, by pretending to praise them for their inconstancy. Since Exhibits can hold multiple pages, the student could then present another sub-section of anti-feminist texts which, according to their interpretation, employ different strategies, such as narratives like Balliol MS 354’s *Jack and his Stepdame and the Frere* which present female characters as stupid or villainous. Depending on what is required from the assignment, these Exhibits could effectively take the place of more traditional research papers, commenting in depth on the Items in their own commonplace book.

They could also stand alone as alternatives to written papers. Cuenca and Kowaleski, discussing the way students curated historical objects on the Omeka-based *Medieval London*, described the way the digital platform helped students “transform seemingly inert objects from the pre-modern era into a kind of language with which they can reconstitute the past into stories...microhistories of objects with their own assumptions, logic, and interpretations.”<sup>34</sup> As microhistories, Exhibits can use Pages with a variety of presentational options to create a facsimile of a research paper that constantly refers and links back to the larger archive.

For various kinds of class projects, there are multiple features of the Omeka platform which students can use to curate their objects, and a huge range of possibilities. Each Item requires a caption, necessitating the student to make choices about how to briefly describe them. This lets students, to some extent, disagree with or contradict the form of the Item as it appears in the Collection without needing to create new Items. The text *The Knight Who Forgave His Father's Slayer* from Codex Ashmole 61 is one of those medieval narratives which fits several different genres. In the captions, one student might choose to emphasize that the story is a Romance, and pair it with *Lybeaus Desconus* from Lambeth MS 306. Another might argue that it is a Christian Miracle Story, and, in their caption, draw attention to the fact that it features a crucifix that appears to come to life and embrace a sinful character. This kind of re-categorization can be effectively joined with the practice of creating new Items, especially when smaller Items are created out of pre-existing, larger ones. A student might decide that the best classification for *The Knight Who Forgave His Father's Slayer* was Moral Tale and imagine that a good Exhibit would be a collection of Moral Tales--what about the single Item *Fall of Princes* from Harley MS 2551? Much like *The Seven Sages of Rome* from Balliol MS 354, this object is actually a collection of extracts from the longer tale-collection by John Lydgate which is not represented fully in that manuscript. Some of those extracts may fit with the classification Moral Tale and some would not. The student could then create new Items out of the original one and put those into their Exhibits--and since Items here can be shared, other students could pick them up and add them to a Biblical Narrative Exhibit, Historical Monarchs Exhibit, or even (considering the content of these stories) Gruesome Death Exhibit.

There are many ways in which a class could use and develop the basic Omeka tools in this archive, or others like it, when teaching the study of com-

---

34 Cuenca and Kowaleski, “Omeka and Other Digital Platforms,” 16.

monplace books. While anyone is free to browse my own site, I encourage the creation of independent archives of commonplace book material. While more technologically advanced classes could download, install, and customize the software according to their own specifications, teachers and students may also simply acquire a hosted account on omeka.net which requires few technical skills. As the examples from my archive show, these late medieval and early Tudor manuscripts contain a fantastic array of historical evidence about how these past readers used their books: the textual selections, arrangements, marginalia, and other paratextual information can promote discussion and inspire students to build something new with their own set of reading practices that goes beyond “assessing medieval reading practices through the language and criticism of digital media.”<sup>35</sup> However, such reading practices can easily be applied to other disciplines in the Humanities: history, media and culture, music, art, and many more. Using the Omeka platform in the ways I have outlined make reading practices inseparable from writing practices and foregrounds the judgment and interpretation of the students themselves in a dynamic learning environment.

---

**35** Heather Blatt, *Participatory Reading in Late-Medieval England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 8.