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Developing and Utilizing the VSFP Database: Atalanta and Girls’ Adventure Fiction

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The original purpose of my project was two-fold: 1) to expand the Victorian Short Fiction Project, a peer-reviewed database compiled from Victorian periodical fiction housed in Brigham Young University’s special collections library; and 2) to utilize this database in order to perform a literary study of nineteenth-century colonial fiction. In accordance with growing scholarly interest in digital tools as a means of conducting literary scholarship, I wanted to promote BYU’s own digital and print resources in order to discover important trends in Victorian literature. With the help of Dr. Leslee Thorne-Murphy, who has worked tirelessly over the past decade to curate and professionalize the VSFP, I developed and expanded the database and, furthermore, utilized its resources in order to compose an argument concerning the role of girls’ adventure fiction in the first volume (1887-1888) of a girls’ periodical entitled Atalanta.

Through this project, I originally planned to investigate boys’ colonial fiction. While working as a research assistant on the VSFP (approximately one year prior to my ORCA project), I was intrigued by the interrelated nature of boys’ adventure fiction and colonial fiction more broadly. However, as I was conducting the first phase of my project—migrating boys’ adventure fiction stories from an older version of the website onto the VSFP database—Dr. Thorne-Murphy pointed out to me what seemed to be an anomaly: a boys’ adventure fiction story contained within a girls’ periodical entitled Atalanta. At a time when boys’ and girls’ fiction were largely policed by gender roles, such a contrasting example seemed significant. As I looked further into the periodical itself, I found a trove of colonial stories fitting this same contrasting nature. Therefore, when I moved onto the second phase of my project—curating and preparing new stories for publication on the VSFP database—I changed directions and exclusively chose stories published in the first volume of Atalanta, all of which had colonial elements. In pouring over these stories, while at the same time researching current scholarship in nineteenth-century girls’ fiction, Victorian temporality, and ecological criticism, I developed an argument concerning the significance of Atalanta in relation to current conversations surrounding the British Empire and its colonial environments.

Overall, my project helped to curate and prepare eight Victorian short fiction stories for publication on the VSFP database: four migrated boys’ adventure fiction stories from the unedited vsfpwiki site, and four brand new stories chosen from the first volume of Atalanta. These stories will be publicly available for further research (or perhaps simply for entertainment) on the VSFP database website. I also composed a paper concerning the role of colonial fiction in Atalanta, which I presented at a conference at BYU in October. My paper argues that Atalanta’s girls advocate for England to adopt a post-imperial diplomatic approach with its colonies founded in an ecological mode of relationships. I begin this paper by tracing the changing concerns of the Empire in fin-de-siècle Britain—coinciding with a shift in the role of boys’ colonial fiction—and how these concerns combined to necessitate an adjustment both to the imperial structure of England and to its literature. Atalanta responds to these changes by presenting an intermediary ecological girl who traverses borders in order to negotiate between cultures. The negotiating capabilities of this girl, along with a blending of Darwinian and Rousseauian constructs of nature, further allow her to characterize herself as a piece of natural history. This position allows her to speak on behalf of an elevated sense of nature, advocating for England to interact through a post-imperial relationship to colonies and, therefore, also its colonial environments. My presentation develops this argument through an analysis of how Paul Hamilton Hayne’s American poem, “The Story of an Ambuscade,” shifts within Atalanta's context. I presented this paper at the ORCA Symposium organized by BYU’s Humanities Center on October 27th. I have also submitted this paper to the Southwest English Symposium held as
Arizona State University, whose theme seemed especially fitting: “Borders and Cross-Cultural Encounters.” The paper is currently under review. Furthermore, I plan to submit this paper to the National Undergraduate Literature Conference at Weber State University, and to Criterion, BYU’s undergraduate journal of literary criticism.

Thus, with ORCA’s support, my project has fulfilled many of the purposes I set out to achieve, while opening avenues for further discovery. As the VSFP database grows in both size and reputation, more of its resources will be available for the enjoyment of Victorian fiction as well as for research into Victorian literature’s continued significance. Beyond helping to increase the size and knowledge of the VSFP and BYU, I also hope that my project will contribute to current initiatives to discover the many ways we can utilize digital resources in order to more fully understand the complexities of Victorian literature. Future research may use the database in order to refine digital humanities tools for literary analysis, which could amass large amounts of data concerning the language used in the stories of the VSFP. Additionally, the literary analysis of my project helps to contribute to current understandings of the Victorian empire. It bridges ecological and postcolonial theoretical fields in a novel way; while much research between these two fields of discovery center on how postcolonial thought can help scholars understand Victorians' relationship to their environment, my project looks at how ecological views can help us understand the British Empire and its connections to its colonies and environments.

I am confident that my efforts in digital Victorian fiction will help to expand the magnitude and the name of the VSFP database, BYU’s research efforts, and BYU’s special collections library. I am optimistic that my findings will contribute toward an understanding of how Victorians navigated the imaginary and materials spaces of colonial environments. I find it extremely meaningful to investigate these notions through digital means, especially since today’s technology can help us understand our own methods of interacting with the environment, as well as how those methods have been inflected by Victorian paradigms. I hope that this project and the VSFP database will help to open up further opportunities for discovery in the realms of digital humanities, Victorian girls' fiction, and ecological theory.

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