Coalition Talk: The New Archive: Women, Writing, Work

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In “Feminism in the Age of Digital Archives,” Jacqueline Wernimont and Julia Flanders argue the archive is a “conduit through which [we can] experiment with new modes of scholarly intervention” (425). By re-conceptualizing the archive as a conduit, we call into question the criteria for what constitutes the archive as a physical space and the materials as physical artifacts. For Wernimont and Flanders, that space is a digitized one and those materials are print sources, but their work can be applied to physical spaces and manuscript materials. For example, Antoinette Burton’s *Dwelling in the Archive* provides us “historiographical opportunities” (5) to locate the “counternarratives” (33) that re-shape traditional boundaries and prefigure substantive changes to feminist scholarship. This re-shaping requires that we re-imagine not only the archive but also the questions we ask of it. As we ask new questions of old and often overlooked materials, we enact Wernimont’s and Flanders’ archive as conduit by recovering voices that have been silenced and by making space for voices that have not yet even been invited to the table. While this presentation follows in the archival footsteps of these three feminist scholars, it focuses on the material artifacts of eighteenth-century rural housewives to demonstrate that as we engage archive as conduit, we locate the counternarratives and, through them, construct an alternative story about women, writing, and work.

Drawing on Wernimont’s and Flanders’ work on *Women Writers Online* (WWO), this presentation examines women’s manuscript recipe books from the long eighteenth century that are held in archival repositories. The movement from a digital to a physical location and from a print to a manuscript format uncovers a number of issues relevant
to the feminist scholar and the production of feminist research. Access, security, and cataloging are most notable. Access is critical to feminist recovery work. For the typical American graduate student or junior colleague, working with eighteenth-century manuscript materials can be prohibitively expensive; this is especially the case if the materials are housed outside one's own country. Many archival repositories are addressing this issue by scanning materials and making them available online. Increased access benefits the field by increasing awareness about archival libraries and their holdings, making materials available to a wider audience, and providing critical attention to previously neglected women writers. Finally, both the scanned and the secured item will remain overlooked if not properly identified and catalogued. For example, an early challenge for feminist scholars using archival repositories was that women's materials were often housed in their family's collections and cataloged under a father's or husband's name, not the woman's name. Because of this, many women's materials were virtually lost in the archive. Most libraries have taken care to include women's names in the cataloging data and to revise finding aids to describe women's materials.

One area where the archive provides an historiographical opportunity to recover women's work is through their recipe collections.

Women's medicinal recipes provide scholars with details about the conditions of eighteenth-century home health care. Remedies were created and prescribed as a means of eliminating pain and preventing disease and included treatments for a range of bodily ailments and infectious diseases, preventative therapies, cosmetic salves, and dental repairs. As I have discussed in "Expanding the Archive: A Galaxy of Medicinal Receipts," the most frequently asked question and, in short, the litmus test for a medicinal recipe is "does it work?" In the eighteenth century, self-medication was common practice, although exceptions were made for cases that required surgery or where bones were broken. Even serious conditions, such as falling sickness (epilepsy and convulsions) and the King's Evil or scrofula (abscess and swelling of the lymph nodes) and infectious diseases, such as plague, smallpox, and consumption, were treated at home. For the rural housewife at home, medicinal recipes needed to work.

Sarah Palmer's Book illustrates a common practice in this regard. The ingredients list she provides for Mrs. Essington's Cordial Water, which she writes is "good against Infectious diseases," includes salendine, rue, syrup of poppies, and sentory among other ingredients. Her long list illustrates the common practice of using a broad range of herbs in one recipe. In Mrs. Essington's Cordial, the salendine and poppies may have provided some analgesic or sedative effect, but the other ingredients contained no therapeutic value. The thinking at the time was that using multiple herbs improved the odds that the remedy would actually cure the patient. While the application of a medical litmus test would have been the first question asked of remedies in the eighteenth century and may, today, provide greater insight into the probable efficacy of treatments, this line of inquiry is far from the most interesting and highlights the difference between the questions practitioners asked in the eighteenth century and the questions feminist scholars ask in the twenty-first. It is in these questions that the counternarratives can be found.

A physical examination of the material artifact is an excellent starting point for exploring recipe books as conduit for alternative stories of women, writing, and work. Recipe books in the eighteenth century contain medicinal recipes, memoranda on their uses, and detailed instructions on how to prepare them. Most included a dedicated culinary section as well commonplace items interspersed throughout. Some collections were written in one hand, by a professional scribe or personal amanuensis, and represent recipe books produced as presentation copies and given as gifts on special occasions like the birth of a child, a baptism, or marriage. Other recipe books, like one that belonged to Johanna St. John (see Figure 1) were compiled one recipe at a time, written by a series of different hands over a period of years, and passed down from one generation to the next. This sample page from Her Booke reveals two different hands and strikes a sharp contrast with a recipe book that would have been the first question asked of remedies in the eighteenth century and may, today, provide greater insight into the probable efficacy of treatments, this line of inquiry is far from the most interesting and highlights the difference between the questions practitioners asked in the eighteenth century and the questions feminist scholars ask in the twenty-first. It is in these questions that the counternarratives can be found.

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[1] For work on women, health, and healing, see Catherine Field, Mary E. Fissell, Lillian R. Furst, Monica H. Green, Rebecca J. Tannenbaum, and Lynette Hunter.

[2] Mrs. Essington's recipe and complete list of ingredients for her Cordial Water can be found in MS.3740. Sarah Palmer and others, Collection of medical receipts, with a few cookery receipts: in English, written by several hands, but mostly by Mrs Palmer, early 18th century (Wellcome Library). While this method of combining herbs, taken in conjunction with instructions on dosages, indicates an awareness of medicinal properties, it does not suggest scientific understanding of the ailment.

[3] A substantial body of work has been written on the patient's perspective. See Lucinda M. Beier, Roy Porter, Michael MacDonald, Mary E. Fissell, and Linda A. Pollock.
have been produced as a presentation copy in terms of use, quality and wear of paper, care of penmanship, organization of items on the page, and even content. Based on evidence gleaned from physical examination alone, one can speculate that this was a text that was used frequently. Even though Johanna St. John's Booke is bound in leather, with pages stitched into the binding, and inscribed "I.S.," diagonally across the front surface of the binding are several 4- to 5-inch etch marks that appear to be made by the blade of a knife. These diagonal cut marks along with culinary section of recipes in the back of the book suggest that Her Booke was stored in the kitchen and on occasion used as a cutting board. Other evidence includes the appearance of a spill in the top left-hand quadrant of the inside page of the book, torn and occasionally stained pages throughout the book, and a number of different types of handwriting. Physical examination of the book as artifact suggests not only frequent use but also a narrative conversation taking place within its pages.

The symbols at the top of the page in Figure 1 are identified as those that apothecaries use on their bills, which would be information a housewife would need easy access to during the course of her day. Since this page is the inside front cover of the book, it would provide her with easy access to these symbols. Organization would also increase ease of access. While the organizational strategies used in recipe books varied widely and often included indexes and/or tables of contents, Johanna St. John uses a series of letters as tabs to highlight the purpose of remedies (See Figure 2), that is, D would indicate a recipe for delivery, A for afterbirth, G for a glister, and so on.4 In Figure 1, inscribed on the right-hand bottom of the page is an “M” for Mange in a dog. To the left is a note that reads, “Cow Piss will cure a Dog of the mang washing ther with” (1v). An “X” written beside the remedy probably indicates that it did not work. A revised remedy is provided beneath the original one in a different hand and ink: “a certaine cure is some gunpowder beat very fine & put it in scalding Hogs Lard & noynt it as hot as can be indured 3 times or more” (1v). This conversation appears to be a two-part follow-up to a conversation that began on the next page with a remedy penned by the first hand “For the Itch in man or woman or mang in a Dog” (1r). Leaving


the verso page blank for additional comments, like the ones we see added here, was common practice in early manuscript culture.

Customarily, recipes open with a title that suggests use and include annotations that address efficacy and provide personal testimony. For instance, Figure 2 provides two recipes “For a loseness in a childbed woman,” the second of which was tried and approved by Dr Cox. Three recipes below this is a recipe “To settle the mother after delivery,” which recommends “4 grains of musk mixed with 4 spoonfuls of burnt claret stop her nose least the sent raise vapors” (211r). The name “Mrs Shaw” is listed after the title, indicating that she had tried and approved the remedy. Recipes often include personal testimony. For instance, at the end of Mary Evelyn’s “Powder against Miscarriage,” she comments that “This hath been used by one that hath had 12 Miscarryings, and upon the use of this hath had 4 Children” (20v). In the right-hand margin of her “Medicine for the Eyes,” Evelyn claims that the remedy is “to cleane the sight and strengthen the sight; used by the Bishop of Hall and…York, who at the Age of 125 saw to read any print without spectacles whilst at the Age of 50 he could not” (36r). The implication is that recipes were tried, proven, and came highly recommended. Attribution and personal testimony were common practice in medicinal recipe books and indicate that an informal but expected mechanism of authority was in place and that a growing community of women—a network of female healers—knew one another and shared their knowledge about what worked and what did not.

While the pristine quality of a presentation copy may suggest a socio-economic privilege that a stitched gathering of leaves between what is ostensibly a cutting board cannot, frequently used recipe books provide the feminist scholar a glimpse into the circumstances of daily life, access to the conversations about healthcare that are taking place in that household, and a location for those conversations, namely the kitchen. That location bears significance. It positions family healthcare alongside family nutrition and documents the pivotal role women played in both. The pencil sketch shown in Figure 3 is from a Collection of cookery and medical receipts of a woman working in her kitchen at table with small cups and a large steaming pot on the floor chronicles women’s work and illustrates the organic and interactive nature of eighteenth-century recipe books (126v). This drawing appears to represent the passing of knowledge from one generation to the next as a mother works in the kitchen while her daughter chronicles the experience by sketching it on the very pages...
of the recipe book, itself. Wellcome’s brief description in the finding aid concurs; this “drawing vividly conveys the transfer of knowledge in progress: the owner works while her child watches and learns for the future” (MS 1796). The examination of location reveals healthcare’s long socio-culinary heritage, juxtaposing kitchen and cooking with healing and suggesting a feminist re-conceptualization of a space that has long been conceived as private as public.

In addition to the medicinal recipes and the culinary section that typically contained recipes for meats, puddings, and pies, stylistic illustrations, and detailed instructions on how to serve a bird in its skin or set a table for dinner, commonplace items were often interspersed between recipes throughout both of the sections. Items might include account ledgers with expenses; handy price lists; useful pharmaceutical abbreviations; favorite poems; maxims to live by; beloved Bible passages; sermons; reflections on family, friends, and loved ones; and information on family births, baptisms, and burials—the family’s repository of important, practical knowledge. These items give concrete detail to family life and suggest reading preferences, popular dinner conversations, and even the general tone of the times or mood of the household. A “Hymn in Sickness,” found on the pages of Martha Hodges’ book, reveals a common belief held in eighteenth-century homes about the relevance of religion to sickness. The lines, “Altho disease infects my Breast/...His sacred will I yet adore/Who gives & takes away,” evoke a dependence on God’s “sacred will,” not medicine, for health and recovery (43r). Recipe books capture the complex eighteenth-century tension between remedies and religion and, in conjunction with the culinary and commonplace, help us recover the complex narratives of family life.

When we engage the archive as conduit, we have the opportunity to recover voices that have been silenced and stories that have been lost. As a result, individual women healers gain critical attention and their recipe collections, which chronicle of an ethics of care central to the practice of healing during the eighteenth century, are saved, ultimately by the ink of
their own pens. As I reflect on what and who has been saved by the pen, I am reminded of the theme of our panel. As I put down my own pen, I realize that this topic of women, writing, and work is not only about those who cook in eighteenth-century kitchens, populate the pages of recipe books, or fill archival shelves but also those who do the work and the work itself. I am reminded that there is a responsibility implicit in enacting archive as conduit and that responsibility depends on us—to engage the space, find the counternarratives, and pass on the alternative stories.

Works Cited
About the Author
Phyllis Thompson is Associate Professor of Literature at East Tennessee State University where she is also Director of Women’s Studies. She teaches courses on women authors, young adult literature, methods of teaching English, and feminist pedagogies. Her scholarship takes her to dusty attics and modern archival repositories, where she examines women’s medicinal recipe books from the eighteenth century and writes about what we learn about the conditions of daily life, reading and writing, healing women and their communities, and the archive itself from reading women’s unpublished life writing. Her forthcoming “Expanding the Archive: A Galaxy of Medicinal Receipts” will appear in *An Expanding Universe: The Project of Eighteenth-Century Studies (Essays Commemorating the Career of Jim Springer Borck)*, which has been edited by Kevin L. Cope and Cedric Reverand II and is being published by AMS Press.