

## Literary Recovery: Manuscript Transcribing and Editing Exercise

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### Introduction:

This assignment is designed to help students understand and appreciate how the process of editing shapes the literature we read, through the comparison of four versions of May Alcott Nieriker’s “London Bridges.” Alcott Nieriker was a successful painter and American copyist, who lived much of her adult life in Europe. She is perhaps even better known as the sister of Louisa May Alcott and the model for Amy March in *Little Women*. I have used this assignment and the digitized materials in American Literature 2, a 200-level survey for English majors that covers literature from 1865 to the present. Because this is a survey course, intended for students beginning their study in the English major, this exercise is designed as a shorter, relatively low-stakes assignment, which will complement the course’s greater focus on coverage of postbellum American literature. The assignment combines short transcribing, documenting, writing, and analysis activities done in class and at home. Students are encouraged to work collaboratively on transcribing and identifying variants, but the short essays are designed to be written independently, preparing them for the papers they will write in the class. Any of the elements of this assignment could be adjusted for a course with a different focus or for students working at a different level. The sequence of processes could also be adjusted to differently frame the learning goals and takeaways.

I use this as the first assignment in the course, which gives students the opportunity to practice doing some literary analysis, while beginning to consider the bigger questions of canon formation and its relationship to editing and publishing practices. I introduce the assignment in the first week of class. Students read the published version of the text and participate in the lab in Week 2, and all parts of the assignment are submitted in Week 4, when we spend some time discussing how their exploration of editing practices shapes how they understand their work as scholars of literature. Throughout the course of the semester, my students frequently referred back to these early conversations about editing, publishing, and canon formation. I chose to have students submit all the materials together to give them the experience of putting together a mini-portfolio—a common assignment for English majors—but the parts of the assignment could also be submitted separately.

The students found the text itself quite interesting, responding to the author’s sense of humor, and the way she constructs “American” identity. The exercises in transcribing and identifying variants offered students some new and challenging experiences. The last time I used the

assignment, I added a lab component, which allowed students to work collaboratively and to receive more instructor assistance on their work. This proved to be *much* more successful—and confidence affirming—than having students do all of the work outside of class on their own.

Students are invited to use laptops and classroom computers during the lab portion of the class. To start the lab, I remind students how to access all of the versions of the text and provide a review of the parts of the assignment. We discuss the kinds of variants students might encounter, such as differences in wording, punctuation, capitalization, spacing, or spelling. Then I direct them to decide on which page they will transcribe and to determine how they will record variants. Some choose to open a new file on their laptops, some designate a recorder for the group, and some work with pen and paper, reserving their devices for examining the texts. A few printed copies of documents, including some blown up on large paper, are also provided, so that students can try looking at a document both on a screen and in a printed format. These documents can also be used by students who request accommodations. Students are encouraged to move about the room to work with classmates, and they also have the option to work individually. They have the entire class period to work on transcribing and recording variants, and I circulate, checking in with each student or group during the period. As questions come up, I can address the whole class (to provide information that might be useful across the board), or respond to an individual or small group about specific instances. I assist in identifying handwriting trends, and point out places students might look for variants. By the end of the lab period, many had a good start on their transcription and list of variants, and some chose to schedule additional time to work together outside of class. In this way, the lab also helped to create community in the class early in the semester.

**Activities:**

**Task:**

For this assignment, students learn how to examine and compare several versions of a literary text. They interact with digitized manuscripts, transcribe a section of written text, identify and record variants, and think about the decisions editors must make when they publish a text. The assignment includes in-class lab time and work outside of class.

**Purpose:**

The assignment introduces students to digitized manuscripts and helps them to understand the way editorial processes and choices have shaped the canon we study in a survey class. By reading a text outside the anthology, students gain first-hand knowledge of literature that has been excluded from canon-building.

**Learning Outcomes:**

This assignment is designed to help students do the following:

- examine and compare several versions of a literary text.
- interact with digitized manuscripts, digital archives, and manuscript documents.
- transcribe a section of handwritten text.

- evaluate the decisions editors must make when they publish a text.
- analyze how and why certain texts have historically been excluded from the literary canon.
- articulate ideas about literature and editing in formal writing.

**Criteria:**

This assignment has four parts:

1. Students write a 500-word literary analysis of “London Bridges.”
2. Students complete a transcription of at least one full sequence (page) from “London Bridges” in the digitized manuscript of May Alcott Nieriker's *An Artist's Holiday*.
3. Students compare four versions of "London Bridges," and identify at least 10 variants in a chart or table of their own design.
4. Students describe their editorial approach in 300-500 words.

(See the rubric at the end of this resource for assessment criteria.)

**Directions:**

This assignment is designed to help you understand and appreciate how the process of editing shapes the literature we read. For this assignment, you will examine and compare several versions of a literary text. In addition to practicing the literary analysis that will be central to your work in this class, you will have the opportunity to examine and compare digitized manuscripts, transcribe a section of handwritten text, document differences between versions, and think about the decisions you would make if you were an editor. The knowledge you gain of these processes will inform our discussions and learning throughout the course.

You will have some time to start working on the assignment during the lab portion of class, and then you will complete the assignment on your own time. You will submit all of the parts of your editing exercise to Canvas.

**Overview:**

We frequently read literature with a focus on what it means and what it says to us, acknowledging the power of written texts to communicate and produce thoughts and feelings within readers. When we consider a work outside of our own responses to it, we might address the historical context in which it was written, edited, published, produced, marketed, and sold. These social and material factors are also important elements of a text's history.

In this assignment, we will consider in more detail the process by which texts are edited, exploring how that might affect all of the other factors listed here.

We will work closely with several versions of a text, May Alcott Nieriker's "London Bridges."

Texts:

1. May Alcott Nieriker, "London Bridges" appendix in Julia Dabbs, *May Alcott Nieriker, Author and Advocate* (Anthem Press, 2022), pp. 196-200
2. Manuscript: May Alcott Nieriker, *An Artist's Holiday*, 1873, available through Harvard Library
  - a. First MS version of "London Bridges": Seq. 146-151
  - b. Second MS version of "London Bridges": Seq. 277-287
3. "London Bridges" from *The Youth's Companion* July 23, 1874, pp. 239-240

Assignment:

This assignment has four parts:

1. Literary analysis of "London Bridges"
  2. Transcription of at least one full sequence (page) from the *An Artist's Holiday* manuscript
  3. Identification of variants
  4. Editorial approach
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1. *Literary analysis of the text:* Write a brief literary analysis (500 words) of the version of "London Bridges" from Julia Dabbs' appendix. What is significant about it as a work of literature? You might focus on the author's word choice, style, use of figurative language, or imagery. You might examine whether the author seems to have a purpose and what strategies she employs to achieve that purpose. You might address whether the author places the work in conversation with other literature or historical events. As with all literary analyses, it is essential to include quotations and specific details from the text in your analysis of it.
  2. *Transcription of a handwritten manuscript page:* Through the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, most writers were accustomed to copying large sections of text. People made copies of letters they wrote and received, they copied favorite poems into commonplace books, and they often wrote and rewrote important pieces of writing. Transcription and copying were very common activities. Today, transcribing handwritten texts from this period is often a central part of manuscript research, editing, and publication.

Using the May Alcott Nieriker manuscript, select one full handwritten page to transcribe into type, drawing from Seq. 146-151 or 277-287. Make sure to label which Seq. you have transcribed. Spend some time reading your handwritten page. This may be easier on

a larger computer screen. If your screen is small, you might want to work on a library computer.

Try to make out and transcribe onto a typed page as much of your manuscript page as you can. If there are words you think you know but have some doubts, place a question mark in parentheses after the word, like this: word (?). If there are words you cannot make out at all, include a blank in your typed transcription, like this: \_\_\_\_\_.

Reading old handwriting is challenging and it's okay if you can't make out every single word with certainty. Do your best to offer as complete of a transcription as you can, but know that it is okay if there are some gaps; in fact, I expect them. You are encouraged to work with a classmate or a helper on this portion of the assignment. (Just make sure you each turn in a copy of the transcription.) You will be amazed to see that transcribing gets easier as you do more of it. For additional guidance on this process, you might turn to this [video](#) from the University of North Carolina Wilmington or this [guide](#) by Anna Moulis and John Deal.

3. *Identification of variants*: Compare the four versions of "London Bridges" and identify at least ten differences that you encounter between versions. Provide these in a list or table format. You may use any format you like for this portion of the assignment.

For example, if you are using a list format, one entry might look like this:

In Julia Dabbs' appendix (p. 197) and the digitized copy of *The Youth's Companion* (p. 240), the narrator refers to her companion as "C.", but in Seq. 147 and Seq. 279, he is called "Mr C—".

If you choose to use a table for the same information, it might take this form:

Dabbs' appendix	<i>Youth's Companion</i>	Seq. 146-151	Seq. 277-287
"C." (p. 197)	"C." (p. 240)	"Mr C—" (Seq. 147)	"Mr C—" (Seq. 279)

4. *Editorial approach*: In 300 to 500 words, respond to the following: You have been asked to edit and publish May Alcott Nieriker's "London Bridges." What will be your approach as an editor? Which version of the text will be your base text (or copy-text)? Will you identify textual variants in your edition? Will you include annotations or an introduction? What challenges will you face as an editor and what questions will you need to resolve so that you can complete the project?

## Readings:

- May Alcott Nieriker, “London Bridges.” Appendix. *May Alcott Nieriker, Author and Advocate: Travel Writing and Transformation in the Late Nineteenth Century*, by Julia Dabbs, Anthem Press, 2022, pp. 196-200. [[PDF PROVIDED](#)]
- Nieriker, “London Bridges.” *An Artist’s Holiday*. 1873. Louisa May Alcott additional papers, 1845-1944. Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA. Manuscript, seq. 146-151 and seq. 277-287. <https://nrs.lib.harvard.edu/urn-3:fhcl.hough:30117921>.
- Nieriker, May Alcott. “London Bridges” from *The Youth’s Companion* July 23, 1874, pp. 239-240. [[PDF PROVIDED](#)]

## Assessment:

My grading practice draws from theories of *ungrading*<sup>1</sup> and *specifications grading*.<sup>2</sup> Students are provided with the rubric for the assignment at the beginning of the semester, and it is presented in class during the first week. In this course, students earn full credit for all assignments in which their work matches the description of “Competent” or “Strong” in every area. If any portion of their assignment matches the description for “Needs work” or “Absent,” they earn half credit. Students who earn half credit may resubmit until they earn full credit for as long as the assignment remains open on Canvas (usually 3-5 weeks after the due date, longer if need be). In order to facilitate student learning through revision, I return their work soon after it is submitted with detailed feedback on what they should address in their revisions (as well as what is particularly effective). I also encourage students to meet with me for feedback (in my office or virtually) before submitting assignments or revisions. The rubric below shows the assignment specifications, and I often add comments to the rubric when evaluating their performance on the criteria. Grading holistically in this way, all of the criteria are mandatory and are weighted the same. However, for courses that use a more traditional approach to grading, the rubric could be modified to give different weights to different parts of the assignment. (I recognize that I am able to do this kind of assessment because I teach at a small college with relatively small classes. I have found it to be highly effective, but I know that it might not be practical for larger classes or at institutions with heavier teaching loads.)

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<sup>1</sup> For an excellent collection of essays on the history of—and approaches to—ungrading, see Susan D. Blum, *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)*, West Virginia University Press, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Macie Hall provides a helpful overview of specifications grading [here](#).

### Manuscript Transcribing and Editing Exercise Rubric (Marlowe Daly-Galeano)

Criteria	Strong	Competent	Needs Work	Absent
<p><b>Literary Analysis:</b></p> <p>Write a brief literary analysis (500 words) of the version of “London Bridges” from Julia Dabbs’ appendix. What is significant about it as a work of literature?</p>	<p>Assignment is at least 500 words. Analysis offers an original and compelling interpretation of the selection. It demonstrates careful attention to the details of the text and arguments are supported by quotations. Writing is academic, fluid, concise, and free of errors.</p>	<p>Assignment is at least 500 words. Analysis offers an original interpretation of the selection. It demonstrates attention to the details of the text and arguments are supported by quotations. Writing is academic and free of errors.</p>	<p>Assignment may be slightly outside recommended word count. Analysis may not offer an original interpretation or may be more summary than analysis. More attention to details is needed. Quotations are missing. Tone is not academic. Patterns of errors exist.</p>	<p>Analysis is missing. It does not offer an interpretation or is not focused on the text.</p>
<p><b>Transcription:</b></p> <p>Using the May Alcott Nieriker manuscript, select one full handwritten page to transcribe into type, drawing from Seq. 146-151 or 277-287.</p>	<p>At least one full page from the manuscript is transcribed into type. Most or all of the text is accurately transcribed. Careful attention to details such as punctuation, use of abbreviations or symbols is included.</p>	<p>At least one full page from the manuscript is transcribed into type. Most of the text is accurately transcribed. Some attention to details is included.</p>	<p>One full page of the manuscript is transcribed into type but there are numerous blanks, errors, or inaccuracies. Details such as punctuation are frequently missing.</p>	<p>Less than one full page is transcribed or this assignment was not completed.</p>
<p><b>Textual Variants:</b></p> <p>Compare the four versions of “London Bridges” and identify at least ten differences that you encounter between versions. Provide these in a list or table format.</p>	<p>Ten or more variants are identified. Descriptions of variants are clearly communicated. Differences are noted across multiple versions. Differences show attention to detail, nuance, and careful reading.</p>	<p>Ten or more variants are identified. Descriptions of variants are clearly communicated. Differences are noted across multiple versions.</p>	<p>Eight to ten variants are noted. Description of variants may be unclear or variants may come from only two documents.</p>	<p>Fewer than eight variants are listed or this assignment is missing.</p>

<p><b>Editorial Approach:</b></p> <p>In 300 to 500 words, respond to the following: You have been asked to edit and publish May Alcott Nieriker’s “London Bridges.” What will be your approach as an editor?</p>	<p>Editorial approach is 300-500 words. It includes a thoughtful exploration of questions an editor faces and presents a compelling approach to editing the text. Ideas are complex and creative and are informed and supported by elements of the texts. Approach is well-written, fluid, and free of errors.</p>	<p>Editorial approach is 300-500 words. It includes a fairly thoughtful exploration of questions an editor faces and presents a clear approach to editing the text. Ideas are informed and supported by elements of the texts. Approach is well-written, fluid, and mostly free of errors.</p>	<p>Editorial approach is outside the word count. Approach only minimally addresses questions an editor faces or presents an unclear approach to editing the text. Ideas are not well informed or supported by elements of the texts. Approach may be confusing or exhibit patterns of error.</p>	<p>Editorial approach is well outside the word count or missing. It does not meet assignment requirements or contains serious errors.</p>
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**Reflection:**

A few years ago, I had the good fortune to be selected as an M.C. Lang Fellow at Rare Book School at the University of Virginia. This fellowship provides support for college teachers looking to incorporate book and print history into their humanities teaching. While I had always been interested in manuscripts, archives, and publishing history, the fellowship was instrumental in helping me to find ways to incorporate bibliography, documentary editing, and recovery work into all of my literature courses. I realized that I don’t need to teach an upper-level book history seminar to give students the opportunity to engage with manuscripts, material artifacts, and primary sources. This assignment is one of the ways that I have been trying to make sure my survey courses help students gain not only a broad introduction to the literature of a period, but also to the different kinds of engagement with texts that are part of being a literary scholar.

Most students enjoy the novelty of learning about digital archives, handwriting, transcribing, and notating variants. These are the kind of activities they have not often encountered in their high school English courses. However, some students are initially surprised that they are being asked to do more than read literature and write compelling AP-style essays about it, something that many can already do well. This can be a bit scary for students. I think that bringing in the more collaborative lab time emphasizes how much fun this work can be, which makes it less intimidating for students. Doing the assignment at the beginning of the semester helps students to read with questions of recovery and editing in mind. I have found that by starting the class this way, they can apply these questions to all of the literature in the course, ranging from satire by Mark Twain, to selections from the Harlem Renaissance anthology *The New Negro* to contemporary poetry by Victoria Chang.



What is perhaps least satisfying to me about the assignment is that it is so short—I would love to geek out with this manuscript for several weeks and have students do big group project related to it. But that is something better suited to a different class. This assignment is incorporated into the survey without requiring the loss of much content or instruction time, and it does so much to get students excited about manuscripts, archives, and, by extension, all of the promise of being a literary scholar.

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