Early Modern Letters in the Bodleian Library

The Balliol-Bodley scholarship, now in its eighth year, gives a Balliol graduate student the valuable opportunity to work in the Bodleian special collections for a whole term. This year, the role of the Balliol-Bodley scholar was to support a project called “Bodleian Student Editions,” which was launched in Summer 2016 and relates to the digitisation of early modern correspondence. This collaborative project brings together Oxford’s Cultures of Knowledge project and the Bodleian Library’s Department of Special Collections and Centre for Digital Scholarship in order to offer textual editing workshops for undergraduates and postgraduates. Drawing on the rich collections in the Bodleian Library, these workshops give students a unique opportunity to transcribe and edit original letters. To prepare students for this task, specialists at the workshops provide a crash course in the palaeography (the study of handwriting) and the principles of editing. These students are then taught how to create useful descriptive metadata for their documents, which involves them extracting the sender, recipient, date, language and origin of the letters. This metadata, along with the edited texts, ultimately goes on the Early Modern Letters Online database, where the information becomes accessible to people around the world at the push of a button. The Bodleian Student Editions project, then, uses the Bodleian’s special collections both to equip students with valuable skills in the digital humanities and to expand an existing scholarly database. How would the Balliol-Bodley scholar fit into project? Their role would be to identify suitable letters in the vast Bodleian special collections to use in future workshops.

The scope of this year’s scholarship appealed to me for several reasons. Firstly, the early modern subject matter resonated with my own research project. I am a second-year DPhil student in English at Balliol College, and my thesis is on early biblical drama. Although I primarily work on late-medieval plays, it is not uncommon for these texts to survive in early modern manuscripts, and indeed many of these plays had early modern afterlives. My research interests thus place me firmly on the boundary between the medieval and early modern periods, which explains my interest in the study of early modern letters. Secondly, I have a keen interest in archival work and its relationship with digital humanities. Since 2016, I have been working with Balliol College’s early printed books with several of my peers in order to make evidence of their early ownership accessible online via the Material Evidence in Incunabula database (MEI). Working with MEI solidified my interest in book history, the digital humanities, and the importance of making special collections accessible and useful to a wider audience. The Bodleian Student Editions project, therefore, seemed like a natural next step. Finally, in the past year I have written several posts for the Teaching the Codex blog on the topic of how medieval manuscripts in the Bodleian can be used
when teaching undergraduates, and so I was already personally invested in the idea of maximising the pedagogical values of the Bodleian’s special collections. In January 2017, I was delighted to hear that my application for the Balliol-Bodley scholarship had been successful, and I was ready to learn more about exactly how I would be getting involved in the project.

At the heart of these workshops is the letters themselves. While the Bodleian Library contains an enormous number of early modern letters, many of these are not suitable for this project for one reason or another. Preferably, the letters used in the workshops should fit all or most the following criteria. Firstly, the letter should be in good condition. Unfortunately, many letters from this period require especially delicate handling, for example because they are fraying around the edges. Understandably, such letters are not ideal for student workshops. Secondly, the handwriting of the letter should be legible for a beginner. In practice, this means that the letters chosen for the workshops generally date towards the end of the early modern period and/or they were written by women. Typically, early modern women wrote in “Italic” script—the ancestor of today’s Romanised fonts—rather than the more formal “Secretary” hand which was generally taught only to men and tends to be more challenging for modern readers. Thirdly, the letters should contain few abbreviations, as these add another time-consuming layer to the transcription and decoding process. Fourthly, if possible, the letter should be a page or two in length at most, so that the students would have enough time to complete the transcription and editing process within the workshop.

Finally, it helps enormously if the letters have been “fasciculed,” a term which requires some explanation. When antiquarians were originally collecting together the early modern letters in the Bodleian library, hundreds of documents at a time were bound together in large books. These books tend to be very unwieldy and have the obvious disadvantage that only one of the hundreds of letters can be consulted at any given time. In the past few decades, conservators at the Bodleian Library have begun to take these books apart and transpose the material into “fascicules,” which are blank books containing around thirty pages made of acid-free paper. Essentially, the letters are individually mounted onto these pages, and the end result is something which resembles a scrap book. One large book of letters might yield dozens of fascicules, which are far easier to handle and allow readers to consult different parts of the collection at once. For the Bodleian Student Editions workshops, these fascicules are ideal: students can consult their “own” fascicule at their leisure during the workshop.

As Balliol-Bodley scholar, it was my job to sift through hundreds, if not thousands, of letters in the Bodleian’s collection and identify documents which fitted the five criteria outlined
above. Having attended one of the workshops myself earlier that term, I had a very clear picture of what I was looking for. Whenever I found a letter that seemed suitable, I photographed it and added the necessary details into my personal database. I focused in particular on letters written in the 1640s sent and received by prominent political figures including James, Duke of York (Later King James II), Elizabeth Stuart (Queen of Bohemia), the Lord Justices of Ireland, the Marquis of Ormond, and William Lenthall (then Speaker of the House of Commons). The late date of these letters meant that legible hands were relatively easy to find, and as an added bonus this material was of great historical interest. Moreover, this body of material had recently been fasciculed, and in the process the letters had received conservation where necessary.

Occasionally I would come across poignant conversations about sickness and loss, but far more common among was commentaries on the current state of political affairs, accounts of rebellions, reports of military successes, and appeals for money and ammunition. One particularly striking letter was written on the third of January 1643 by Francis Rous, an English politician and Puritan (1580-1659). In a letter to Sir John Potts (d. 1690), Rous explains: “This is a time of changes both publike & private. One that was a most deare frind to the church & Comonwealth; & that hath labord more then any one of all, is gone before he saw the haruest for whieh he labord…” (MS Tanner 62-2B fol. 530r). Many of the letters about the governance of Ireland had a particular resonance for me because I am from Northern Ireland. Often, letters addressed to the Marquis of Ormond hailed from places that I know well. There was something very special—and uncanny—about reading that a letter was written in Belfast in 1643 (MS Carte 7-1 fol. 11v). I visit that city frequently; it is where my mother was born and spent much of her life. It is very pleasing for me that these letters will receive close attention in the Bodleian Student Editions workshops, and will potentially reach an even wider audience online.

By the end of my scholarship, I had identified just shy of 150 suitable letters. This should hopefully help Bodleian Student Editions workshops to continue for the foreseeable future. In completing this research, I had a unique opportunity to learn much about early modern correspondence, the process of digitization, and the challenges of editing. For example, during my scholarship I was fortunate enough to attend an event on early modern “letter-locking,” which is the study of how early modern letters were folded and sealed. This event fundamentally shaped the way I looked at early modern letters in the Bodleian Library, and so I was careful to make a note in my database of when suitable letters were also particularly interesting from a material point of view.
I am very grateful to Balliol for awarding me this scholarship and enabling me to devote so many hours of careful study to the special collections in the Bodleian. It has undoubtedly influenced the way I think about the early modern period, the act of letter-writing, and the digital humanities. Perhaps more significantly, in an age when letters are seldom sent, this entire experience has changed the way I approach my own correspondence, encouraging me to write more letters of my own.