It is no question that the field of literary studies, the field to which I belong, has long benefited from the research of scholars who venture into archives. Indeed, archival research has led to vital recoveries and discoveries of literary works by historically under-represented groups—women, African-Americans, working-class laborers—and has helped scholars to better understand the history of and cultural contexts surrounding literary production. Yet, with the exception of those who specialize in Composition and Rhetoric, a subfield of English that encourages archival research with some regularity, archival research remains tangential at best to the experiences of most English graduate students.

The reasons for English graduates’ lack of experience with or interest in archives are not hard to figure. Archival research is often a time-consuming and expensive endeavor, a type of work that I myself undertook only with the aid of a nine-month CLIR/Mellon fellowship. As Meaghan Brown, a member of my CLIR/Mellon cohort and fellow literary scholar, recently said to me, archival research downright provokes “resistance and resentment” among English graduate students already struggling to pay their bills.

It is true that we live in an age when humanities departments—and English departments in particular—must continually justify their raison d’être to budget-conscious administrators, and so it makes sense that archival research is viewed as a luxury few graduate students can afford. But when my fellowship tenure came to a close this year, I found myself reflecting on the value of archival research as an activity. It seems that the act of conducting archival research produces more than just new and vital scholarship—it produces better scholars, researchers invested in and more keenly aware of how history is collected and remembered.

When examining archival materials, one can hardly help but wonder why certain materials were preserved instead of others, and moreover, from where the money for the preservation of selected materials came. When confronted with the multiple ways in which the materials can be made to “speak” to each another, one can’t help but view the immediacy of the role of the scholar in the act of knowledge production. Archival researchers do more than bring to light hidden narratives, after all; they create narratives to be told.

Such realizations thus beg the question of how to encourage archival research in English departments when money remains a limited resource. Perhaps the answer begins with the understanding that archival research need not necessarily take place in lands far away or for months at a time. Local historical centers, community libraries, and university special collections often contain a wealth of material ripe for scholarly inquiry, opportunities many English graduate students (myself included) often overlook. Of course, there is the possibility that resistance to archival research comes from a place more existential than practical.

In recent years, English departments have grown more interdisciplinary, and some scholars argue that a lack of focus has resulted in a disciplinary identity crisis. Marjorie Garber addresses the problem head on in her controversial 2003 manifesto about the state of
Some literary historians and historicist critics within departments of literary study are in danger of forgetting, or devaluing, the history of their own craft and practice, which is based not only on the contextual understanding of literary works but also on the words on the page. (12)*

Garber’s call for English departments to focus on what we do best (looking at the “words on the page”)—and by extension to actively distinguish ourselves from departments of History—no doubt stems at least in part from the field’s premiere problem of funding: we need to articulate for the powers that be that we have skills that others do not. But it also seems to come from a place of prideful uncertainty: we specialize in theoretical critique and textual close readings. Isn’t that enough?

I want to suggest here that literary studies scholars consider archival research, not because what we do isn’t enough, but because our skill set uniquely qualifies us for endeavoring the work. Archival research requires one to create new narratives, and literary scholars specialize in the study of narrative structure and development. Recovered materials often throw into relief ideas about what literature is and who has historically produced it, ideas central to the work of many literary scholars, even those who have yet to conduct archival research of their own.

Yes, as concerns over finances and the length of time to degree grow more pressing for English graduate students, the decision to stay away from expensive, long-term archival study is understandable. But for adventurous souls with good time-management skills and access to local collections, the choice to conduct archival research could lead to scholarship that reinforces the need for the field of literary studies while making valuable interventions within it.


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