

## Take a Behind-the-Scenes Look at Gale's Databases

Senior Lecturer at the University of York, Emma Major, Shares Her Passion for Literature

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Our partnership with renowned academics enables us to bring you the most authoritative and trusted databases available to meet the needs and standards of students, faculty, and librarians alike. We spoke with Emma about her background, research interests, and what it's like to bring her passion to a worldwide audience through *Gale Literature*.



### EMMA MAJOR

#### BIOGRAPHY:

Dr. Emma Major is a senior lecturer in the Department of English and Related Literature and the interdisciplinary Centre for Eighteenth-Century Studies at the University of York. Her research interests range from the 1680s to the 1880s, focusing on British literature. She has published on various authors and debates from this period; her monograph, *Madam Britannia: Women, Church, and Nation 1712–1812*, was published by Oxford University Press, and she was awarded a British Academy Fellowship to develop research on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century citizenship. She is a general editor for the Elizabeth Montagu Correspondence Online project, and is currently working on sermons, hymns, and citizenship as well as an article on Jane Austen.



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#### 1. Tell us a little bit about yourself. Describe what makes your work as a scholar distinctive.

I think my deep love of reading, my intellectual curiosity, and my fascination with the curious all give my work its distinctive shape. I have always been interested in literature that crosses boundaries and exploring beyond disciplinary conventions: if an eighteenth-century cartoon or sermon or political tract illuminates a poem, then I'll use it to give a sense of the intellectual context of the author I'm writing about. Religion wasn't very fashionable as an area of study when I began working on it, partly I think because it involves a lot of research to understand it properly! But it shaped eighteenth-century life in Britain, so it can't be ignored simply because it's not as important to some of us today. I have become addicted to reading eighteenth-century sermons over the years, and perhaps less oddly, to reading eighteenth-century letters. I hope my enthusiasm comes across in my writing.



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## 2. How did you come to be a scholar in your chosen field?

I knew I wanted to be a scholar from my first term as an undergraduate at Queens’ College, Cambridge. Originally, I had planned to specialize in Percy Bysshe Shelley, but when I did the interdisciplinary MA at the University of York, I became even more fascinated by the eighteenth century, and I ended up staying there to do my Ph.D. I am very fortunate to have been taught by brilliant and generous scholars at Cambridge and York, and to have been able to remain teaching at the interdisciplinary Centre for Eighteenth-Century Studies at York. I still need to write something on Shelley at some point, though, as I still love his work!

## 3. Which entry are you most proud of? What makes it stand out?

I was really fortunate to be asked to produce entries for writers I love for *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800*, *Poetry Criticism*, and *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism*. The eighteenth-century poet and polymath Mark Akenside (1721–1770), to list one example, is far less well known now than he should be: the depth and range of *Gale Literature Criticism* means that users can get a fuller sense of his fascinatingly eclectic eighteenth-century literary community, where science and philosophy are often found in poetry. Akenside’s poem *The Pleasures of the Imagination* (1744), which weaves his medical and philosophical interests together with his aesthetic and religious thought, was very influential right up into the early nineteenth century.

## 4. What needs does your work address to help further scholarship or learning?

I hope my awareness of the importance of religion helps give readers a richer understanding of the eighteenth century. It matters that, for example, Anne Bradstreet (1612–1672) left England for America because of her Puritan beliefs, and that her faith made her publication more acceptable at a time when women were criticized for appearing in print. As with Akenside, another Protestant dissenter, Bradstreet’s intellectual interests were broad, including science and philosophy as well as religion, literature, and history. These authors were examples of medical humanities long before the term was coined!

## 5. What are the most important topics you’ve covered? Why are these topics important? Or why are these entries so important?

I think all the entries I have contributed to are important in their own ways. Whether it’s introducing users to the brilliant Aphra Behn (1640–1689) or encouraging people to explore such writers as the poet William Cowper (1731–1800) or the underread William Makepeace Thackeray (1811–1863), I feel really proud to have been part of Gale Cengage’s team of scholars making this wonderful world of literature available to new readers. Behn and Bradstreet are very important authors, so it felt a huge honor to be contributing their entries—but particularly so when, as previously overlooked women writers, they have only become part of the canon and commonly taught in my lifetime. Reference works such as *Gale Literature Criticism* are brilliantly useful. As an academic, it’s a great feeling to be using digital resources that have transformed the communication of knowledge, compiling the scholarship of centuries and passing it on to readers.

## 6. Tell us a bit about some of your favorite authors, works, and topics featured in *Gale Literature*.

As you’ll have gathered, I really enjoyed working on my entries! It is difficult to choose favorites. It was exciting to feel part of renewed scholarly interest in more-obscure figures, such as the thrilling poet Akenside and the wonderfully named, fascinating Lancelot Andrewes (1555–1626). Cowper and Thackeray are writers I have loved much of my life, and both are still less widely read and appreciated than they should be. I do have a particular soft spot, though, for Sarah Scott (1720–1795), author and the sister of the more famous hostess and author Elizabeth Montagu (1718–1800). She led a very interesting life and wrote some wonderful letters. I spent a very happy time over 20 years ago reading her manuscript letters at the Huntington Library, California, and I’m currently coediting Montagu’s letters to her for the Elizabeth Montagu Correspondence Online project with a friend I made at the Huntington when we were both wading through the many boxes of Montagu manuscripts. There’s something very special about having handled the actual letters, with all their crossings-out, indecipherable moments, and intimate fragility.

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