

SOONER SPOTLIGHT • DAVIS & JOYCE

"For most of history, Anonymous was a woman." —Virginia Woolf

What began as a means to unmask the anonymity of women authors has mushroomed into a mammoth project spanning 15 years—and counting. What began with inquiries from students is becoming a comprehensive, multi-volume bibliography of women writers before 1900.

"Some of my students asked why there were no women writers taught in their literature courses," recalls Gwenn Davis, OU professor of English.

"The accepted canon was not heavy in women's names because of the prevailing attitudes of women as 'scribblers,'" explains Beverly Joyce, in her 19th year at OU as an associate professor of bibliography and instruction/reference librarian. Many works by women, she adds, exist only in places such as historical societies or in state or hometown public libraries.

Davis set out to compile a list of women writers, not more than a one-volume checklist. Joyce joined the project two years later to lend bibliophile expertise. Her input quickly pushed the project out of the "list" category. "I thought we should incorporate

full bibliographic data—who the publisher was, how many pages, nationality, birth and death dates," says Joyce. They soon recognized their opportunity to rewrite history.

"People just didn't have an idea of the range and scope of women's writings," Davis notes, "and that is one of the things this is intended to redress, because much of the new scholarship tends to go over the same authors time and time again. What we're trying to do is set in motion an entire re-examination of who was writing and what kinds of things they were doing."

The two women tediously searched the Library of Congress Catalog, the National Union Catalog and the British Library Catalog, plus hundreds of literary histories, biographical sources and others. After two years wading through the approximately 700-volume NUC, the pair began to hit paydirt.

"Many of women's personal writings are a marvelous blend of details of their own lives, families and acquaintances; some offered their views of social justice; some are observations from their travels and a kind of commentary," explains Davis, director of graduate studies in the English department, where she has specialized in renaissance literature for 20 years. "This study provides a whole area of literature, social history, development of 19th-century culture that's never been looked at."

The National Endowment for the Humanities recognized the worth of the project with three grants, including one for \$110,000, which enabled the pair to take a semester's sabbatical together and, when supplemented by University funds,



Davis, left, and Joyce pose with merely a fraction of the volumes they researched for their bibliography of women in literature.

provided an editorial assistant for data entry. Constantly applying for research funds, the women used a separate \$50,000 NEH grant to purchase costly rare books, catalogs and other materials for the OU Libraries, which also is receiving a large number of documents preserved on microfilm during the study.

Not far into compiling and entering the mountain of information into a database, Joyce and Davis realized the "checklist" best would be assimilated in pieces. They sorted the information by genre, producing a seven-volume blueprint. So far, three volumes have been completed: personal writings, including autobiographies, letters, diaries and travel literature; poetry; and drama. The remaining volumes will address long and short fiction; and juvenile literature; the final section will cover pseudonyms and alternative names.

Each is indexed by subject and chronologically, allowing for tracing an author by genre and titles. The bibliography is being published by the respected firm of Mansell.

Sometimes Davis and Joyce have relied on a bit of detective work, such as poring over memoirs of women's "best friends departed," who inserted "just

enough personal data" to provide yet another lead. Travel has been a necessity to places such as the British Library, the Huntington, the Library of Congress and public libraries in Texas and Boston.

"I took six weeks one summer and went to eight or nine different libraries on the east coast," says Joyce, whose travels were partially subsidized by OU and the NEH. "I went to the Buffalo and Erie Public County Library because a publisher there published many books of women's poetry that aren't anywhere else in the country. I also found several things in the New Hampshire State Library that we wouldn't otherwise have been able to get because most of those libraries don't allow interlibrary loan of the rare books." With a faint light visible at the end of the literary tunnel, both women feel that the project has been invaluable for its cultivation of rich, practically limitless areas for future studies for themselves and other scholars.

"The (English) department certainly has expanded its offerings and has incorporated more and more women's writings, writings of minority authors and so forth in their course offerings generally," says Davis.

"It's fascinating," says Joyce, eyes gleaming, "to discover all these interesting life stories of all these women who lived in centuries past. You almost feel you know some of them."

And thanks to Gwenn Davis and Beverly Joyce, Ellen E. and Hester A. Dickinson will claim their rightful places alongside Emily in the literary annals.

—MARGARET FRENCH