

Julia Gardner and David Pavelich

Teaching with Ephemera

IN THE FALL 2006 ISSUE of *RBM*, Pablo Alvarez presented us with three case studies to demonstrate his efforts at “introducing rare books into the undergraduate curriculum.” His fascinating examples included teaching an Italian Literature class by looking at various illustrations of Dante’s *Commedia*; a thought-provoking investigation of censorship in the history of science, making use of Copernicus’ *De revolutionibus*; and the dissection of an especially loaded edition of Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* for a course on that novel.

Near the end of his article, Alvarez noted that, “Perhaps the distinguishing feature of my own work that I have highlighted in this article lies in its great emphasis on content and historical context.”¹ Yet for us, one of the most interesting points in his article is so brief that it could easily be overlooked. When Alvarez enumerates “questions [he] pose[s]” to the students, he alludes to what likely resulted in a lively discussion among librarian, professor, and students: “What does the working of a printing establishment tell us about society in Early Modern Europe?” asked Alvarez. “Can the layout of early-printed books illustrate the persistence of medieval cultural features?” These questions look to the objects and ask the students to make conclusions based on the evidence at hand.

The items that Alvarez chose to illustrate his article are canonical. That is, the content—Dante, Cervantes, and Copernicus—is certainly well-established undergraduate reading, but the formats included are also canonical. Early illustrated books and codex manuscripts are the stuff of classic book history, and they are essential to the teaching of many visiting classes. But what of the truly staggering variety of materials in our libraries, materials that are perhaps less polished, less fine, less well known? What purpose do they serve in the classroom? An English broadside,

1. Pablo Alvarez, “Introducing Rare Books into the Undergraduate Curriculum,” *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage*, 7:2 (Fall 2006): 103.

for instance, a little worse for wear, allows us to ask quite different questions from those we might ask if showing an edition of *The Rape of the Lock*: “Who would have read this broadside? What does its format, paper, typography (or lack thereof) tell us? Does this ‘thing’ remind you of anything you might have hanging in your dorm room? Why is this poem *not* considered essential reading for students of English literature?”

Dealing, as ephemera does, with the transient, the marginal, or the fugitive, it attracts attention from librarians who attempt to classify and contain it, describe it, and provide access to it. The attention paid to ephemera from librarians and scholars demonstrates what librarian Timothy Young has termed the “academic gentrification” of ephemera, whereby it has moved from being a low priority—dealing with low culture—to a more valued source of evidence and information.²

This academic gentrification, however, coupled with the materials’ relative scarcity, have moved ephemera out of the realm of the many and into that of the elite. Professors and graduate students may know to seek it out, but undergraduates are unlikely to understand what is meant by the term “ephemera,” or to know how to find it, with the result that ephemera is usually omitted from sources undergraduates are encouraged to consider. Such omission is unfortunate, for in our experience, teaching with ephemera can provide particular kinds of “teachable moments” less likely to occur when students are shown only “greatest hits”—the canonical types of special collections material—rather than a rich array of formats from our holdings.

At the University of Chicago, we are working hard to put our collections into the classroom. During the 2006–2007 academic year, the Special Collections Research Center hosted 46 distinct classes—both undergraduate and graduate—in 103 sessions. We led three graduate-level workshops, spoke to six high school and elementary school classes, and conducted dozens of tours. This year we also held three major open houses for undergraduates, including the *Library Luau: Tropical Treasures in the Special Collections Research Center*; a crossword tournament to promote an exhibit of English language dictionaries; and our annual open house for Orientation Week, which brought 773 incoming freshmen, graduate students, and their families into Special Collections over the span of four days.

Our many interactions with undergraduate students have earned us insights into what undergraduates may take away from their visits to special collections and how they experience their class sessions while there. Similarly, our cooperative experiences teaching with general reference staff have encouraged us to include

2. Timothy Young, “Evidence: Toward a Library Definition of Ephemera,” *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage*, 4:1 (Spring 2003): 11.

bibliographic instruction in each of our teaching sessions. Along with the historical lessons students learn when they visit us, we strive to advance critical thinking skills and each student's information literacy. In other words, we instruct our students to seek materials in special collections and evaluate what they find. We are constantly aware that our undergraduates learn differently than they used to, so we look closely at the questions we pose. We encourage an interactive and lively discussion in our spaces and define the librarian as a facilitator for discussion. Integrating printed ephemera into our class sessions helps us meet each of these objectives.

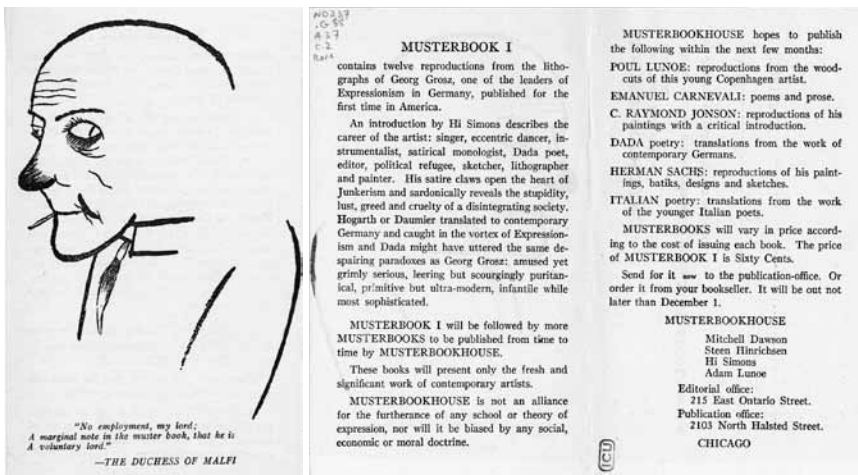
When faculty bring their classes to Special Collections, they often request materials that will help place the class's topic or theme of study in a historical context. As Alvarez's earlier-cited comments indicate, inclusion of rare materials is invaluable in creating a sense of context for students and providing them with a greater understanding of the topic at hand. Ephemera can play an important role in this contextualizing process, complementing more standard print resources, such as books and archival papers. An example of this role can be seen in a recent class session that focused on the 1893 World's Fair. The students and their professor were particularly interested in the individual ephemeral items selected for display, including a ticket to the Fair, pocket guides, surviving pamphlets and promotional material, and an individual's scrapbook. By incorporating these everyday items that also made up the fairgoers' encounter with the World's Columbian Exposition, the class was presented with ways to think about how the Fair was experienced—and by whom—that added to a sense of context and particularization about the event.

Ephemera also helps to widen students' understanding of a subject. A class studying the sentimental novel, for instance, may visit us to see various editions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, thus gaining a sense of how significantly the novel impacted nineteenth-century culture. But we also show examples of broadsides advertising productions of the dramatic version, along with loose pages of illustrations depicting characters or famous scenes from the novel, all of which further the point of the novel's social influence. Such ephemera appeals to students' interest in the everyday. Whether studying a historical subject or a more contemporary one, a common question for students to ask is where they can find out what "ordinary" people read, how they experienced an historical event, or how they reacted to a particular work of literature. When ephemera pertaining to such topics exist, students are intrigued to find this evidence.

Ephemeral material provides an important humanizing perspective for students. In our presentations on the history of the University of Chicago, we are quick to include student ephemera in our displays. These materials document student life in all of its varied aspects, from dormitory living and student protest, to clubs (like the

Contemporary European Film Group) and the local radio station (WHPK). The formats of these materials elicit a feeling of familiarity: fliers, posters, postcards, and pamphlets are still common in campus coffee shops and the student union. Even more, this classroom attention to student-created content sends important signals to our undergraduates. First, that we believe the students are essential players in the university's rich history; and second, that the library believes their activities are worth documenting in the archives. We turn our attention to the students themselves—and what better way is there to encourage current students to donate similar materials to the collection?

It is serendipitous and even useful when ephemera points to an event or a publication that never actually was realized. In a recent class on the poet Wallace Stevens, we discussed a Chicago leftist, art critic, and textbook editor named Hi Simons, whose extraordinary correspondence with Stevens sheds light on Stevens' poetics. Yet, aside from a short obituary and a few unreliable paragraphs here and there, very little is known about Hi Simons himself, other than that in 1921 he started his own small press entitled Musterbookhouse and published two monographs—a book of twelve George Grosz reproductions and Yvor Winters' early minimalist poems, *The Magpie's Shadow*. But it is the ephemeral material—the fliers printed to promote Musterbooks—that gives us a unique window on Simons' interests. What do the prospectuses show us? His hoped-for international milieu, for one thing, and his youthful ambition for another (see figures 1–2). A full seven advertised projects were never published, as can be established by searching in WorldCat and other resources. It is this tiny scrap and some elementary online research that has told us a little more about Simons than we would have known had that scrap been discarded.



Figures 1–2. Publisher's prospectus, included with, George Grosz. George Grosz; twelve reproductions from his original lithographs, with an introduction by Hi Simons. Chicago, Musterbookhouse, 1921. Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

Including ephemera among the items selected for class use provides students with a variety of source types, which in turn presents opportunities to use ephemera to help reinforce critical thinking skills. When we teach students about evaluating evidence, instruction often focuses on how to distinguish reputable or authoritative secondary sources. Often this instruction takes the form of helping students negotiate the overwhelming amount of material they might find online and showing them ways to determine if a particular secondary source is appropriate for an academic paper. Yet, as the previous example of the Wallace Stevens material illustrates, students may need to be critical of primary sources as well as secondary ones, a new concept for many undergraduates.

As another form of primary source material, ephemera necessitates that students grapple with the process of evaluating a source on different terms other than those usually taught for secondary materials. That is, rather than sorting through a list of articles and determining if they are peer-reviewed or otherwise suitable for an academic paper, students must look at the varieties of primary source material presented to them and think about the different ways these items can provide information. Students might be encouraged to question, for instance, a broadside advertising a performance: did the play really take place? How can they determine if it did? Working through these sorts of questions helps students understand that accepting a source at face value may require further research on their part to determine its usefulness. While students can find it difficult to apply this sort of critical evaluation to secondary sources, in our experience they find it easier to do with a primary source and thereby develop a skill that can then be transferred to other sources they encounter, including secondary ones.

One student in particular came to mind when we began thinking of teaching with ephemera in our special collections classroom. Two quarters ago, an undergraduate, enrolled in a class taught by the historian Professor Neil Harris entitled *Graphic Design and Commerce: 1870–1960*, paged two whimsical items we had never seen before from our collections (see figures 3–4). We suggested that the student look through materials in an archival collection of the noted Chicago printing business R.R. Donnelley to scour it for more items like these. This marked the first time the student had used a finding aid or archival collection. We were delighted when she incorporated these ephemeral items into a presentation she made to the class to illustrate the marketing of chewing gum in Chicago in 1915. The introduction she came across of the “Sprightly Sparmen” by the Wm. Wrigley Jr. Company in 1915 demonstrated that ephemera, besides its other many uses, can simply be fun, for us as well as the students.



Figure 3. Wrigley's "Mother Goose": introducing the Sprightly Spearmen. Chicago: Wm. Wrigley Jr. Company, 1915. Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

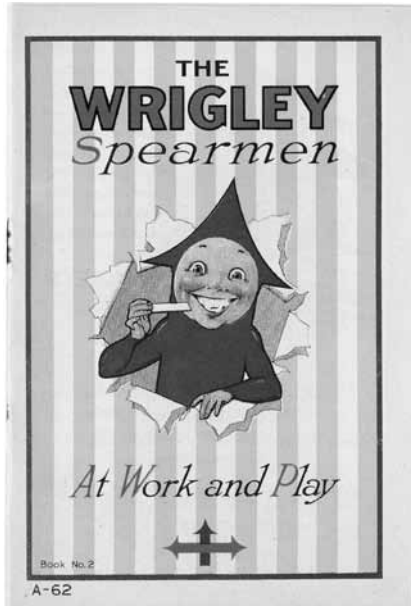


Figure 4. The Wrigley Spearmen at work and play. Chicago: Wm. Wrigley Jr. Company, 1915. Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

It is critical, in today's classroom, to have students participate, to get them engaged and talking. Lynn Keller, a professor of English at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, has provided a useful distinction between what she refers to as the "centripetal" and the "centrifugal" classroom.³ The first model—the centripetal classroom—is dependent on the students' having read and interpreted a text (like a poem) before class, each individual reader having had a "private experience" with the text and drawing his or her own conclusions about it. In contrast, the centrifugal classroom relies on a "collective rather than privatized reading process." Keller suggests that the centrifugal classroom is not concerned with closure, or arriving at a final meaning. Instead, the conversation, the creativity in the collective experience is the objective. A key aspect of the centrifugal classroom is its tendency to be "drawn toward the world outside," that is, to allow the discussion to organically grow into debates about "art and politics, intelligibility and the responsibilities of the intellectual," and so on. To our students, this means asking: "What do you think? How does this relate to *your* life?"

While our own special collections class discussions begin with a given item—a book, broadside, train ticket, or poster—the ensuing discussions must also whirl

3. Lynn Keller, "FFFFalling with Poetry: The Centrifugal Classroom," in *Poetry & Pedagogy: The Challenge of the Contemporary*, eds. Joan Retallack and Juliana Spahr (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

outward from it in a collective way. The class, having presumably never seen the object before, collectively learns about it. Rather than looking for a consensus as to an object's meaning or cultural significance, we should allow students to interpret the book, the broadside, the artifact, as their own experiences allow. Printed ephemera tends to be accessible to students: engaging due to its content, origin, or small size, inspiring interest without the awe that sometimes accompanies class use of more canonical items. When we have used ephemera in classes, it has provided an excellent discussion-starter, often achieved simply by calling on the students who happen to be sitting in front of particular items and asking them to read a bit of the piece aloud, or giving students a chance to explore material individually before asking them to comment to the group. In this way, questions are raised that allow us both to discuss content of the items and also segue into providing bibliographic instruction when students want to know how to find such items, or how to find out more information to answer questions raised by the discussion of the ephemera.

Printed ephemera, because of its accessible nature, can provide a useful entrée into class discussion and, through this discussion, lead to opportunities for students to sharpen their critical thinking skills for assessing evidence. In the process of engaging with an item, students also glean information about historical context and gain a broader understanding of the topic under discussion, expanding their view from a purely canonical account to include accounts from the margins. Since a printed item of ephemera is often a short, discrete piece, students can discuss and evaluate it within the span of one class meeting. The lessons we hope they learn from such meetings, however, extend beyond the visit to the special collections library and lay the foundation for students to apply critical thinking skills to an array of materials they encounter in the research process. This broader understanding—of the subject itself, of the research process, of what special collections libraries can offer—underscores the benefits to be gained from teaching with ephemera.