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Highest Form of Public Scholarship

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Highest Form of Public Scholarship

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Teaching: The Highest Form of Public Scholarship

In her 1980 MLA presidential address, Helen Vendler states, “We have one way of reaching [the] public, and that is in our classrooms” (345). In 2017, it is no longer true to say that we as eighteenth-century scholars have only one way of reaching the public. Varied digital platforms and the everyday prevalence of social media have enabled greater access to a greater audience, and journals like *ABO: Interactive Journal for Women in the Arts, 1640-1830* and its sister site, *ABOPublic*, point to the power of these venues. But teaching, I believe, remains our highest form of public scholarship, and pedagogical scholarship is where we realize Vendler’s instruction to examine “how best to teach others how to love what we have loved” (345).

It is in the classroom, real or virtual, that we translate the greater values of our disciplines and make an immediate case for their continuing significance. Knowledge can be curated, but understanding requires negotiation. The classroom can embody this imperfect process and make visceral the exchange of ideas at the heart of our educational mission. We learn in real time how well we communicate the value of these works and experience first-hand their effect on others. It is both a deeply personal enterprise and a highly public one.

The above is especially true when we teach the women of the long eighteenth century, whose voices frequently require the dialogue of the classroom to be heard. Often writing on the margins in the long eighteenth century, their voices can still appear marginal today unless we consider how to frame their stories and their work. In fact, in literature, seventeenth-and eighteenth-century writers, especially women writers, often framed their narratives as pedagogical exercises. They engaged their readers by claiming an instructive purpose, and elevated their novels through promoting varied fictions of teaching. And although we can question how seriously these authors intended these claims, we cannot question how powerfully they viewed the claim itself. Imagining themselves in an instructive role enabled a broader array of voices, experiences, and perspectives to find expression in their written work. It promoted the “intersectionality” that Mona Narain makes central to her vision statement as new scholarship editor and creates space in our classrooms when we teach these works to address the complexities of gendered identity and the multiples roles we assume whenever we revisit another’s story.

Interestingly, Aphra Behn—whose name makes personal this journal’s mission of inclusiveness—was more hesitant than her peers to claim instruction as a primary purpose for her writing, naming even in a text as pedagogically powerful as *Oroonoko* “divers[ion]” as primary motivation for reading his story (8). Yet she only reluctantly and in the last months of her life commits to paper and to the caprices of an easily distracted reading public this deeply personal story, choosing instead to tell the story in real time and in the presence of others for most of her professional career.[1] That reluctance suggests that she too understood the value of the negotiated space of the classroom setting and how that lived space could better ensure that Oroonoko’s story did not become hers alone. In turn, that hitherto spontaneous text, *Oroonoko,* has spurred the type of work this journal encourages: scholarship attentive to the multiplicity of identities, lived selves shaped by the intersections of sexuality, gender, race, class, nationality, colonialism, disability, or all the many variabilities of our lives, and our relationships with one another, especially as they play out in real time.

ABO: Interactive Journal for Women in the Arts, 1640-1830 with its open-access policy and its commitment to collaborative practices provides the ideal showcase for this important public scholarship. *ABO* from its inception and under Laura Runge's editorial leadership has put pedagogy at the heart of its mission, and has routinely published peer-reviewed pedagogical scholarship alongside traditional scholarship. *ABO*'s international readership has responded to this parity with enthusiasm. Percentage-wise, more pedagogical pieces are downloaded than any other form of scholarship in the journal, and the most popular article in the journal remains a pedagogical essay where the author openly acknowledges how teaching *Fantomina* in real time and over a period of years has altered her formerly fixed ideas about the text's feminism vis-à-vis the more canonical *Paradise Lost* ("The Only Beguiled Person: Accessing *Fantomina* in the Feminist Classroom"). The openness, rigor, and insightfulness of this essay represents the best of what scholarship, and not just pedagogical scholarship, can do.

Under my editorial leadership, I want the journal to continue in this strong tradition while expanding its scope. Article-length essays on pedagogy will remain a mainstay of the journal, and I will seek to expand the number of these articles we publish and the types of interactions they promote. But *ABO* will also create a venue for shorter, peer-reviewed essays that can respond more quickly yet rigorously to pressing issues in the classroom, and replicate in written form the give and take of roundtable discussions. This new forum acknowledges that not all pedagogical scholarship must look the same, and that length and format can vary to meet need. *ABO*'s commitment to an efficient, interactive peer-review process ensures that these essays stay responsive to on-going classroom issues and contemporary events.

The spring 2017 issue saw the first of these Teaching Forums, four short-form essays organized around the topic of embodiment and how to encourage students to engage textual difference by making those texts (at times physically) their own. In that series of essays, students create online dating profiles for favorite characters, produce word clouds that map value, physically act out the part of fictional characters, and translate Austen's prose into Twitter feeds or alternately write letters of their own. The exercises described are practical and creative, the approaches are grounded in history and/or theory, and the differences among these approaches are as instructive as the approaches themselves. These essays are deeply collaborative, both in their pedagogical practices and in their relationship to one another. I encourage you to read and apply these essays from our spring issue, and to imagine such future collaborations of your own.

Future forums will be varied. They may focus on broader issues of teaching, such as the trauma reading can cause and how teachers can address this, or new methodologies such as those emerging from digital humanities, or simply reflect on "how best to teach others how to love what we have loved," and what pleasures, challenges and dangers this aim can represent.

As a professor at a liberal arts college for over 22 years, my teaching and my scholarship have always been intertwined, whether that scholarship is directly intended for the classroom or directly emerges from the classroom. In fact, my most recent essay starts by telling stories of the classroom and then returns to that space to shape and develop the theory of my scholarly practice. It would be difficult to know whether to submit this piece to this journal as a pedagogical essay or as a scholarly one, as Laura Runge predicts in her new vision statement. Such "confusion" I encourage; public scholarship requires these hybrid forms of engagement.

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Moreover, the very public work of digital humanities raises new questions about the distinctions between scholarship and pedagogy; it means as Tonya Howe, the new digital humanities editor, explains it in her vision statement that "there is room for more fully-theorized essays taking up the scholarship of digital pedagogy" and that this work is likely us to lead us to innovative, previously unimagined, ways of interacting in the classroom, and certainly of organizing our journal.

Regardless of the platform, we all know that teaching as scholarship requires constant recommitment. It is not enough to teach what we love once, we must teach it again and under different circumstances, and stay open to how that love may alter over time. *ABO* has made that interactive approach to scholarship part of its mission. As the new pedagogy editor, I look forward to continuing *ABO*'s commitment to interactive, public scholarship in its highest form, teaching.

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[1]Famously, Thomas Southerne speculates that Behn chose not to write Oroonoko's story as a play because "[s]he thought either that no actor could represent him, or she could not bear him represented" while also noting "that she always told his story more feelingly than she writ it" (qtd. in Kowaleski Wallace 268). Elizabeth Kowaleski Wallace uses this famous quotation largely to defend 'Biyi Bandele's 1999 adaptation of the text for the Royal Shakespeare Company, but speaks indirectly, I think, to the types of transformations that can happen in an interactive and fully participatory classroom. She explains: "Just as a jazz riff belongs neither to the originator of the tune nor to the musician through whom it passes in its moment of transformation, so neither Bandele nor Behn can be said to possess the story of the African prince. Bandele implicitly argues that seminal narratives can travel freely across national, racial, and ethnic boundaries the same way fragments of melody do. . . . Or, as [Julie Stone] Peters reminds us, nobody 'owns' a culture: 'when one inherits, one inherits a global collective web . . . which one is meant, indeed bound, to reweave. The point is to recognize the ways in which the documents of history may be documents of barbarism, and to repossess them differently'" (266).

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