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‘The Only Beguiled Person’: Accessing *Fantomina* in the Feminist Classroom

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‘The Only Beguiled Person’: Accessing *Fantomina* in the Feminist Classroom

Keywords

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“**accessible**”: “affording entrance; open”; [c]apable of being entered or reached. . . get-at-able”; “open to the influence of”; “[a]ble to be (readily) understood or appreciated” (def 1-2c).

A few years ago, I wrote an article comparing the experience of teaching *Paradise Lost* and *Fantomina* in a required first-year English class at Barnard College.² In that article, I celebrated the feminist pleasures of teaching Haywood’s work for its relative accessibility, which I claimed empowered my classes of all-female students to find their own voices. Since then, my students have seemed increasingly determined to prove me wrong. It’s not that they don’t find *Fantomina* accessible: they still find the story much less daunting than the complex thickets of Milton’s epic. However, once inside Haywood’s story, they have started to condemn her failures as a feminist. Thus, my earlier article now seems naïve and overly utopian, as well as somewhat under-informed.

Because of its representation of a sexually assertive and verbally expressive heroine, Haywood’s story has been adopted into the canon of 18th-century feminist texts: a typical response is Catherine A. Craft’s description of *Fantomina* as a “fantasy of female freedom” (830). And I’ve been teaching it from that perspective for over 10 years. In my syllabus, *Fantomina* follows directly after an intensive, intense (and sometimes very tense) two-week encounter with *Paradise Lost*. As such, my students and I have usually found *Fantomina* a relief and a pleasure both aesthetically and also ideologically; compared to the more compliant and subservient Eve, *Fantomina* seems like a liberated and almost contemporary heroine.

In my previous article, I described how *Fantomina* allowed my students to express themselves more freely after the structuralist rigors of *Paradise Lost*, how they seemed empowered by the title character, how they seemed to embrace the author’s feminism—how a positive experience was had by all. Or so I thought. Lately though, I’ve noticed a change creeping into our discussions of Haywood’s story that is starting to influence my own understanding of the story’s feminism—or lack thereof—as well as sowing doubts about the feminism of my pedagogy.³ A number of students have started to resist my claims about this story’s feminism.⁴ While they grant that *Fantomina* seems unusually active and assertive for an 18th-century heroine, they complain that she acts solely in relation to her male lover Beauplaisir and therefore should not be considered feminist. They also question my (and other feminist critics’) reading of the ending, which views *Fantomina*’s exile to a French convent as emancipating.⁵ By contrast, my students increasingly define this ending as Haywood’s “selling out” of her heroine and her story’s feminist possibilities—and increasingly defy my efforts to prove otherwise. In recent semesters several of them have even written eloquent essays about *Fantomina* as a failed feminist heroine and *Fantomina* as a failed feminist text.⁶

These seemingly irreconcilable differences between my feminist interpretive and pedagogical desires and my students’ actual readings of *Fantomina* raise questions that serve as useful points of access for this inquiry: are 18th-century feminist texts so scarce (or even non-existent) that we sometimes pursue phantoms? Is that why I have been so excited to introduce my students to the seemingly feminist possibilities of *Fantomina*—and so surprised and even a little saddened when they resist my interpretation? Are my efforts to endorse (or enforce?) a feminist reading of

Fantomina in the classroom paradoxically anti-feminist? What is a feminist classroom anyway? And why *Fantomina*?

My research for this article has led me in some strange and unexpected directions. I began and expected to remain in the safe and well-known domain of 18th-century studies, but along the way, I've ventured into the new and sometimes threatening territory of contemporary pedagogical theory (feminist and otherwise). However, although I may have strayed beyond the 18th century in my quest for knowledge and search for answers, I have also found that the 18th century itself offers some possible solutions—or at least the terms with which to begin to ask the right questions.

Thus my quest begins with *Force or Fraud*, Toni Bowers' recent book about seduction in 18th-century literature and culture.⁷ Bowers' book, which contains a chapter about Haywood, is above all an analysis of the phenomenon that she calls "collusive resistance" (4) She defines this as "an effort to maintain virtue in coercive situations by exercising submission and refusal simultaneously, a newly nuanced model for virtuous subjecthood that emerged in a time of severe constraint" (20). According to Bowers, this model, which originated in the political, cultural, and social upheavals of late 17th- and early 18th-century England, became allegorized by the early writers of "seduction fiction":

the great Augustan seduction novelists—Behn, Manley, Haywood, and Richardson—were fascinated by an endlessly repeated narrative situation in which a virtuous ingénue is pursued by a more-knowing, partially desirable seducer in a position of authority over her. . . it. . . was, for them, an urgent problem: how (and how far) to resist the demands of authority figures—figures both dangerous and desirable, to whom submission, while due, was problematic or even transgressive—without forfeiting Christian virtue. (23)

Bowers analyzes 18th-century gendered fictional archetypes, in particular the innocent but resistant female ingénue and the knowing male seducer, as allegorical representations of the struggles of actual 18th-century British subjects, most notably those Tories who tried to remain loyal to their rulers under political conditions that often made it impossible to do so.⁸ I admire Bowers' cogent analyses of literary works and her insightful use of those analyses to revise 18th-century British political history—as well as her new framework for understanding the 18th-century novel. However, what I find most useful here are her original terms, which will serve as a valuable analogy for diagnosing my ongoing obsession and pedagogical struggles with *Fantomina*. In Bowers' terms, *Fantomina* might occupy the position of the "virtuous ingénue. . . pursued by a more-knowing. . . seducer in a position of authority over her."⁹ But if we turn those terms into an analogy for my classroom situation, the analogy becomes *Fantomina*: Beauplaisir:: my students: me.

How shocking it seems to cast myself, even analogically, in the position of the (male) seducer! Although according to contemporary pedagogical theory, this is neither shocking nor particularly surprising. The idea of teaching as seduction dates back perhaps as far as Plato, but has certainly been theorized and written about profusely for at least 30 years.¹⁰ Joan De Jean defines this seductive potential in Biblical terms:

[t]he archetype of such a relationship could well be the seduction of Eve by the serpent, who, like all the corrupt teachers who follow in its wake, gets the woman to do what it wants by offering her knowledge. Pedagogical corruption can thus be situated at the origin of original sin. (98)

While De Jean's formulation posits a "corrupt teacher," it almost goes without saying that by its very nature, all teaching (or at least all *effective* teaching) involves some kind of seduction of the student by the teacher. As Jane Gallop, the ur-theorist of teaching-as-seduction, describes it, "[a]t its most intense—and, I would argue, its most productive—the pedagogical relation between teacher and student is, in fact, a `consensual amorous relation'" (*Feminist* 57). The student is by her very nature open ("accessible") to what the teacher has to offer—she is available and indeed expects to be "seduced," while the effective teacher also desires to seduce the student into his or her particular realm of knowledge, an experience that Mary Gordon describes as "[t]he familiar feeling of falling in love with a student" (222). Depending on its context, this model of teaching has either utopian or nightmarish possibilities. bell hooks's formulation represents the former: "[t]he academy is not paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created. The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility" (207), while Gallop's actual experience represents the potential fallout of the latter.¹¹ The negative risks originate in the natural imbalance of power present in every classroom: the teacher possesses something (knowledge, information, skills) that the student desperately wants or at least needs (in order to pass the class, graduate, get a good job, etc.). The teacher also controls the fate of each student at least in the short-term context of the classroom through the institutional power of the grade.¹²

When viewed as seduction, the phrase "feminist pedagogy" thus becomes almost oxymoronic. By its very nature, feminist pedagogy--and indeed most progressive pedagogy--is utopian.¹³ As part of its ideological mission, it aspires to create a non-coercive and loving relationship between equals, or at least a partnership of like-minded souls. In her article "What is Feminist Pedagogy?," Carolyn M. Shrewsbury defines feminist pedagogy as

a vision of the classroom as a liberatory environment in which we, teacher-student and student-teacher, act as subjects, not objects. . . . A classroom characterized as persons connected in a net of relationships with people who care about each other's learning as well as their own. . . . The vision includes a participatory, democratic process in which at least some power is shared. (6-7)

In light of such definitions of feminist pedagogy, more than one feminist pedagogical theorist has viewed with suspicion or even rejected outright the idea of pedagogy-as-seduction: "an erotic pedagogy, I would argue more often than not involves serious sexual harassment of students, not only because of the unequal power relation but also because it creates a `hostile work environment'" (Ebert 800).¹⁴ But some feminists do admit, albeit at times reluctantly, that seduction and pedagogy, along with their concurrent power inequities, are difficult if not impossible to separate. In describing her desire for a feminist pedagogical practice, Berenice Malka Fisher confesses that it is hard to avoid seduction (which she coyly labels "persuasion") in the classroom: "[t]he notion of a feminist teacher's accountability implies a definite restraint in how she employs her authority. Knowing that I am accountable to others prevents me from using my authority to try to simply persuade others to my point of view. Yet. . . Every aspect of

teaching involves some element of persuasion” (93). While Christine Cusick and Laurie Mcmillan assert that “feminist pedagogy empowers students and provides opportunities for risk-taking,” they acknowledge that they “struggle to find an appropriate balance of power as [they] teach” (79). Kathryn Pauly Morgan sums up this problematic but inescapable paradox of feminist pedagogy:

if the feminist teacher actively assumes any of the forms of power available to her. . .she eliminates the possibility of educational democracy in the feminist classroom; if she dispenses with these in the name of preserving democracy, she suffers personal alienation, fails to function as a role model, and abandons the politically significant role of woman authority. In short she stops functioning as a feminist teacher. (51)

Like all good teachers, don't we (feminists) want our students to agree with us--or at least to recognize that there might be some truth and value in the fruits of our hard-earned knowledge? And like all good *progressive* teachers, don't we also want our students to agree with us by choice, not by “force or fraud”? But how can we make that happen if not by seduction? Can even (or especially) we avoid the (patriarchal?) desire to penetrate students with our (phallic?) knowledge?¹⁵ Do we also require their complete accessibility to our ideas and beliefs?¹⁶

Even if we do concede that seduction in the classroom is par for the course, we must acknowledge the even more painful truth that seduction, in the classroom or elsewhere, doesn't always go as planned. Sometimes the seducer risks rejection or at least resistance; as De Jean notes, every “class is, at least temporarily, out of the teacher's control” (116). This brings us back to my classroom struggles with *Fantomina* and indeed my desire for a more feminist pedagogical practice. À la Bowers, we might label my students' challenges to my feminist reading of *Fantomina* a kind of “collusive resistance”: like those “besieged [18th-century] fictional women [who] labor to respond appropriately to the transgressive demands of men whom they are accustomed to obeying—and who, indeed, have a right to demand obedience” (Bowers 7), my students resist submission to my (feminist) authority even while often appearing to agree with me.

As hard as it is to admit, my students are right to resist my reading of *Fantomina*. Fisher describes her own limitations in the feminist classroom: “[n]o matter how valuable I think an exercise or assignment, [student] resistance serves as a warning to me that I need to reflect on my exercise of authority” (94). And my recent pedagogical struggles with *Fantomina* both remind me and help me to do that. There's a good reason (besides its current popularity¹⁷) that Bowers doesn't include this story in her Haywood chapter—for *Fantomina* doesn't quite fit her paradigm of virtuous female ingénue and knowing male seducer. In fact, it seems to exist at least in part to disrupt that paradigm.¹⁸ While *Fantomina* does start out (sexually) innocent, it is her “[g]ratification for an innocent curiosity”/her desire for (sexual) knowledge that propels the story's action (Haywood 227). And while Beauplaisir does initiate the story's first sexual encounter (an experience that numerous critics have characterized as rape¹⁹), *Fantomina* shows that she is a quick learner. After their initial encounter, she uses multiple disguises to trick Beauplaisir into believing that he is seducing her, all the while she is actually seducing him: “I have outwitted even the most Subtle of the deceiving Kind, and while he thinks to fool me is himself the only beguiled Person” (Haywood 239). As Tiffany Potter notes, *Fantomina* is in

charge throughout most of the story: she “demonstrates her mastery not only of the linguistic codes of seduction and power in realms public and private, but also of the broader cultural signifiers of identity and power. She proves her skill. . .in a competitive game with the man perceived to be the best” (179).

Throughout the story, Fantomina uses her hard-earned (sexual) knowledge to leap over boundaries and disrupt numerous binaries, among them male/female, subject/object, victor/victim, and of course seducer/seduced.²⁰ Tassie Gwilliam comments how *Fantomina* serves a similar function for its readers: “[t]he reader of *Fantomina*. . .gets to have ‘female’ and ‘male’ pleasure, enjoying the spectacle of a series of animated sexual encounters powered by (her) constant love and (his) excitement at new conquests and by her skillful disguise and his blindness” (279). In this model, the reader’s desire for a stable subject position is perpetually and perhaps even pleurably disrupted: at any given point, are we Fantomina? Beauplaisir? Neither? Both? This disruption, as psychologically unnerving as it might feel, also has the potential to be powerfully productive, especially in the feminist classroom—for I hope by now that it is clear that *Fantomina* functions as an allegory as well as an analogy for my classroom experience. Although my students might initially (and almost certainly unconsciously) see me as occupying Beauplaisir’s position of masculine authority in my role as The Teacher, Haywood’s story works to undercut and expose that authority at every turn; for as Margaret Case Croskery points out, “[Beauplaisir is] objectified by his own desires in a way that [Fantomina] is not” (88).²¹

Not only does the story expose the limits of my classroom authority, it doesn’t even allow me to occupy that position of authority consistently. Jo Keroes represents teaching as an act of masquerade: “[a]s much as they have license to self-display, teachers are entitled, even expected, to *play a role*, actually, to play a number of them and to enjoy the sensation of being watched, being the object of a collective gaze. . .The students’ reward. . .is to partake of that performance. . .” (124). At least part of the teacher’s power derives from the possibilities provided by masquerade, a position that supposedly makes the teacher’s “true self” always inaccessible. But *Fantomina* (and Fantomina) uses masquerade in a way that holds a mirror up to and reverses the power differential of the classroom. As Juliette Merritt describes it, it is Fantomina, the erstwhile student, who masquerades in order to establish mastery over her alleged teacher and strip him of his power: “Beauplaisir is unaware. . .that it is he who has been seduced by an artful performance” (57). By doing so, Fantomina becomes the teacher: “her genius in metamorphosis, even though designed to appeal to male fantasy, is thrilling because it is a sign of her *power* to transcend her role as spectacle and achieve the position of the one who sees” (Merritt 60).

“Achieve the position of the one who sees”: isn’t that what we desire for our students? Yet how unnerving it is to give up (or at least share) some of our hard-earned power! For as we know, women have fought hard to be taken seriously in the front of the classroom as elsewhere. It’s no accident that one of my students recently damned me with this faint praise on *CULPA*, the “unofficial” Barnard/Columbia teacher evaluation website: “Professor Levin is a great professor. At first. . .I thought she was not ‘brilliant’ enough to be an English professor at such a well-regarded institution, but my opinion quickly changed.” I suspect that more than one of my female colleagues will recognize the paradox that they embody as *female authority figures*.²² As Gallop notes, “[t]he positions that I thought of as *real* were me-female-student and my male teachers. . .[as a teacher] I felt I had switched genders. . .to experience the pedagogical positions

as drag performance, role-playing. . . `being the teacher' felt like a masquerade" ("Knot" 216-17). If female professors are always already performing a (gender) masquerade in the classroom, what do we risk by letting *Fantomina* unmask us? Will I, like Beauplaisir, have to storm out of the room when my students refuse to recognize my authority? Or will I also, like Beauplaisir, keep trying to "[renew] the Crime" (Haywood 248) in my desire for a different ending?²³

What I have learned most of all as a student/teacher of *Fantomina* is that the "best way" to teach this story is to use it to ask questions rather than to demand answers, for *Fantomina* (like its heroine, who never unmasks) is most accessible not as it is "(readily) understood" or "get-at-able" but rather as it is "open[-ended]." Even though or perhaps because *Fantomina* leaves Beauplaisir "more confused than ever he had known in his whole life" (Haywood 248), I agree with Croskery that "*Fantomina* makes it difficult. . .to identify this text's heroine as victim or victor" (90), that she "eludes characterization as a figure of rare female empowerment or ambiguous patriarchal collusion" (92). In the future, I plan to teach this story not by emphasizing *Fantomina*'s feminist triumphs, but by highlighting the contradictions and complications that her story exposes both from its own time and from ours.²⁴ *Fantomina* has also taught me along the way that encouraging my students to resist—or at least question--my authority is not a sign of feminist failure but of effective feminist teaching.²⁵ After all, there have even been days when they have convinced me that their way of understanding *Fantomina* is the best way—or at least as legitimate as my own. For as *Fantomina* teaches us, the best seduction is always mutual: "if there be any true Felicity in an Amour such as theirs, both here enjoyed it to the full" (Haywood 244).²⁶

Thanks to all of the "strong beautiful Barnard women" who have discussed, debated, and written about *Fantomina* so thoughtfully and passionately over the years; to my colleagues Elizabeth Auran, Collomia Charles, and Georgette Fleischer for their generous assistance with this project; and to Margaret Vandenburg, as always, for the opportunity. Thanks also to my many wonderfully seductive teachers. This project is dedicated to my mother, my first and best teacher.

Notes:

1. Eliza Haywood 239.
2. See my article below. For a description of the Barnard First-Year English syllabi, see Margaret Vandenburg.
3. What do I mean by “feminism”? In my classroom we usually construct a mutually acceptable working definition along the lines of “the desire for equality between men and women,” which occasionally morphs into more radical territory such as “the desire to undermine patriarchy.” The question that then arises is whether *Fantomina* fits either definition, or both, or perhaps even neither. As Margaret J. M. Ezell warns in her insightful and still timely book *Writing Women’s Literary History*,
[the] belief in a uniform female response to life. . .enables us to identify with early women writers and to achieve a sense of a female literary family. Such a belief also results, at its crudest level, in a lamentable tendency to judge the “feminism” of earlier generations as it meets our standards. . .We worry whether our literary forebears were “good” feminists. (27)
One of the many valuable lessons I’ve learned from teaching *Fantomina* is that what I might like to think of as a universal one-size-fits-all definition of feminism is also a historical construct and perhaps even projection of my own 21st-century desires—and that this definition needs to be re-examined and refined in light of what actually takes place in Haywood’s story. That may, however, be the subject of another essay altogether.
4. One of my students recently pointed out that *Fantomina* would fail the “Bechdel Test,” which defines a work as more or less feminist according to the following criteria: “(1) it has to have at least two women in it, (2) who talk to each other, (3) about something besides a man” (*Bechdel*).
5. See for example Margaret Case Croskery: “in Haywood’s works, banishment to convent or monastery was no guarantee of moral transformation, nor was it an effective stopgap to erotic pleasure. The story’s ending suggests not a conclusion, but a sequel. . .*Fantomina* never formally chastises its heroine” (92).
6. In one of these essays, a student even revised the ending to have *Fantomina* kill her lover and move on to other men. She thus justified her version as more feminist than Haywood’s:
The original *Fantomina* has an ending that does not do justice to a wondrously disturbing and seemingly pro-woman story. Haywood was writing in a time when women were, more often than not, seen as inferior to men. . .Although this might explain the reason for *Fantomina*’s lackluster ending, that does not mean the story had to end this way. . .the new ending. . . allows the reader to come away with a message that does not point to the woman as the victim but rather characterizes her as the dominant, powerful, and intelligent force of the narrative.

7. Here I must confess that while my previous article originated as a tribute and response to John Richetti, a pedagogical “father” who served as my dissertation advisor, this one has been inspired by a pedagogical “mother”: it was Toni Bowers who first introduced me to 18th-century women writers, including Haywood, and who also served on my dissertation committee.
8. Bowers calls such individuals “tories” (or oppositely, “whigs”) in order to distinguish them from the more official political party designations of “Tory” and “Whig”: “I mean precisely to *distinguish* partisanship—a conscious, programmatic commitment to getting or keeping power in the hands of a certain recognized group (the Tories, the Whigs) in order to direct public policy in certain ways—from ideological sensibility—a more amorphous matter of values, attitudes, and default assumptions” (5).
9. Bowers doesn’t discuss *Fantomina* in her book for a number of reasons that should become clear shortly.
10. For example, see the articles in Regina Barreca and in *The Pedagogical Imperative* along with all works below by Jane Gallop. For a discussion of pedagogical seduction in Plato, see Jo Keroes (2) and Chrissie Tan.
11. Like De Jean, Gallop acknowledges the potential for corruption (inherent in the always present possibility/threat of actual physical seduction) in the teacher-student relationship, a possibility conceded by the very title of her book, *Feminist Accused of Sexual Harassment*.
12. Ira Shor calls this “the unequal power zone of the classroom. I am, after all, the teacher, the one assigned by the institution to do education to them, the only person in the room with the power to give grades” (51).
13. For insightful discussions of progressive pedagogy, see books by Michael Bérubé and by Shor. Feminist pedagogy seems to share most (if not all) of its methods with other forms of progressive pedagogy and differs mostly (if not always) in terms of content: its focus on women’s experience and/or gender definitions.
14. As a feminist Marxist, Teresa L. Ebert criticizes a feminist erotics of pedagogy for its denial of the unequal power relations of the classroom:
the erotic relation is seen as an isolated, ahistorical, noninstitutional “free” space of “free” individual desire that undoes hierarchies through the reversible, negotiable relation of “seducer” and “seduced.” But the professor-student relation is not a “free” space outside institutions and domination. The negotiation of power in an “unequal relationship” is always a negotiation in which the one with (institutional) power sets the terms. (803)
15. The metaphor is Gallop’s, drawn from her analysis of Sade (“The Immoral Teachers” 118).

16. As Chris Amirault describes this situation, "far from being a good teacher, I was practicing the *worst* kind of pedagogy, one thoroughly caught up with my own narcissistic reproductive desire, striving to produce little copies of myself in my students" (70).
17. Laura Runge points out that *Fantomina* currently appears in at least four literary anthologies and asks, "do we really need that many *Fantominas*?" (149). Bowers and Stephanie Harzewski also observe that "during the 1990s, *Fantomina* received a proliferation of feminist readings and. . .indispensably fueled the Haywood Renaissance" (505 n. 13). Because of this "proliferation," I will assume that my readers are already familiar with the details of the story's plot.
18. In fact, I think that one of the reasons for *Fantomina*'s current popularity is its interpretive ambiguity (which is bound to appeal to a post-modern audience). For example, one way that it evades or at least disrupts our assumptions about the story's feminism is the ambiguity of its definition of seduction: unlike the examples in Bowers' book, we are never quite sure from one moment to the next who is seducing whom.
19. See for example Ros Ballaster 188.
20. Croskery observes that "the heroine's disguise continues to confuse the roles of seducer and seduced" (84).
21. More than one student has revealed her own identification with *Fantomina*, as in this opening of a recent essay about *Fantomina*: "I would like to say that I am a 'Young Lady of distinguished Birth, Beauty, Wit.'"
22. I believe that the contradictory nature of my student's comment reflects at least in part my decision to make myself relatively accessible to my students. Madeleine Kahn remarks that this problem may be endemic to the role of a female professor at a women's college: "my professional distance was under siege from the moment I walked into a classroom at Mills. I was subjected to intense—even passionate—scrutiny, and every boundary I tried to establish was immediately tested" (11).
23. As Croskery mentions, at the end of the story, "Beauplaisir is once again enamored" (92).
24. Bowers notes that "by coming to understand the history of certain modern assumptions about the reciprocal power of men and women in intimate relation, we can. . .use that perception to think critically about the present" (25). My experience suggests that this "history" can be used to analyze all power dynamics, not just those between "men and women in intimate relation."
25. In keeping with the tradition of the best progressive feminist pedagogy, I hope that I can encourage my students to become more whig than tory by making their resistance to my authority outright rather than collusive.

26. If we follow the allegory to its endpoint, we could say that Fantomina, impregnated with Beauplaisir's "knowledge," gives birth to a baby girl who will adhere to and perhaps advance her mother's story—or perhaps the two of them will go off together to found a community of female scholar-courtesans in France.

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