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Gender & Genre

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The first words I uttered in a graduate classroom were in response to the question a fellow student put to the professor: what is “the canon?” Without thinking, I blurted out “Moby Dick!” My classmates laughed, and the professor smiled wryly. I had long been a feminist, though I was not yet a teacher or scholar of the eighteenth century. But on that first day, I articulated a connection that would guide much of my study: the relationship between body and text. Years later, I am a feminist, a seasoned teacher, and a devoted scholar of eighteenth-century studies. And I see feminism, pedagogy, and eighteenth-century studies as intricately related.

For years, many eighteenth-century texts we now consider canonical were viewed as beyond the pale, and most of those texts were written by women. Late-twentieth-century feminist recovery projects made accessible works by writers like Aphra Behn, Eliza Haywood, and Delarivier Manley. In the years that followed, scholar-teachers revisited master-narratives of literary history as well as pedagogical strategies for teaching the period. Anticipating the 35th anniversary of the *American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies Women’s Caucus*, Toni Bowers wrote that there is a trend among “younger critics... to revisit assumptions that their gender-oriented predecessors once labored to leave behind – for instance, the notion that it is possible to discuss literature from a gender-neutral position . . .” (58). I was in graduate school in the 1990s, and I was trained to view literature from an interdisciplinary perspective, to wit: I read with an eye toward difference. I have brought that training to bear on my teaching by setting primary texts in contexts, including historical, colonial, economic, religious, political, sexual, and gendered. In multiple ways, of course, they are all interconnected. And, as Bowers points out, it is because of early feminist work that I am able to teach many of the texts I assign in my classes. As one of my students eloquently put it, “Feminism to me is free and equal rights for women to write. It is because of the first feminists that I am able to write what I feel like writing about, or just write in general.”¹ This article will discuss several ways that I have succeeded in making feminism and the eighteenth century mutually accessible to students.

Challenges

I teach at a public university in central Pennsylvania. The student body is mostly homogenous, regional, and many students are the first in their family to attend college. They are also earnest, kind, respectful, and open to considering new perspectives when they are so invited. One challenge I face in the classroom is that students consistently come to the table with deeply-held stereotypes about gender and sexuality, even as they articulate what is to them a feminist position. For instance, in one Restoration/ Eighteenth-century British Literature class, I asked my students how they would define “feminism” and “literary history.” At that point in the term, we had read Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko*, *The Widow Ranter*, excerpts from *The Spectator*, the Swift~Montagu poetic fight, and Eliza Haywood’s *Fantomina* and *The British Recluse*. One student wrote: “Feminism is a woman’s ability and desire to express herself openly however she wants to. So she can be a prude, a slut, masculine, feminine, etc. It’s her choice.” The first part of the definition is one that suggests freedom, but the student quickly moves to prescriptive, stereotyped roles. Ironically embedded in the response were the very stereotypes she claimed feminism helped women to overcome. Another student captured a prevailing ethos: “I don’t really know what feminism is except that I should be for it because I’m a girl, lots of people

glare if someone isn't, yet it gets a bad rep." Even one of my most sophisticated students² struggles with stereotypes, though I'm not sure she would see it that way. She wrote:

Feminism is a philosophy of enabling women to fulfill their highest potential and not feel intimidated by pre-conceived or socially constructed genders roles. Feminism does not necessarily mean you hate or look down on men, but means that as a woman, you want to better yourself and see yourself as an individual, not necessarily to the detriment of others. I consider myself feminist in many ways, but I do not wish to victimize myself or be a man-hater. It's all about being an empowered woman!

Even in a smart articulation of a position of strength, she felt the need to qualify that position by reassuring (me? herself?) that she is neither a victim nor a man-hater. To my mind, the most strikingly eighteenth-century definition is this one: "Feminism is the revolution of women figures in society. It empowers women and places them (in a text) that empowers them." According to this definition, women are placed in a text parenthetically (!) as if women's writing or women characters are an adjunct to or an aside from the text itself. Moreover, the parenthesis suggests that there is a relationship between reality and representation, and it calls attention to the intentionality of representation.

An additional pedagogical challenge that many of us face is the gap between feminist theories and practices. Like many—if not most—undergraduates today, my students are not third-wave, and they are certainly not post-feminist. But an abundance of contemporary popular discourse and scholarship about feminism starts from the premise that we live in a post-feminist era. For instance, in 2011, our *Women's and Gender Studies Program* hosted the authors of *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future* as the Women's History Month speakers. Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards are considered and consider themselves to be key shapers of feminism's third wave. Their talk offered some valuable definitions about the way that third-wave feminism differs from first- and second-wave feminism because it wasn't organized around a civil rights or political movement, like the Abolition movement or the 1960s civil rights campaigns. Rather, they claimed that third-wave feminism grew out of pop culture. Since third-wave feminism is anti-essentialist and draws attention to the social constructedness of gender and sexuality, I understood why Baumgardner and Richards would talk about Lady Gaga. But I was troubled because I understood them to say that feminism could be separated from any kind of social justice. Specifically, I was confused by the connection they drew between Sarah Palin and feminism. They claimed that "people's reactions to [Palin] and Hillary Clinton were the same." I shouted out that "people didn't like Sarah Palin because she doesn't know anything." To my surprise, the audience applauded. Baumgardner and Richards said that part of Palin's political success was because she had been on stage with her children. They then seemed to defend Palin by saying that male politicians had been just as uninformed as she. I was angry. I did not like the idea that Palin could be ranked as a feminist; her politics are antithetical to feminism's central tenets! Palin's attempt at a "new conservative" feminism is *oxymoronic*. What's next, I wondered? "Patriarchal feminism" (Harding)? Yes. Kate Harding used this phrase ironically in a 2010 *Jezebel* article "5 Ways of Looking at 'Sarah Palin Feminism.'" Her piece perfectly articulates the frustration, even exhaustion I feel when intelligent feminist speakers reinforce the vacuous appropriation of feminism in the service of pretty much anybody or

anything. My point in recounting this lecture is to illustrate the chasm between the majority of students who have barely-budding feminist sensibilities (at best) and post-third-wave feminism's assumption that the grass-roots intellectual work of feminisms is already done.

Pedagogical Suggestions

How, then, do I make accessible feminism and eighteenth-century literature to students who have reservations and fears about feminism and who are totally unfamiliar with the eighteenth century? In what follows, I will talk about my use of genre and about a collaborative form of masquerade as ways to engage students in the material.

Genre: In teaching some classes, I contextualize primary texts in terms of feminism, reading seventeenth-, eighteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty first-century proto-feminist and feminist material. But, in the classes I discuss below, I used an inductive method, focusing on genre first and ideology and discourse second. Our study of genre ultimately leads the students to arrive at feminist conclusions themselves. For instance, when I teach Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's 1734 "Reasons that Induced Dr. S[wift] to Write a Poem Call'd the Lady's Dressing Room," the famous riposte to Swift's misogynist poem, I emphasize her "small digression." In the middle of a poem that satirizes a pompous gentleman's failure to sexually perform with a whore, Montagu digresses from the plot to argue that the male British literary tradition is just like the impotent gentleman: all surface and no substance. She does so by using two of the most popular genres of her period: poetry and satire. She condemns even Alexander Pope's work as style rather than substance, and she uses Enlightenment ideals such as reason and a reverence for the ancients against the writers who mocked women's intellect. Students admire her for taking on the author of "An Essay on Criticism" and "The Dunciad." Recall the student definition of feminism that I quoted earlier: "Feminism... places them (in a text) that empowers them." Students read Montagu's digression as this very powerful, parenthetical, textual moment. At the end of Montagu's poem, the gentleman blames the whore for his shortcomings, and he threatens to assault her with poetic verse: "'I'll be revenged, you saucy quean' / (Replies the disappointed Dean) / 'I'll so describe your dressing room / The very Irish shall not come" (84-87). Undaunted, the whore replies: "She answered short, 'I'm glad you'll write. / You'll furnish paper when I shite" (88-89). My students love these lines because they use satire and intellect to right the sexual, textual, and intellectual injustices inflicted against the woman in the poem. And they love that the whore uses the gentleman's literary weapons against him. Thus both the whore and the woman writer outwit their opponent using the very literary tradition that excluded women because of gender. This is the ideal time for me to have students read Janet Todd's *The Sign of Angellica: Women, Writing and Fiction, 1660-1800* because they will better understand Todd's argument that professional women who wrote for the literary marketplace were considered as disreputable as prostitutes who advertised their wares publicly.

The Swift—Montagu poems are among my favorite to teach because Montagu's parenthetical placement of women's intellectual tradition within the poem leads the class to talk explicitly about the connection between sexual and intellectual possibilities and power dynamics. They are able to see the generic acrobatics that women performed in order to assert their right to write. Another example is *The Adventures of Rivella; or, the History of the Author of The Atlantis*, Delarivier Manley's brilliant so-called auto-biography in which she maintains authorial control

even though she is off-stage throughout the entire novel! I asked the class if they thought that any of the characters we had read so far expressed what we would consider to be feminist ideas. Half said yes; half said no. Several students thought that Manley knew that the best way to get her ideas across was to put them in the mouths of men. Another student said that Rivella was “not overbearing feminism.” The class concluded that seventeenth- and eighteenth-century women writers and women characters often fictionalized feminist ideas by manipulating genre. This strategy, they thought, was not didactic or overtly ideological, and therefore feminist ideas were more successfully conveyed to the reader. One final example is Samuel Johnson’s Oriental tale, *Rasselas*. Again, I asked if students thought that any of the characters we had read so far expressed what we would consider to be feminist ideas. One student pointed out that, at the end of the tale, Princess Nekayah wanted to establish a college for women, and Pekuah (the Princess’s favorite servant) wanted to spend her life studying in a convent, places of learning for women. *Rasselas*, on the other hand, wished to rule his own kingdom. The class concluded that, in Johnson’s tale, men wished for power whereas women wished for the power of knowledge. Initially, students hadn’t thought of those ideas as explicitly feminist, but they came to see that writers used genre and characterization to draw the reader in and arrive at feminist notions themselves. When we read William Warner’s chapter about Pamela as a character who is surprised to find herself in a novel and who instructs the characters about how to interpret her, students are prepared to see genre as a supple tool for feminist ideas.

My method of teaching parallels the strategies of writers who used genre obliquely in order to render transparent feminist ideas. Slightly masquerading feminism with genre (seduction fiction, autobiography, Oriental tale, . . .) strikes me as a very characteristic eighteenth-century way of using satire, play, and masquerade to make an ideological point.

Collaboration & masquerade: Class discussions about genre set the stage for Eliza Haywood’s masquerades in *Fantomina* and for the disguises in *The British Recluse*. I set a critical context for seduction fiction by telling students about the history of masquerade (we read chapters and excerpts by Ros Ballaster and Catherine Crafts-Fairchild). Masquerade leads to discussions about identity as a social construct. But student responses to Haywood are always tremendously emotional. One student was so angered by the female characters’ gullibility in *The British Recluse* that she emailed me from the library to say that, while she had not thrown the book across the room, she really wanted to! Student responses to *Fantomina* often reflect the kind of prevarication I see in the student definitions of feminism that I quoted at the beginning of this article. With this novella more than with any other, students drop any pretense of formality and vociferate against the characters, calling them names like “scumbag” or “slut.” (I encourage them to use more century-specific terms like “rake” or “strumpet.”) They articulate their reactions by using stereotypical bodily insults and by adopting the kind of sexist language that they had been critical of elsewhere. Their animated responses are the perfect springboard for talking about one of the central questions raised by the text: does *Fantomina* subvert stereotypical means of oppression or does she fall prey to them? Does the text punish or reward her for her sexual liberties? In addressing these questions, I face multiple challenges: I must give them a historical background in which to contextualize the class and sexual politics in the novella. I must help them to unmask their own stereotypes about gender and sexuality. And I must help them to see connections between the eighteenth- and twenty-first centuries, while avoiding anachronistic thinking.

To that end, I offered students a creative option for their final project:

Working in groups of two or three, write an imaginary dialogue among two or more 18th-century characters or authors. You may select from any author we've read or any character in the plays, poems, essays, or novels we've read. Each student will be responsible for his/her character and will research biographical and critical background information about the character. Then you will collectively write a piece that puts into dialogue those characters/ authors. You are invited to perform the piece for the class.

As students discussed what it would be like for Fantomina to talk with Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, one student arrived at the conclusion that we must read eighteenth-century literature in the context of gender and sexuality. Indeed, she claimed, there could be no other way to study the period. Several of their scripts and performances animated their views. In one dialogue, the Widow Ranter advises Fantomina to privilege her mind over her body. Fantomina weighs her options and concludes that she would be happier living as a lesbian, a solution that reminds us of Haywood's *The British Recluse*. We had just finished reading Sarah Scott's *The History of Sir George Ellison* when I assigned the project. In another student-written dialogue, Fantomina schools Sir George Ellison, who had claimed that men knew more about morality because of their involvement in the public sphere. Fantomina asks: "is not the home the whole world?"

Students love the theatrical assignment. They love the idea of masquerade in general. Dressing up in the characters and authors they have read allows them to speak more freely than they would do in class about subjects which are sometimes threatening to them. It makes them think about why authors might script scenes in which characters hide or reveal themselves. One group wrote a dialogue in which Godwin and Haywood dressed up as Caleb Williams and Fantomina. They used circumlocution and costuming to arrive at a climax where identities and ideas were revealed. In so doing, my students were trying to mirror the literary techniques of Haywood and Godwin (an odd pair, I will allow), and they gave voice to dominant ideas raised by the texts. Most of those ideas had to do with gender and sexuality. The assignment allowed students to take control of narratives as they explored what it means to read and think as feminists. The collective writing project is also valuable because it requires students to work communally, to practice "connected learning."³ Thus, the creation of their own genre (the scripts) employs one central tenet of feminism.

I love teaching masquerade, and I love masquerade balls. I have hosted several of them. And I love the idea of using masquerade as a pedagogical strategy. In graduate school, I remember beginning to write a chapter on Anna Maria Falconbridge's travel narrative to Sierra Leone (Harrow, *Adventures*).⁴ Throughout her travelogue, she wields a stylized femininity in order to narrate her politicized domestic situation and to vocalize criticism about empire. The colonial and the feminine are connected in her narrative; she alternately positions herself as a colonist and as woman, often using one subject position to criticize the other. "Delicacy" prevents gentlemen from allowing her to view some of the slave scenes, but her "curiosity" brings her there and in spite of her blush, she narrates the experience. I remember excitedly talking with my father

about her narrative. My father is an intellectual – an Africanist and feminist scholar. It was he who introduced me to Irigaray, Kristeva, Cixous, Butler, Fuss. I was excited to have names for “strategized femininity” and “mimicry” – destabilizing forces I had been aware of for most of my post-puberty life. I know the idea of a stable, authentic subject is at the core of problematic, patriarchal master narratives. And, even as I embrace rhetorical and actual masquerade, I struggle with the authority of the master narrative that values an independent, isolated, individual scholar over a scholar who works communally and collaboratively.⁵ And for all of the theorizing about ways to take control of narrative means of oppression by subverting it through masquerade – for all the success that people like Abolitionist women writers had at using the gendered stereotype of the emotional woman to political advantage – there are still ugly realities that such rhetorical or actual masking does not change. Those friends I had in graduate school who earned money for tuition by stripping were still taking their clothes off and gyrating on strangers’ laps for money.

So for me there are gaps with which I struggle, and with which I am sure we all struggle. There is the gap between the ugly oppressions that women still endure around the world and the idea that we are “post-feminist.” There is the gap between my students’ naïveté about their own ignorance and the claim that the culture we live in is post-feminist. And there is the gap between my value of collaborative work in the classroom and my struggle to accept collaboration as equally valuable in my own work. Perhaps I am most successful in the classroom when I share these struggles with my students. I try to demystify feminism, writing, and the eighteenth century. I try to show them how “the canon” has changed and is still changing. By doing so, I hope to invite them into new ways of thinking and into the long eighteenth century. After all, the long eighteenth century is, I am told, still going on.

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Notes

1. All student quotes come from two classes taught at Shippensburg University during the following terms: Spring 2011 and Fall 2011. In both cases, I told students that I was working on this article, and I asked if I could anonymously use their quotations. They granted me permission to do so.
2. I told students that their responses could be anonymous, but some voluntarily wrote their names on their definitions.
3. Volumes have been written about feminism and pedagogy. One useful article on connected and separate learning is Gawelek, Mulqueen, and Tarule's "Woman to Women: Understanding the Needs of Our Female Students."
4. For brief biographical information on Anna Maria Falconbridge, see "Anna Maria Falconbridge," in *Dictionary of African Biography*, ed. Henry Louis Gates & Emmanuel K. Akyeampong. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.
5. One glowing exception to this is my intellectual relationship with Dr. Nora Nachumi. In our commitment to reading one another's work, she has helped me to practice the writing strategies I preach to my students.

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