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"Less of the Heroine than the Woman": Parsing Gender in the British Novel

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“Less of the Heroine than the Woman”: Parsing Gender in the British Novel

Abstract

This essay offers two methods that will help students resist the temptation to judge eighteenth-century novels by twenty-first-century standards. These methods prompt students to parse the question of whether female protagonists in novels—in this case, Daniel Defoe’s *Roxana* (1724), Samuel Johnson’s *Rasselas* (1759), and Charlotte Lennox’s *Sophia* (1762)—are portrayed as perfect models or as complex humans. The first method asks them to engage with definitions of the term “heroine,” and the second method uses word clouds to extend their thinking about the complexity of embodying a mid-eighteenth-century female identity.

Keywords

teaching, pedagogy, female protagonists, women, eighteenth-century novel, methods for teaching, heroine, word clouds, female identity, embodying

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Cover Page Footnote

Johnson, Samuel. *Rasselas*. Ed. Thomas Keymer. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. Lennox, Charlotte. *Sophia*. Ed. Norbert Schürer. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2008.

Introduction to *ABO's* Teaching Forum

Cynthia Richards, Pedagogy Editor

This issue inaugurates the first of *ABO's* Teaching Forums. These forums feature a series of shorter essays that are in conversation with one another about issues related to teaching all aspects of women in the arts in the long eighteenth century. Geared to a scholarly audience, these forums may be both practical and theoretical in nature, but will uniformly take as their focus the public work of the classroom and how scholarship is translated into action. These first four essays illustrate that focus by foregrounding practices in which students are asked—sometimes quite literally—to embody knowledge of the eighteenth century, and particularly, how gender reframes that experience. As such, they speak to the long-standing feminist practice that acknowledges the role of the body in shaping experience and point to emerging insights in Body Studies, which focus on a history of the body and its representation.

Listed chronologically in terms of content, the four essays included in the forum are: “Arabella’s Valentines and Literary Connections [dot] com: Playing with Eighteenth-century Gender Online” by Melanie Holm; “‘Less of the Heroine than the Woman’: Parsing Gender in the British Novel” by Susan Carlile; “Embodying Gender and Class in Public Spaces through an Active Learning Activity: Out and About in the Eighteenth Century” by Ann Campbell; and “Embodying Character, Adapting communication; or, the Senses and Sensibilities of Epistolarity and New Media in the Classroom” by Jodi L. Wyett.

“Less of the Heroine than the Woman”: Parsing Gender in the British Novel

How often have you found yourself teaching an eighteenth-century novel, when you suddenly realized that the students have leaned back in disgust? They are not repulsed by the plot or by the strange sentence structure. What makes them crazy is the fact that they cannot “like” the character, usually the female protagonist. I am going to guess that I am not alone in this challenge. We would like to think that we have convinced students that it is irrelevant whether they like or don’t like a character; but the fact is, we lose students when we cannot figure out how to get them to connect with the plights of young people in circumstances and with mindsets very different from their own. I offer here a scaffolded approach that helps students extract themselves from their own experience (if ever so slightly). Even better it sets them both inside the world of the eighteenth-century novel and within the bodies of characters trying to negotiate a range of female personae. This

approach helps them resist the temptation to judge novels by twenty-first-century standards.

I am inspired by other ABO scholars who prompt us to think in more complex ways about how we teach gender in our period. Alison Conway, Sharon Harrow, Nora Nachumi, and Laura Runge's "Teaching Eighteenth-Century Literature as a Feminist Scholar in the New Millennium" (<http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/abo/vol2/iss1/8/>) and Kathryn Strong Hansen's "Inviting Twenty-First Century Students to the Eighteenth-Century Party" (<http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/abo/vol3/iss1/3/>) address these problems from different angles, but each acknowledges that we are tasked with teaching students about how female characters were operating under different codes of behaviour than the codes twenty-first century students might assume. In fact, all the essays in this forum recognize that we must ask students to consider the complexity of individual circumstances and variation between representations of eighteenth-century female experience.

This is not as simple an undertaking as it might seem on its face. My undergraduate English majors and master's students at a teaching-focused, large, urban university are usually new to our period. They tend to judge these female characters as fainting, blushing, victims or as irresponsible hussies. Alternately students are frequently uninspired by what seems to them to be simply dithering about. Why doesn't she just get a job? Why is she so terrified to be on her own? One student was so unable to access the eighteenth-century's rigid codes of female conduct and subsequent restraints on female behaviour as to suggest that the protagonist of Charlotte Lennox's novel *Henrietta* (1758) must have already been raped before the novel begins, since she's so afraid to venture out of her aunt's house. To twenty-first-century readers, eighteenth-century female characters are initially, if not victims, just very "annoying." How can we teach them to judge these women on the terms of the novel in which they appear, rather than on our terms?

I think we would all agree that our goal is to teach students to read closely, to go down the rabbit hole of time and sense what these authors were creating and what it might mean for their eighteenth-century readers. I am not beyond reminding my students that these authors most obviously did not have us in mind when they wrote their tales, but this very fact makes the effort even more intriguing because studying this period is much like reading a book set in a foreign country. By getting outside our own perspectives we come to understand humans in far more nuanced ways. Still, as we know, appreciating the plight of the characters in an eighteenth-century novel is central to grasping the significance and import of the plot.

One element necessary for readers to connect with the urgency of the narrative is helpfully articulated in April Alliston's 2011 *Eighteenth-Century Theory and Interpretation* essay "Female Quixotism and the Novel: Character and Plausibility, Honesty and Fidelity." Alliston illustrates the tension in our period

between history and romance and how the novel is not only a mixing of these genres but an improved form that allows not just for the “should’s” of romance, nor simply the events of history. Instead, novels use plausible characters rather than idealized ones, to suggest a new way of thinking about humans, especially women. If characters are “plausible,” then we can imagine them as realistically inhabited or embodied rather than simply iconic exemplars of hoped for (or not) behaviors.

This concept supports the pedagogical strategy of emphasizing debatable topics within a text. The question of how female protagonists are actually being portrayed—as perfect models, or as complex humans—leads to productive conversations and debates about how each novel is constructed. My novel unit focuses on Daniel Defoe’s *Roxana* (1724), Samuel Johnson’s *Rasselas* (1759), and Charlotte Lennox’s *Sophia* (1762). These novels seem to help students engage with the uniquely overlapping and contrasting themes of cultural and gender resistance within our period.

Accessing (and then challenging) prior knowledge

To begin, students who have just read *Roxana* write briefly in class about whether they believe Roxana is a heroine. The prompt asks them to use whatever definition of “heroine” they choose, which leads to an initial conversation about how the concept of “heroine” reflects the values of the time she represents. Students acknowledge that they have thought far more about the qualities of a hero (rather than the female counterpart), and they end up drawing from their own ideas formed by movies, television, and novels, but also from their studies of texts like Chaucer and Shakespeare. Some students thought Roxana was a heroine because she was strategic, overcoming her odds and making her own money. Others thought she wasn’t because she felt extreme guilt, even calling herself a “whore.” Their list of qualities of a heroine included: ability to overcome obstacles, kindness, chastity, providing for children, honesty, selflessness, self-awareness, responsibility for flaws, accepting the social contract, resourcefulness, self sacrificing, courage, humility, and a rejection of materialism. This exercise sets the groundwork for our discussion about how the eighteenth-century heroine embodied numerous qualities from the classical period and that she also reflects values unique to the Enlightenment, when gender roles and identity were beginning to be called into question. Though we don’t spend as much time on it, students invariably bring up how we are still struggling with many of these gendered qualities and expectations.

At the conclusion of our discussion of *Roxana*, and before reading *Rasselas*, I presented students with Samuel Johnson’s 1755 definition of a heroine. In his famous *Dictionary of the English Language*, the illustrative quotations are the most interesting.

Students were most drawn to Dryden's phrases like "inborn worth," "confirm'd her mind," and "fortify'd her face," as well as Addison's emphasis on performance. In *Rasselas* we might not consider Nekayah a heroine, since she does not "fortify her face" when Pekuah her maid is kidnapped. In fact, she was "overpowered with surprise and grief" and later "burst out into new lamentations" (72). In *Sophia* students became interested in the protagonists' attempts to do just that: erase any emotion from her face by exerting sheer will. For example, when Sophia's jealous sister unleashes "a torrent of reproach and invective" designed to overwhelm her, "Sophia answered no otherwise than by a provoking serenity of countenance, and the most calm attention" (75). Sophia's mastery of her face and body seem to make her commendable.

Our modern understanding of heroism or at least a morality upon which heroism is founded has to do with being genuine or "true to one's self" and not hiding what is felt. Especially in our extroverted and exhibitionist culture, this sort of reconsideration of muted performance is intriguing. Students discussed this concept as they also considered Johnson's inclusion of the Addison quote: "The British stage more noble characters expose." They were particularly drawn to the ways this passage described Sophia, who appeared in a novel published just four years after Johnson's *Dictionary*. This protagonist who distinguishes herself by her "wit and vivacity" clearly feels the burden of noble performance, "her exalted understanding" allows her no "indecent transports of anger" which are "so unbecoming [of H's] sex and years" (75). Even when she has doubts about her suitor's character, she knows that at the moment of his declaration of love she must, "suffer no marks of discontent or apprehension to appear in her countenance and behaviour" (82). We note how the narrator is cuing the reader to admire Sophia's ability to perform, to control her body.

Partway through our discussion, we switched to a focus on heroes and masculinity. This shift unsurprisingly helps students think differently about femininity. They find it easier in these texts to identify ideal male traits—like action, responsibility, and strength. And this comparison produced an equally interesting conversation about how each narrative constructs expected behaviours from men. How does a text suggest what a "good man" or a "good woman" is? That is, how

does the narrative define “good” in relation to a male body versus a female body, and how does it complicate our judgement of the supposedly “good” characters? Is “action” equally expected of both genders? I also asked questions that encouraged students to think about how stories communicate models for women. What do you think a female reader would take away from this novel about how they should make decisions about marriage? What might they learn about how they could negotiate their relationship with their parents. I prompt students to consider how those same narratives simultaneously challenge social conventions.

Word Clouds to Extend Discussion

After several weeks doing close readings of all three novels, I asked students to draw back for a discussion of what we could extrapolate about the way women are portrayed in the texts they have read from our period. I showed students their earlier list from *Roxana*, which they made when they began this unit. Now, they reassessed their list of qualities for heroine and hero. I also used word clouds to help extend the work of parsing gender. For comparison, I imported Volume 1 and Volume 2 of *Sophia* separately into Tagxedo.com, which is one of many word cloud engines. This one is free; importing large amounts of texts is easy, and setting up parameters requires no prior knowledge or experience. I decided to take out frequently used proper names, titles of address (Mr. Sir, Miss), as well as family words (mother, sister, father, daughter) in order to privilege concepts in the novels. Since word clouds easily identify word frequency within large bodies of text, students are encouraged to consider if (or to what extent) they think the word cloud accurately represents the ideas of greatest importance in the novel. I explained to students that I used these parameters so that we could see concepts better. As for reading the word cloud, students should be told that the shape for the cloud, the proximity of words to each other, and the angle of each word is random. The size of the word is

what they should be noticing, since the largest words were mentioned most often. Then, they are encouraged to consider how these words, both the most and the least frequently appearing, help them rethink the way concepts of hero and heroine we have already discussed are portrayed in the novel.

Sophia, Vol I

of the word “thought” and “think,” as it appeared as some of the largest words in both Volume One and Volume Two of the novel. This prompted them to think more about how Sophia’s personality, mind, and body performance make others see her beauty, rather than the way conventional beauty would have made her similar to her heroine predecessors. Sophia’s magnificence shines through because of her uniquely (within the context of the novel) good qualities. To put a fine point on this distinction, students noted how Lennox describes her protagonist Sophia, as “less of the heroine, than the woman” (95). This phrase forms the title of Chapter 9 in which Sophia, who admits her passion for the undeserving Sir Charles, rejects her mother’s wishes and triumphantly leaves home: “Opposition kept up her spirits, and preserved her mind from yielding to that tender grief which the idea of parting for ever from Sir Charles excited” (97). In *Sophia*, narrative moves like these that show breaks from social standards as empowering take women off pedestals and remind readers of the value of a woman’s complexity for themselves and for society.

Franco Moretti in *Graphs, Maps, Trees* (2007) and *Distant Reading* (2013) has given validity to the conversation about the value of statistical analysis in literary study. He notes that in charting texts “the reality of the text undergoes a process of deliberate reduction and abstraction,” which produces “double lessons, of humility and euphoria at the same time” (Moretti, *Graphs*, 1-2). Word clouds have only been recently used in pedagogical study and the use of and cautions about textual analysis in literary study is in an early phase. Scholars suggest that systematic analytic efforts such as word clouds give readers overviews, help them keep track of what they have seen, and suggest what students should look for next. In sum, they have the potential to encourage new inquiries (See Muralidharan and Hearst [2013] and DeNoyelles and Reyes-Foster [2015]). I discuss with my students Moretti’s ground-breaking work and also how word clouds have the potential to be problematic in literary study. These visualizations of text reduce it to a basic level of simple quantification. The study of word frequency in isolation is a ham-fisted way of understanding a novel. Still, in my classroom this exercise prompted debates about what the significance of more frequently used words might be and provided a window into a different kind of analysis.

I found that when I left the word cloud up on the screen for the duration of the class students kept referring back to it as we debated the concepts of heroine and woman. Students noted the differences between Lennox’s sister protagonists, Sophia and Harriot (precursors to Austen’s Elinor and Marianne in *Sense and Sensibility*). The novel—at least on the surface—offers Harriot as an example of who not to imitate. In contrast, Sophia is the good woman. Harriot is a woman of impulsive action, and the recurrence of the word “make” reminded them of this fact. In contrast, Sophia is a woman of “thought,” who is rewarded in the end for her pensiveness, including as it appears on her face. Students also noticed a shift from the first volume to the second volume by comparing the word clouds. Being a

woman more than a heroine means dealing with the complexity of real life. Students asserted that perhaps replacing the frequency of the word “affected” in the first volume with frequent mentions of “hope” in the second suggests the need to perform in a society so tightly focused on social convention. They also commented on how in the first volume “tears” was frequently mentioned and that it appeared more often than “mind.” In the second volume “tears” does not even appear on the word cloud, thus it was either not mentioned or was included less frequently than all the words that do appear. “Mind,” in contrast, is more frequently mentioned.

Through the word cloud, students recognized that while “feminine” embodied behavior began the narrative, intellect and cognition (not infrequently as conscious performance) were more dominant features in the second. This observation transferred to students’ charts with comments like “Sophia refused to be bought by Sir Charles” under “Good” and “Sophia’s grace and goodness improves other people, including Sir Charles” under “Heroine.” Students were recognizing the nuances not simply of the words on the page, but of the understanding of and embodiment of femaleness. A good woman is represented as having an edgier personality, one who can stand up for herself. While a heroine in this novel is one who can get away with standing up for herself, as long as she is part of a larger social improvement project. While some students chose to use their own words and phrases on their charts after seeing the word clouds, others used the exact words from the word cloud in their four-quadrant chart. One placed “little,” and “manners” in the “Good” category and then wrote her own words, “hopes for respect from her husband,” in the “Heroine” category. Whatever the demerits of word clouds, the conversations they generated focused students around narrative structure and how it creates a world with its own terms and values for understanding characters.

Although these exercises simplified the text and the concepts of “heroine” and “good woman” in an attempt to be provocative, they generated nuanced conversations about Defoe’s, Johnson’s, and Lennox’s novels. Undoubtedly these concepts are extremely complex during our period, but the multifaceted nature of these narratives published between 1724 and 1762 bred fruitful literary study that took students away from their preconceived notions about gender and helped them suspend their personal judgments. Giving students a space to visualize the text and creating a space for reflection on the temporality of hero/ine encouraged students to imagine in a more nuanced way the complexity of what it would have felt like to embody a British eighteenth-century female identity. Thus, students were able to more widely consider how novels of every period each create their own world. These narratives both represent and challenge the gender conventions of their moment in history and perhaps even confront students own gendered thinking today.

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