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Teaching the Long Eighteenth-Century Literature Survey as Public Humanities

In 2022 Spring, I threw out – with plenty of trepidation – my traditional syllabus of the E425 *Restoration and Eighteenth Century Literature* course at Colorado State University and tried something new. Spurred by department meetings about the ‘Crisis in the Humanities,’ the ghostly but persistent echo of the word “relatability” in the hallways, and the threat of declining enrollments in the courses, I threw out my old favorites from *MacFlecknoe* to *The School for Scandal*. My course had been like the rotating tap beer menu in our local (wonderful!) breweries – always offering a selection of lagers, porters, IPAs, and ales though the specific beers each month might be different. So I had the satiric poems, a play from the Restoration and one from the late eighteenth century, fiction by Behn and/or Haywood, a gothic novel, and something by Defoe / Richardson / Fielding et. al. though individual works offered might differ. Pivoting from a focus on the literary period, I turned towards the students and the conversations they might like to have in the classroom. I also wanted to offer writing assignments that offered more public-facing opportunities. A sample of the readings and assignments for either incorporating a Public Humanities assignment in an eighteenth-century course or restructuring an entire course are provided below.

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Using the idea of ‘strategic presentism’ and learning from colleagues who have been doing the important work of making eighteenth-century literature “relatable” to undergraduate students, I identified three topics that are already being debated in contemporary culture with the plan of using eighteenth-century writings along with their specific socio-historical context to engage in those discussions.[[1]](#endnote-1) It will surprise no one that two of the three units in my course were “Sex and Sexualities" and "Empire, Race, and Slavery." The third unit, that generated the richest and most thorny discussions in class – and that I found personally most eye-opening – was a unit on “Politics and Comedy.” Here is an overview of this unit. Steps 1-4 focus on readings and in-class activities; Steps 5 and 6 identify the written Public Humanities assignments associated with the materials we discussed in class

**Politics and Comedy Unit**

(Restoration – Exclusion Crisis and rise of party politics – “Glorious” Revolution):

Step 1. Foundation.

*Set up the political/historical context*

Foundational basics of politics in the period using in-class lectures with overheads and powerpoints. Students are quizzed on each topic via Canvas quizzes (short essay option) to confirm their understanding of the foundational historical/political contexts. Additional quiz preparation materials were provided such as photocopies of introductions or headnotes from eighteenth-century literary anthologies such as the Longman, Norton, or Broadview, encyclopedias, as well as more reliable non-scholarly sources. (For example, the BBC has a fine page on Titus Oates and the Exclusion Crisis with links to further resources <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b079rbcj> )

Topics/ Events around which the unit was structured:

1. Charles I regicide, Commonwealth era, Restoration of Charles II
2. The Exclusion Crisis and emergence of political parties.
3. The 1688 Revolution

Step 2. Literary Study

*In class reading/discussion of comic texts (dramatic and verse satires) engaging with the political situation.*

Topic (i) - Charles I regicide, Commonwealth era, Restoration of Charles II can be followed by Restoration comedies such *The Committee* by Robert Howard or even more canonical comedies such as Behn’s *The Rover.* Douglas Canfield’s “Introduction” from *Tricksters and Estates* offers an easily accessible overview of how Restoration comedies encode political ideology in their sexual plots.

Topic (ii) -- The Exclusion Crisis and emergence of political parties – is posited as a period when this sexual rhetoric ratchets up. Party politics and ‘trash talking’ the other side – as in the “cit-cuckolding” comedies such as Edward Ravenscroft’s *The London Cuckolds.* John Wilson’s *The Court Satire of the Restoration* (1976) offers a very useful collection of lewd lampoons created in the context of heightened Whig-Tory animosity and is conveniently available online via the Ohio State Press. As Rochester’s old poems such as “A Satyr on Charles II” and “Signor Dildo” were also re-printed during the Exclusion Crisis as attacks on the Tories, they can be included as examples of how reruns of old comedies can be imbued with new political potential.

Topic (iii) -- The 1688 Revolution – includes exploration of Whig comedy. *The Beau Defeated* by Mary Pix (1700) and Richard Steele’s *The Tender Husband* (1705) offer great illustrations of how attitudes to sex, marriage, and money in comedy can align with political party allegiance. The contrast between the marital relations in these post-1688 comedies and those of Restoration comedy offer a good opening to talk about current politics and sexual attitudes.

Step 3. Big Picture Thinking

*Study scholarly essays as well as popular “light” pieces on comedy - politics interactions.*

“Wit as a Political Weapon: Satirists and Censors” by Leonard Freedman was used to kickstart the conversation about how political comedy works in today’s world across the globe, including authoritarian regimes such as Russia or Syria (*Social Research: An International Quarterly*, Volume 79, Number 1, Spring 2012, pp. 87-112).

Scholarly essays about current examples of political comedy such as *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, and *SNL* ask students to think further about how laughter functions in the political realm, especially when party-identity is an important element of the show. Scholarship about these shows and the fast-changing political comedy pop-culture scene is growing apace; but an essay such as “Media Subservience and Satirical Subversiveness: *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, The Propaganda Model and the Paradox of Parody,” by James Anderson & Amie D. Kincaid ask students to interrogate what they are laughing at and why in these popular programs (*Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 30:3 (2013): 171-188).

The use of sexual humiliation as political mockery has returned with a vengeance in contemporary culture. The trope of the “Liberal cuck” or “snowflake” in Right-wing humor can be better understood within the context of Restoration and Exclusion-Crisis comedies because they are not entangled in our present, messy, emotional-political allegiances. Alison Rowley’s ‘Trump and Putin sittin’ in a tree’: material culture, slash and the pornographication of the 2016 US presidential election,” provided an excellent entry point into such discussions (*Porn Studies*, 4:4 (2017):381-405).

At the other end, non-scholarly pieces online such as “Modern Television and Political Ideology” <https://www.theprincetontory.com/modern-television-and-political-ideology/> and “Are You What You Watch? Tracking the Political Divide through TV Preferences” <https://www.mediaimpactproject.org/ideologyandentertainment.html> help them appreciate the implicitly political ethos of mainstream entertainment.

Step 4. Then and Now

*In-class group presentation on potential ways of thinking about the late seventeenth century and early twenty-first century together. After the presentation, the group leads class discussion for the whole period.*

This ended up being a very animated discussion on the nature of comedy, its potential for subversion, who you can/should laugh at (or not), punching up vs. punching down in satire, and if comic license should have limits. The group referenced eighteenth-century texts and contexts in their discussion questions as required by the assignment, but the discussion tended to veer more towards current scenarios of how TV, movies, memes, and cartoons use humor in political contexts. I was mostly an observer in this student-driven class, only occasionally nudging the discussion deeper into an issue.

The students had a robust and multi-faceted conversation. But my own ideal that comedy should not be censored no matter how distasteful its content were took a strong blow. To my surprise, almost all students seemed to subscribe to the opinion that some topics should be totally off-limits for comedy and mockery.

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In addition to the changed reading list, I also endeavored to change the kind of writing students did in the class. My aspirational goal was having students engage in rigorous study of eighteenth-century texts but then translate their learning into writing meant for a broader, non-specialist audience as an exercise in public humanities. To that end I have tried two assignments: (a) creating a blog on wordpress discussing texts we studied in class in the context of present and past debates; and (b) writing or improving a Wikipedia article on a text we studied in the course.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Step 5. Observations on Contemporary Culture by a Student of Eighteenth-Century Literature *Students write a blog essay on a text and issue of their choice.*

The assignment:

**Public Humanities Blog**

Public Humanities is the use of serious academic scholarship to engage in broad cultural conversations ongoing in communities big and small. (See the University of Columbia [Public Humanities Hub](https://publichumanities.ubc.ca/about/what-are-the-public-humanities/)  for a fine explanation).

In the first module of this course we studied specific instances of how comedy and politics intersected in the Restoration and early eighteenth century. We also discussed how some of those intersections either resonate with contemporary political humor or highlight the shifts in the relationship of power structures with comedy.

Using your study of eighteenth-century literature and culture, create a blog of about 750 words on the topic of "Politics and Comedy" reflecting on any one aspect political humor then and now.

Frame your blog as exemplifying the persistence of the "deep eighteenth century" -- Joseph Roach's term for how our present world remains shaped by ideas, approaches, structures that emerged in that period. To that end, ensure you make concrete reference to the literature we studied in class (and it's political context, of course) as you identify the resonances and familiar configurations traceable in the interaction between comedy and politics in our socio-historical moment.

Please add at least ONE IMAGE to your write-up.

Here is the address of the blog [thestrangelyfamiliar18thcentury.wordpress.com](https://thestrangelyfamiliar18thcentury.wordpress.com/)

[Links to an external site.](https://thestrangelyfamiliar18thcentury.wordpress.com/)

Log in and you should see a tab "write" to the top right. After you are done, (i) 'publish' the blog, and (ii) choose the 'category' you want the blog to show up in from the tab to the right.

 Given below are some examples of public humanities blogs. There are also sample contributions by students from previous years on the blog.

 Example :

<https://theyorkhistorian.com/2018/04/04/the-popish-plot-titus-oates-and-alternative-facts-in-seventeenth-century-britain/>

[Links to an external site.](https://theyorkhistorian.com/2018/04/04/the-popish-plot-titus-oates-and-alternative-facts-in-seventeenth-century-britain/)

**and**

[**https://www.18thcenturycommon.org/jane-austen-prince-of-wales-mr-trump/**](https://www.18thcenturycommon.org/jane-austen-prince-of-wales-mr-trump/)

***Sample of student work for this assignment:***

<https://thestrangelyfamiliar18thcentury.wordpress.com/2023/03/10/cuckoldry-as-satire-then-and-now/>

<https://thestrangelyfamiliar18thcentury.wordpress.com/2022/12/30/the-destabilization-of-politics-through-comedy/>

Step 6. Sharing your Literary Expertise with the World

*Students write an article for Wikipedia on a text they have studied in class.*

Wikipedia Education has an initiative wherein the research students do in class can be used to add to this public encyclopedia in order to make it more reliable, scholarly, and comprehensive. I find writing a Wikipedia article an attractive option for my students as it requires research, reading and synthesizing literary criticism, and presenting the texts they study in class to ‘the world’ in an accessible linguistic register. This can be a good addition to the usual literary criticism essay type of assignment or even a substitute, especially if the students are learning skills of argumentation, support, and literary analysis in other courses. Many of the works we consider important don’t have a Wikipedia page or articles that are mere stubs. For instance, *The Narrative of the Life of Charlotte Charke* or Robert Howard’s *The Committee* have no pages yet. The work our students do in class can help remedy such gaps. And this assignment can give them a sense of purpose or meaning for their study by a concrete contribution to the “real world.”

There is a significant learning curve involved for the instructor though, as I had to go through an instructor training and learn the process of editing and citing materials added. Creating a multi-step new assignment where students go through the various modules created by Wiki Edu to learn the basics of writing a public article effectively as well as ethically can be time consuming. But the accessibility and support of the Wiki Edu folk has been strong so far, which is eases the learning curve considerably.

(As mentioned in the note earlier, I’m currently running this assignment for another eighteenth-century course (E331 *Early Women Writers*) and plan to include it in E425 Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Literature next time I teach that)

The assignment:

**Writing a Wikipedia Article**

 You will share your study of eighteenth-century texts and secondary research for this class with the world by writing for Wikipedia. Students will work in groups to create and improve the Wikipedia pages for *Millenium Hall, A Narrative of the Life of Charlotte Charke, and A Victim of Prejudice.* Each student will be responsible for writing a specific section but the group must collaborate and work closely to share ideas, resources, and suggestions.

Scaffolding assignments and steps:

* Enrolling in the Class Page on Wikipedia

<https://dashboard.wikiedu.org/courses/Colorado_State_University/Early_Women_Writers_(Spring_2024)?enroll=sofgckxn>

* Wikipedia Tutorials
* Evaluating the Wiki page on *Pride and Prejudice -*Elements of a good Wikipedia page
* Comparative Evaluation of the Wiki page on Aphra Behn’s *The Fair Jilt* (What are the gaps? What are the potential improvements you can make?)
* Making a mini edit to Wikipedia – Students groups work in class to make small edits to *The Fair Jilt* page.
* Read at least two literary criticism essays on the text that you will be writing on. Synthesize ideas in each essay and write annotations about how they might be used for your Wikipedia article.
* Work as a group to write different sections of the Wikipedia article. Cite all material carefully.
* Present your page to your peers in a class presentation with reflections on the process and experience.

1. ENDNOTES

   Using the pedagogic approach of ‘strategic presentism’ is, of course, not without its problems or detractors. Travis Chi Wing Lau’s post on *18th Century Common* offers a good overview of the debate as well as reasons why it might be a good approach. Citing this particular source from the fine platform for Eighteenth-Century Public Humanities is itself apropos as well as strategic on my part. ( <https://www.18thcenturycommon.org/strategic/> ) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. I am currently using this second assignment in another course (*Early Women Writers*) that I shall include next time I teach my erstwhile “survey” course in eighteenth-century. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)