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ASECS INNOVATIVE COURSE DESIGN PRIZE: THE TRANS EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Introduction: context and goals

The Trans Eighteenth Century was taught in the Winter semester of 2018 in the Department of English at McGill University under the course number ENGL 568: Topics in Drama. The class met for three hours once per week. 500-level seminars at McGill can be taken by undergraduate students in the Honours programme and Masters students. In our Department, English students major in one of three streams: Literature, Cultural Studies, or Drama and Theatre. This seminar catered to Drama and Theatre students, although those from other streams also took the course. The Trans Eighteenth Century focused on several instances of cross-dressing on the stage. In addition to these examples from the eighteenth-century theatre, we also considered “real-life” transvestites in order to understand the context in which stage cross-dressing might have been received. The course as a whole aimed to consider cross-dressing as a form of gender expression, an opportunity for objectification and eroticisation, a type of deception, and a means of liberation. Throughout the course the students and I were aware of the dangers of imposing anachronistic ideas of trans-ness onto the historical past. However, the course offered an opportunity to interrogate, amongst other things, whether contemporary ideas of gender as spectrum rather than binary are in fact new.

Topics

The course followed a roughly chronological sequence. After an introductory class that covered some theoretical material on cross-dressing and contemporary understanding of transvestism and trans identity, we looked at perhaps the most famous example of stage cross-dressing, Shakespeare's boy actors playing women who dress as male characters. We focused on *Twelfth Night*, a play with which almost all of the students in the class were already familiar. This common ground allowed us to launch into our consideration of eighteenth-century cross-dressing in order to examine what changed in our period, particularly given the introduction of the actress in 1660. Week 3 looked at the use of cross-dressing in Restoration Shakespeare adaptation, examining Dryden and Davenant's *The Tempest*, which features an actress playing a new male character, Hippolito, and an actor cross-dressing to take on the role of Sycorax. Our discussion of Behn's *The Rover* in week 5 allowed us to incorporate a recent campus production of the play which many students had seen or indeed participated in. By comparing two Farquhar plays in week 6, we were able to consider the difference between the Restoration breeches part (when a female character dresses as a man as part of the plot of the play) and travesty role (when an actress takes on a male part typically played by an actor).

The next few weeks examined "real-life" cross-dressers including female pirates Anne Bonny and Mary Read, a female soldier (Hannah Snell), and Mary Hamilton, the "female husband". These case studies allowed us to analyse further how the period understood transvestism by considering its uses off stage. We then returned to the theatre to read Charlotte Charke's autobiography, which combines her on-stage and off-stage cross-dressing and proved to be a favourite with students for the rich variety of gender positions it explores. Week 11 broadened our scope by looking at male cross-dressing in

plays written by David Garrick and Samuel Foote. Our final class considered the fascinating case of the Chevalier d'Éon, whose gender identity was particularly fluid and fluctuating. Both d'Éon and Hannah Snell (the female soldier) appeared dressed as the opposite gender on stage to offer theatrical demonstrations of their skill in fencing and with rifles respectively, providing an important link between the real life and dramatic examples of cross-dressing covered in the course.

I frequently incorporated audio-visual sources in class. For example the Globe's all-male production of *Twelfth Night*, the trans history podcast *One From the Vaults*, and the dance piece *Eonnagata* by Robert Lepage, Sylvie Guillem, and Russell Maliphant. This latter work opened up a rich vein of contemporary creative responses to eighteenth-century cross-dressing that some students chose to research further. The inclusion of John Gay's *Polly* in our class on female pirates provided an example of an eighteenth-century creative response to real-life cross-dressers.

We spent one class session at the Rare Books and Special Collections division, where we explored McGill's rich holdings of material important to the topic of the course, Librarians also demonstrated relevant electronic resources. This session also enabled us to discuss some of the methodological issues involved in using primary sources and served as a springboard for the students' independent research. An additional special session on cross-dressing in the eighteenth-century novel featured an invited guest, my colleague Professor Peter Sabor, director of the Burney Centre at McGill. Students thus had the opportunity to learn from an expert in the field and to hear perspectives on the course topic other than my own. In the future, I hope to incorporate a further special session in which I would invite trans writer and artist Morgan M. Page, creator of the trans history

podcast *One From the Vaults*, to join us either in person or via Skype to discuss how we might research and present the lives of trans people from the past without falling into the trap of applying anachronistic concepts to our research.

Assignments

As a small seminar course, participation was weighted heavily. The first assignment asked students briefly to present an historical figure, primary text, or theoretical work not included on the syllabus to the class and then to facilitate a brief discussion. The aim of this was twofold. Firstly, students were encouraged to diversify the syllabus by introducing us to important people and texts relevant to the topic of eighteenth-century cross-dressing that we did not have time to cover during the semester. Secondly, students were encouraged to take ownership of the course topic by becoming the expert for about 30 minutes of a class, not just by presenting new material but also by developing students' thinking about it by running discussion. With a larger class I would have the students work in groups to complete a similar assignment.

In the syllabus for the course included here, I have proposed a new assignment that I intend to try in a future iteration of the course. I have taken inspiration from the trans history podcast *One From the Vaults*, an episode of which I assign in our class on the "female husband". The assignment would ask students to produce their own podcast as a preliminary step in their research for the final paper. They would need to consider how to present their findings to a more general audience. Students would also be asked to draw a link between their historical research and contemporary society. This is very well done in the podcast episode mentioned above in which Morgan M. Page discusses Mary Hamilton in

light of recent cases of “gender fraud” in a nuanced way that is not simply gimmicky. Podcasts would be posted on the course website in order that students in the class could offer feedback to their peers.

As a course aimed at Honours and Masters students, the final assignment was a substantial research paper on a topic of each student’s choosing. This was facilitated by our visit to Rare Books and Special Collections. Many students developed material they had presented for earlier assignments, which allowed them to respond to feedback from me and from the class. In addition, we conducted peer review of paper proposals in class in order to offer students suggestions as they developed their essays. Paper topics in Winter 2018 included female opera singers in cross-dressed roles, cross-dressing ballads in Newfoundland, and Mark Ravenhill’s 2001 play about eighteenth-century cross-dressing, *Mother Clap’s Molly House*.

Conclusion

The Trans Eighteenth Century could be adapted in a variety of ways. With additional (and more theoretical) readings it could be run as a graduate course. By changing the class pattern to two or three times per week it would work as a 400-level course. The focus could shift away from drama to include other literary forms such as poetry or other types of print culture, such as ballads. The particular focus and readings chosen here work well for my particular Department but could easily be modified to suit the pedagogical context and goals of a different institution. As the students in the course have shown through their assignments, there is a host of other examples of eighteenth-century cross-dressing to be drawn on so that the syllabus can be constantly refreshed.

ENGL 568 Topics in Drama: The Trans Eighteenth Century

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Description

This course will examine examples of cross-dressing in theatre and performance in the long eighteenth century. We will begin by exploring the change in gender dynamics that occurred on the English stage from 1660 onwards when actresses took over from boy actors. We will consider how Restoration Shakespeare adaptations made use of cross-dressing, as well as the effect of having actresses play Shakespeare's cross-dressed heroines for the first time (roles that were originally written for boy actors). We will consider actresses who made their name in breeches parts and travesty roles (such as Margaret "Peg" Woffington) and examples of men dressing as women in performance (in plays written by David Garrick and Samuel Foote). We will also discuss Charlotte Charke, a performer who cross-dressed inside and outside the theatre.

Furthermore, we will explore examples of real-life transvestites including female pirates Anne Bonny and Mary Read, Hannah Snell (a female soldier), the Chevalier d'Éon (who claimed to have infiltrated the court of the Empress of Russia by presenting as a woman), and Mary Hamilton (who allegedly duped another woman into marriage by posing as a man). These real-life examples will help us to understand the context in which stage transvestites might have been received. To further supplement our focus on drama, we will also consider cross-dressing in the novel by looking at selections from texts such as Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), John Cleland's *Fanny Hill* (1748), Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796), and Frances Burney's *The Wanderer* (1814).

Our discussion will of course be informed by theoretical work on cross-dressing by Marjorie Garber, Laurence Senelick, and others and by theorists of gender performativity such as Judith Butler. We will consider cross-dressing as a form of gender expression, an opportunity for objectification and eroticisation, a type of deception, and a means of liberation. Throughout the course we will interrogate whether contemporary ideas of gender as spectrum rather than binary are in fact new.

Format

Seminars based on group discussion (hence thorough preparation and consistent participation will be crucial).

Evaluation

- Detailed instructions for assignments will be supplied separately.
- All components of evaluation must be completed with a passing grade in order to pass the course.

Participation 20%

- thorough preparation for each class (detailed familiarity with all assigned readings)
- posting 2-3 discussion points/questions on MyCourses per week by **Sunday at midnight**
- contribution to class discussion (not just responding to questions but contributing to ongoing discussion)
- contribution to group work

Research presentation and discussion facilitation 10%

- presentation of research on an historical figure / a primary text / a theoretical work not on the syllabus
- facilitating class discussion on the topic of the presentation

Podcast 20%

- preparation of a 20-minute podcast on an issue in eighteenth-century trans history, (inspired by Morgan M. Page's podcast *One From the Vaults*)
- to be posted on MyCourses by week 11

Final paper 50%

- 4,000 words on a topic of your choice
- may develop the material presented in earlier assignments

COURSE SCHEDULE

Week 1 Introduction

Extracts from the following:

Bullough, Vern L. and Bonnie Bullough. *Cross-Dressing, Sex, and Gender*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993.

Garber, Marjorie. *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*. New York: Routledge, 1992.

Senelick, Laurence. *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag, and Theatre*. London: Routledge, 2000.

Teich, Nicholas. *Transgender 101: A Simple Guide to a Complex Issue*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.

Week 2 Shakespearean cross-dressing

Shakespeare, William. *Twelfth Night* (1602).

(1982): 602-22.

Please also listen to the One From the Vaults podcast "Female Husband!":

<https://soundcloud.com/onefromthevaultspodcast/oftv-13-female-husband>

Week 9 **Hannah Snell, the female soldier**

The Female Soldier; Or, The Surprising Life and Adventures of Hannah Snell (1750).

Lock, Georgina, and David Worrall. "Cross-Dressed Performance at the Theatrical Margins: Hannah Snell, the Manual Exercise, and the New Wells Spa Theater, 1750". *Huntington Library Quarterly* 77.1 (2014): 17-36.

Week 10 **Charlotte Charke: cross-dressing on and off stage**

A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Charlotte Charke (1755).

Straub, Kristina. "The Guilty Pleasures of Female Theatrical Cross-Dressing and the Autobiography of Charlotte Charke". In *Sexual Suspects: Eighteenth-Century Players and Sexual Ideology*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992. 127-50.

Week 11 **Male cross-dressing on stage**

Foote, Samuel. *The Minor* (1760).

Garrick, David. *The Male Coquette* (1757).

Ritchie, Leslie. "Garrick's *Male-Coquette* and Theatrical Masculinities". In *Refiguring the Coquette: Essays on Culture and Coquetry*. Ed. Shelley King and Yaël Schlick. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2008. 164-98.

Week 12 **Cross-dressing in the novel**

Extracts from the following:

Richardson, Samuel. *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740).

Cleland, John. *Fanny Hill; or, Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (1748-9).

Lewis, Matthew. *The Monk: A Romance* (1796).

Burney, Frances. *The Wanderer; or, Female Difficulties* (1814).

Craft-Fairchild, Catherine. "Cross-Dressing and the Novel: Women Warriors and Domestic Femininity". *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 10 (1998): 171-202.

Week 13 **The Chevalier d'Eon**

A dossier of primary source readings will be provided as well as the following articles:

Brogan Stephen. "A 'monster of metamorphosis': Reassessing the Chevalier / Chevalière d'Eon's Change of Gender". In Simon Burrows, et al, eds. *The Chevalier d'Eon and his Worlds*. London: Continuum 2010. 81-96

Kates, Gary. "The Transgendered World of the Chevalier/Chevalière d'Eon". *The Journal of Modern History* 67.3 (1995): 558-94.

In class we will watch the performance piece *Eonnagata*:

<http://lacaserne.net/index2.php/theatre/eonnagata/>

Policies

Academic integrity

McGill University values academic integrity. All students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures. Please consult the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see www.mcgill.ca/integrity for more information).

Language

Developing and demonstrating oral and written proficiency in the English language are integral components and objectives of this course.

Electronic devices in the classroom

Laptops and tablets may be used in the classroom to take notes or to conduct relevant research. **Please refrain from using them for other purposes** (e.g. social media) as this negatively impacts not only your learning experience but that of others around you and is highly distracting to your instructors. This is especially true in a small seminar class. Please do not use cell phones in class. For evidence that **laptop use in classrooms lowers GPA and taking notes by hand improves grades**, see the following:

<http://socialpsychonline.com/2017/04/laptop-in-class-psychology/>;

<http://socialpsychonline.com/2016/08/laptops-in-the-classroom/>.

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Students with disabilities

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Religious observances

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http://www.mcgill.ca/secretariat/files/secretariat/religious_holy_days_policy_on_accommodation_of.pdf.

In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University's or instructor's control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.