Teaching the Polyamorous (Long) Eighteenth Century

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THE ORGANIZING theme of my new experimental course on Polyamorous Literature is not likely to be familiar and thus calls for some preliminary explanation. Designed as a one-semester seminar for a mixed group of advanced undergraduate and graduate (MA, MFA, and PHD) students in English, the course provides a provisional framework of thematically coherent units while leaving open the possibilities for coming to terms with—defining, refining, revising—what this broad conceptualization might mean for the study of literature and literary and cultural history spanning from the eighteenth century through to the present day. The context for our primary readings seeks to draw attention both to literature and life, to cultural politics as well as aesthetics, both for the writers we encounter and for us as readers. Focusing on the eighteenth century while moving forward to more contemporary texts and contexts encourages students to make unexpected connections: to recognize familiar dynamics in an earlier historical period, one that initially seems quite foreign, and to discover surprising continuities as well, elements of the past that persist in the present.

My aim is to ensure that the term “polyamorous” is elastic enough to provide freedom to imagine new ways to read, while grounding it with some very specific material reading practices and existing critical frameworks. To begin, though, we might describe this body of texts briefly as a category of literary works (broadly defined, including film and televisual media) that attempt both to imagine and to accommodate multiple erotic and affective relations between individuals—polyamorous, rather than simply polygamous. At their most interesting, such works represent these non-monogamous bonds of attachment both in and between characters while exploring the broader implications of such forms of attachment on the world around them. We might call these connections “networked relations,” or simply non-binary, or—to follow Roland Barthes, whose interest in the art of cruising informs his innovative
semitic investigations—we might see them as embracing the mode of “the amorous plural” (298). This latter formulation seems particularly rich to me, in part because its pluralizing impetus does not delimit the number of agents who are engaged. “Amorous” is also a useful descriptor, suggesting both eros and affect simultaneously, while insisting on neither one explicitly or necessarily.

Before the exploration of various polymodalities, however, the class begins by challenging the normative assumptions about “the myth of monogamy,” as David P. Barash and Judith Eve Lipton style it, structuring our collective sense of what is “natural”—despite how fully this notion is belied by the natural world, including most representatives of the animal kingdom. For most of my undergraduate students, this cultural narrative offers a nearly inescapable, totalizing logic, shaped by the formidable regulatory systems of sex and gender (graduate students tend to be more aware of this narrative’s ruthless deconstruction by a diverse group of thinkers in gender studies and queer theory). For this reason, I found it useful to open the course with selections from a few foundational texts by Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick, and Gayle Rubin (as well as the Freud of the Three Essays, a queer theorist avant la lettre), which supplement readings in popular non-fiction such as Barash and Lipton’s The Myth of Monogamy, Christopher Ryan and Cacilda Jetha’s Sex at Dawn, Dossie Easton and Janet Hardy’s cult classic, The Ethical Slut, and Laura Kipnis’ Against Love. The pre-course stimulus assigned to set up these texts is the compulsively readable and intellectually rich work of psychologist and essayist Adam Phillips (Monogamy), who elevates the subject to “a kind of moral nexus, a keyhole through which we can spy on our preoccupations” as a culture—and in his estimation, “the only serious philosophical question” (“Preface”). This strong provocation to consider monogamy as symptomatic and normative rather than expressive of some foundational truth about “human nature” leads participants in the class to frame it as a productive intellectual problem—ultimately, one that haunts much of the literary landscape in a wide variety of national traditions and generic contexts.

Although this course moves forward into the twentieth and even twenty-first centuries, it takes the long eighteenth century as its foundation and its focus. One of the most compelling reasons for doing so is that the aesthetic and ideological investments of the discourse of Sensibility, which dominates the literary and cultural terrain of the period, established habits of attention to affective and erotic life in newly rich and arguably unprecedented ways, while simultaneously engaging in formal experimentation distinct to this historical moment. Both Samuel Richardson and Laurence Sterne are central figures in establishing a literary-philosophical grounding for the centrality of the emotions in social life (as well as their resistance to being governed or kept in order), and the expanded role for women as both writers and readers in the period contributed in crucial ways also, as much scholarship from the past two decades attests. The broader context for these literary works necessitates an awareness of historical and cultural dynamics that feed eighteenth-century Britain’s
perpetual debates surrounding models of intimacy and the proper geometrical configurations of sexual and romantic desire. Though it has seldom received explicit attention in scholarship on the period, in fact polyamory emerges in a diversity of forms—including libertinism, “divided affection,” polygamy, prostitution, first versus second loves, and Orientalist fantasies of the harem—as a central topic among British writers, artists, theologians, and moral philosophers. Exploring the scriptural and social tenets of sexuality and challenging the putative “natural” laws of attraction, many figures sought out alternatives to the model of the heteronormative couple. The new configurations they imagined range from the utopian realm of “free love”—in which relationships might be freely and openly reconfigured in limitless, consensual combinations according to the desires of the participants—to the dystopian spaces of non-consensual, non-negotiated, and even intentionally cruel machinations—what contemporary practitioners of polyamory call “poly-hell.”

Exploring a multitude of such configurations calls for a diverse set of readings, to be sure. The texts chosen for this class draw from British, French, German, and American traditions, ranging across all the major literary genres and including visual media as well. Primary texts that I have used previously or plan to incorporate in the future include: Molière’s Don Juan; Aphra Behn’s The Rover (Pt.1); Restoration-era poetry of Behn, Lord Rochester, and John Dryden; Daniel Defoe’s Moll Flanders and Roxana; Alexander Pope’s Rape of the Lock; Mary Davys’ Reform’d Coquet; Eliza Haywood’s Fantomina; selections from Richardson’s Sir Charles Grandison; John Cleland’s Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure (more commonly known as Fanny Hill); Sterne’s Sentimental Journey (with selections from the Bramine’s Journal and Sterne’s sermons); Choderlos de Laclos’ Les Liaisons Dangereuses; the Marquis de Sade’s Philosophy in the Boudoir; Vivant Denon’s “No Tomorrow”; Germaine de Staël’s Corinne, or Italy; Sydney Owenson’s The Wild Irish Girl; Jane Austen’s Mansfield Park and Emma; selections from Lord Byron’s Don Juan; P.B. Shelley’s essay “On Love” and “Epipsychidion”; J.W. Goethe’s Elective Affinities; and excerpts from the diaries of Anne Lister. There are many tempting less-canonical offerings one might consider adding to such a list, especially if the course were devoted exclusively to the long eighteenth century: Frances Sheridan’s Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph, Elizabeth Griffith’s The Delicate Distress, and Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire’s Emma as well as The Sylph, among numerous others. Later nineteenth-century texts such as Bram Stoker’s Dracula and two of G.B. Shaw’s “plays unpleasant,” The Philanderer and Mrs. Warren’s Profession, are worth consideration as well, and Sartre’s No Exit proved to be an interesting addition to an earlier version of the class.

These particular texts noted above were chosen with an eye to providing maximum diversity of genre and national representation without losing intellectual coherence for the course theme, and to selecting readings that are likely to be engaging for a more than usually diverse group of students (often including juniors, seniors, MA, MFA, and PHD students in the same class). The subsections of the
syllabus have been designed to introduce provisional but useful sub-categories of what I call *polymodalities*. These range from the more familiar categories of Adultery, Promiscuity, and Serial Monogamy, for example, to more specialized modalities such as Divided Affection (a key trope in the history of the eighteenth-century novel, and one which extends clearly into Austen’s fiction) as well as the more contemporary category of The Unicorn, a specific form of triangulation in which one person openly and consensually joins an existing couple (period specialists will note the parallel to the Italian practice of *cicisbeism*). While Goethe’s *Elective Affinities* can work well in this category, for instance, there are also numerous contemporary incarnations of such an arrangement in film: *Vicky Cristina Barcelona*, *A Home At the End of the World*, *Shortbus*, and the HBO series *True Blood* (all of which are much more interesting to work with than the film adaptation of Goethe’s novel).

Bigamy and Plural Marriage provide another section spanning from works as different as Moliere’s comic *Don Juan* and Stoker’s gothic *Dracula*, to contemporary dramatic renderings for stage and (small) screen such as Arthur Miller’s *The Ride Down Mt. Morgan* and the popular HBO series *Big Love*. As with the films noted above, both of the latter works significantly post-date the long eighteenth century, but they nonetheless provide illuminating contrasts to the cultural assumptions of earlier literary representations. *Big Love* provides a particularly good example, and not only because the roots of the Mormon religious tradition date to the 1820s (and are preserved, with current-day compromises, in the fundamentalist practice anatomized by the show). This series also provides a strong contrast to the comic representations of bigamy in earlier texts such as Moliere’s play (where it is the central conceit) and Stoker’s novel (where it is a significant trope) by bringing to life a tragi-comic vision of its own particular form of nonmonogamy—these characters prefer the term “plural marriage”—which is rich with complexity and contradiction. Poly relations in the series both court and resist stereotypes associated with the practice (it is all about sex; it provides an excuse for men to dominate women; it preys on the young, vulnerable, and sheltered by removing them from broader social support and compromising any true sense of consent) and thus they invite students to revisit the cultural assumptions about and internal logic at the heart of earlier literary incarnations. Miller’s play functions similarly in a different genre and with a focus on nonmonogamy that clearly is not consensual. *Mt. Morgan* potently mixes the comic and the tragic in ways that challenge the reader (or audience) to take seriously the nonnormative life crafted by the protagonist, who—even as he destroys the lives around him—offers a strong (and to many, ultimately compelling) philosophical defense of his compromised ethical choices.

The course also features more conventional pairings of earlier literature and contemporary film adaptation. Both *Dangerous Liaisons* and *Cruel Intentions* (its modern-day retooling) work remarkably well, with or without reading Laclos’ novel, depending on the time available. And the recent film versions of *Fanny Hill* and
Mansfield Park—with smart screenplays by Andrew Davies and Patricia Rozema, respectively—allow for the complex dynamics of different kinds of polyamorous representation to emerge more clearly in class discussion. Austen adaptations are often especially helpful in rendering more palpable the subtle dynamics between characters—a gaze, a touch, body language, the inflection of double-entendre—in ways that are still true to the spirit of her novels. Fanny Hill, a special case in numerous ways, also introduces the category of Prostitution, a particular, contractual form of promiscuity. I have found that it pairs especially well with Behn’s Rover, and might be profitably supplemented with readings from the prostitute narratives collected in Laura Rosenthal’s Nightwalkers volume. Clearly, Defoe’s Moll Flanders or Roxana would make for interesting choices here as well, especially when exploring the economics of poly-relations and the degree to which women of the long eighteenth century find themselves more enabled or disabled through attempts to claim some degree of autonomy for themselves by using their bodies as a means of exchange in the marketplace.

Given the nature of the course, students are warned in advance that they will be confronted with sensitive topics as well as some potentially offensive or objectionable material as part of our required reading (this warning applies mostly to Sade, but a few students have been uncomfortable with the explicit content in Fanny Hill and The L Word), and that they should be ready for the challenge of thinking in counter-intuitive and even counter-factual ways. To ensure an active interchange of ideas, participants must come prepared to contribute something specific to every class meeting: to post regular online responses to our readings as well as short responses to each other’s posts (weekly or bi-weekly, depending on the size of the class); to collaborate with at least one other student on multiple presentations; to write two medium-length essays informed by additional reading and research exploration of materials not assigned for class. The coursework culminates in individually crafted final projects, with my encouragement to incorporate a non-traditional creative component in keeping with the experimental spirit of the course, in which we try to wed our creative and critical energies consistently for fourteen weeks. Although the group presentations often provide excellent opportunities for creative engagement with the material—some have adapted scenes from novels (via theatrical, filmic, and even puppet-show performances), invented smart game-show formats for discussing major literary themes, or forced all of the class to weave a literal web of character interrelations using multiple colors of knitting thread—the final projects are allotted more time both for preparation and for sharing in class, so the latter tend to be the most well-developed, thoughtful, and engaging contributions to the seminar.

In past semesters, final projects have included: original songs and short films; a canvas painting that provided a visual schematic of the course material (with original symbols assigned to each major character, featured on a periodic table that drew them all into fitting “elemental” proximity); an illustrated children’s book inspired by our
core texts; and an enormous three-dimensional map of the solar system with each of
our texts and its major characters plotted in theoretically justified “orbital” relationship
to each other. Several of these mappings have been inspired by the infamous hookup
“chart” featured in the Showtime series The L Word, a nonnormative visual model for
alternative, woman-centered webs of relationality introduced on the first day of class.
This intertextual influence serves as another example of the ways that productive
connections can be established between contemporary works of popular culture and
earlier literary texts—themselves popular culture artifacts in many cases, of course—
allowing past and present to speak to each other. In a future incarnation of the course,
with time and institutional resources permitting, I hope to have students build on
such insights by collaborating on the construction of an online resource for the study
of polyamorous literature, one that lists useful texts of all sorts while also suggesting
various ways in which earlier and later texts might be juxtaposed for different
pedagogical purposes.

One of the fundamental questions that I hope to foreground in the course (and
which our literary and critical works should facilitate) is: what happens when a person
develops multiple attachments of love and desire, especially if they occur
simultaneously? Obvious practical complications are likely to follow, but the class aims
to explore what is not obvious. For example, if we do not take for granted that
marriage, monogamy, and what some critics call a “starvation economy” (belief that a
finite quantity of love is available for everyone, and you are in competition for your
share) are natural states of existence for human beings in all times and places, what
else might be out there for us to imagine? Is it possible to imagine an alternate
economy of abundance flourishing in its place? Or to create relationships that are
structured according to different expectations—of friendship, kinship, nonromantic
partnership, or a hybrid blend of any or all of these? How different might literature
(and life) look if we consider other, alternate configurations of people, of their bodies
and psyches, of their needs and desires, of their material activities in everyday
life? What would be the consequences of taking such imagined (and lived) relations
seriously, perhaps even as alternative models for society?

And to return to the terrain of literary history: what happens to traditional
narratives about “the rise of the novel” or “the anxiety of [poetic] influence” when we
explore the shifting dynamics of polyamorous relations within and between texts? Do
these critical narratives take on a different shape, or might we need to chart new
patterns altogether, if we attend to different dynamics of closure and openness, of
extra-conjugal, of “neighboring texts” (to adapt George Edmondson’s work in a
medieval context)? Finally, if we think of promiscuity in very broad terms as “a
synonym for creativity,” as Tim Dean imagines it in Unlimited Intimacy (5), then what
might be made newly visible by promiscuous readings that establish unexpectedly
fortuitous and productive connections? These are some of the big questions that are
intended to hover over our close-reading of the formal and stylistic elements, and the
themes and historical contexts, of our literary texts. From the different versions of Poly-Utopia imagined by Sterne and Shelley—taking the felicitous benefits of relationality as a given—to the Poly-Hell disturbingly rendered by Sade—undoing the conventional scripts of intimacy and forging newly disruptive ‘benefits’—the core eighteenth-century readings in this course seek to expand our sense of the central role of affect and eros in the life of culture. The consequences of both simultaneous and sequential multiplicity in the negotiation of those bonds, and the pressures they bring to bear on literary form as well as social arrangements, promise to teach us all something new about the as-yet-unimagined possibilities opened up by polyamorous reading practices both inside and outside of the classroom.

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NOTES

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WORKS CITED


