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Teaching from the margins: approaching the feminine register through contemporary fantasy

Abstract:

Fantasy fiction, in all its diverse genres, is hugely popular; however, it is at the margins of the literary academy. Deemed as insufficiently literary, few fantasy courses are offered, and those that are tend to focus either on the Arthurian tradition or perhaps on the Tolkien circle: in other words, on masculine themes. Fantasy fiction by women is clearly beyond the pale. Feminism has also receded to the margins, although for different reasons. Once a significant force in the literary academy, now courses which offer feminist theoretical approaches to the study of literary texts are few and far between. Apparently, feminism is no longer attractive to students. So, while feminism is not offered because it is no longer deemed sufficiently popular, fantasy fiction is not offered because it is too popular.

This paper is positioned at the margins, twice. It reports on the introduction of a new undergraduate course which considers contemporary fantasy by women. Further, this course is an unashamedly feminist project introducing feminist theory as a key component. It actually uses the word 'feminism' in the course description (against the advice of some well-meaning colleagues who thought this would 'scare students off'). The introduction of this course was based on my own perception that many students are in fact interested in feminist issues, but have no language with which to discuss these issues. Many have indeed been 'scared off' feminism by perceptions of radicalism. This paper, then, discusses how we can make the abstract theorisations of feminism (or any other abstraction for that matter) relevant to students by approaching it through a literature which speaks to them.

The irony, of course, is that the literary academy, and the humanities generally, are themselves marginalised. It is this marginalisation that induces them to consider possibilities which otherwise would go against the grain, like my new course. So, this paper suggests, finally, that while marginality has difficulties, it can be productive, even potentially liberating. It is, after all, at the margin that we find the cutting edge.

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Introduction

One day, a couple of years ago, I was having coffee with a friend¹ and we were discussing a fantasy course we were teaching on at the time. We both deplored the tediousness and predictability of the text list. The course was popular enough; it had Tolkien and Rowling, and that pleased the students. There was nothing wrong with any text in particular, it was rather the lack of variety and scope in the collection, the repetitiveness of heroic narratives and overt religious didacticism. We then drew up, ‘on the back of a napkin’ as they say, a list of texts that we would put on a fantasy course of our own. Of course all the texts would have a feminist slant, so already the course would be significantly different from the existing one, but what would we do about theory? The general view in the department was that ‘feminism is dead’, and ‘young women are not interested.’ I only half believed it. I had detected considerable latent feminism in some of my students, despite their claims of indifference. So I proposed to take a risk, to offer a course with a feminist textlist and a generous serving of feminist theory. This year an advanced level course called *Fantastical Women* had its first outing.

Fantastical Women is a project from the margins. The literary texts chosen for the course, with the exception of the first two, are considered marginal within literary studies. The feminist theory, as noted above, is clearly so. Ironically it is the third marginalisation, that of literary studies itself within the twenty-first century business that is the academy, that opened a space of possibility for this course.

This paper is presented in three parts. The first outlines some of the conditions of the marginalisation of feminism, of fantasy literature and literary studies in general. The second gives a feminist rationale for the choice of materials, and the third discusses the feminist pedagogy which was attempted in the implementation of the course.

The marginalisation of feminism, fantasy literature, and literary studies in general

Feminism has indeed become marginalised in society at large. Theoretical feminism is often misunderstood and misrepresented in popular debate, and popular feminism seems to cultivate its difference from more academic forms, constructing a false dichotomy between the artificial categories of ‘second’ and ‘third’ waves (Snyder, 2008; Gillis & Munford, 2004).

A key element in popular feminism, often referred to as third-wave feminism, is individualism (Snyder, 2008; Gillis & Munford, 2004). Popular feminism foregrounds personal narratives, multiple perspectives and voices, and celebrates action and choice. Snyder notes that these narratives tend to the confessional, and there is a marked resistance to synthesis and theorisation. Most significantly absent is an examination of the construction of desire. Snyder proposes that these popular forms present an ‘apolitical manifestation of the expressive individualism that characterises our predominantly liberal culture’ (Snyder, 191). The claims of non-judgmental inclusiveness, however, only go so far. Snyder finds that this movement is extremely critical of more theoretical feminisms, setting itself up as the ‘third wave’ in

opposition to the second. It defines itself as ‘fun, feminine, and sex-positive’, while dismissing the second wave as ‘antimale, antisex, antifemininity, and antifun’ (179). A number of critics have noted that this popular form of critique seems to be turned more against second-wave feminism than against patriarchy (Snyder; David & Clegg, 2008; McRobbie, 2009). Indeed, in her analysis of ‘important’ third-wave texts, McRobbie finds little evidence that the third wave is feminism at all (126-127). It is no wonder that young women are ‘scared off’ the idea of feminism, particularly theoretical or critical feminism, by perceptions of radicalism.

Rather than being a hotbed of radicalism, however, some argue that within the academy feminist politics have become institutionalised. While the emergence of women’s and gender studies departments has given disciplinary legitimacy to the field, Weigman argues that the cost of legitimation has been the transformation of marginal feminist activists into academics who must satisfy broader institutional demands (Wiegman, 2002). Further, the establishment of separate departments of women’s and gender studies has heralded for some a convenient relegation that has allowed the depoliticisation of their own departments. For example, when I was an undergraduate, I remember taking courses called ‘Feminist Poetics’, ‘Feminism and Antifeminism in the Middle Ages’, ‘Medieval Women’s Writing’ and so on. However, for the last 8 years at least in my own department, one of the largest English Departments in Australia, the only course that explicitly mentions women in the title or course description, let alone feminism, is *Fantastical Women*. It seems that feminism still struggles against marginalisation and misrepresentation, both without and within the academy.

Feminism is not alone in being marginalised in the literary academy. Fantasy literature also has questionable status, facing significant challenges to its legitimacy and being cast as a ‘low-culture’ form. Some genres, science fiction for example, have certainly gained critical legitimacy over the last number of years, but this legitimacy has not necessarily translated through to undergraduate courses devoted to these topics. Further, Mendlesohn claims that women science fiction writers and critics remain under-represented in the literature. For example, in volumes which survey the field, women writers are often relegated to single chapters on ‘feminism’ even though 35% of sf writers are now women (Mendlesohn, 2009: 23). It would seem that fantasy or science fiction by women or having feminist themes is necessarily marginalised twice over.

It was, somewhat paradoxically, a third step of marginalisation which brought my project of *Fantastical Women* to centre stage as a real possibility. The marginalisation of feminism and fantasy, through the operation of an ethos which privileges rationality, empiricism and positivism, is the same ideological trajectory which has alienated literary studies. Since the Dawkins ‘white paper’ of 1988 the university sector in Australia has expanded under the banner of such catch-phrases as ‘the clever country’, but has at the same time become hostage to a competitive funding regime based on an empirical ‘knowledge-based’ model which measures research on its capacity to ‘value-add’ (Morris, 2005: 114). Such a model of measurable effect fundamentally disadvantages the humanities. Fludernik posits that the notion of

measurable effect necessarily introduces a 'sliding scale' from the 'hard and applied' sciences, through the social sciences, and finally to what she calls the 'interpretative' sciences (history, philosophy, literature). If government funding follows measurable effect, it necessarily flows away from the humanities to the hard and applied sciences (Fludernik, 2005: 64). Private and corporate sponsorship also follows measurable effect, further marginalising the humanities.

In the face of these present and future challenges to its very existence, one of the ways in which English as a discipline justifies itself, at least at my university, is the continuing large undergraduate enrolments, and the ever increasing postgraduate enrolments. The imperative to maintain high enrolments, as a significant *raison d'être* in our scant armory, is therefore high. As a result, humanities departments have become increasingly sensitive to offering the 'courses of choice' within the faculty. This has led to more considered reflection not only on what students need, but on what students want. Students want something interesting and fun, and fantasy delivers. Surprisingly, it soon became evident that many students would also tolerate feminism.

Fantastical Women: Approaching the feminine register through contemporary fantasy and the fantastic

As noted above, *Fantastical Women* has an unashamedly feminist agenda. Much against the advice of well-meaning colleagues, the word 'feminism' was used in the course description. I did not want to gain student enrolments under false pretences, and it did not seem to put them off. The enrolment in the course was the highest of any advanced unit offered this semester. The design of the course is based upon the theorisation of Luce Irigaray, who argues that the logic of language is not arbitrary, nor natural, but specifically ideologically driven. Irigaray argues that language is not gender neutral; that the apparently gender neutral universal subject is in fact masculine. This sleight of hand is effected by an 'indifference' to gender and sexuality, an indifference which privileges the masculine: '*sexual indifference ... underlies the truth of any science, the logic of every discourse*' (Irigaray, 1985: 69). A discourse which is gendered masculine but unable to recognise itself as such necessarily negates the possibility for alternative gendered discourses to emerge. Similarly, the default subject position is 'masculine', but through imagining itself as gender neutral it thereby precludes the possibility that other subject positions might achieve an equivalent status. The masculine subject thus positions itself as the universal while all other speaking positions, if indeed they can exist at all, must necessarily be particular.

This course seeks to examine literature that engages differently with discursive constructions of history, society and the self. It examines writings by women, writings that challenge representations of masculine discourse by presenting traditional content in new forms with new voices, by reworking myths of origin, legends, fairy tales, and patriarchal culture, remaking them into something other than what they were. To do this simply, without any theoretical context, would be, in Irigaray's view, to remain within the dominant discourse, that of a hegemonic masculine imaginary. In order to

disrupt this process, an explicit theoretical approach is necessary. The course seeks to give students a vocabulary to speak about the dominance and subversion of discourse, and also to introduce the possibility of going beyond, of perhaps thinking differently from the ways they thought before. In this way the course seeks to move towards another space, what Irigaray calls an 'elsewhere' beyond masculine discourse where a potential 'feminine register' might be glimpsed. In order to do this the course introduces literary and feminist theoretical readings, each chosen for its particular relevance to a particular literary text.

The course is organised around three main topics: 'Rewriting the Past', 'Fairy Tales' and 'Social Science Fiction'. The introductory week is theory based, offering foundational and definitional readings, both on fantasy and the fantastic (including Freud, Todorov and Jackson, among others), and on the gendering of discourse (Freud and Irigaray's critique of his work). The concluding week offers one final primary text which was chosen to draw together the three main threads of the course.

The first topic, 'Rewriting the Past', considers texts which rework myth and literary history. One of the texts considered is *The Penelopiad* by Margaret Atwood, which rewrites Homer's *Odyssey* giving voices to Penelope and the twelve maids (the maids who were summarily executed by Telemachus and Odysseus). This is read alongside Adriana Cavarero's 'The Desire for One's Story'. Problematizing the authenticity of autobiography through a reading of desire, Cavarero uses Homer as her exemplar (Cavarero, 2000). As a result, students must negotiate a twofold challenge to Homer's myth of literary origin, reaching for a potential for a feminine register within the intermingling but contradictory tales of Penelope and the maids.

The second main topic, 'Fairy Tales', considers contemporary versions of Bluebeard and Little Red Riding Hood alongside the seventeenth-century versions of Charles Perrault (in translation). The more traditional fairy tales offer an opportunity to explore how normative narratives can become institutionalised, embedded and privileged within national literatures (Zipes, 1994). Late twentieth-century reworkings of the fairy tales, particularly those of Angela Carter, enable a consideration of the potential of expressive feminine sexuality, a notion enthusiastically embraced by students. Helene Cixous' 'Castration and Decapitation' is productively read alongside such (often uncritical) enthusiasm. Cixous explicates how Carter's expressive sexuality can be problematised, for example, when seduction is the only survival mechanism left open to women (Cixous, 1981). In this way students are encouraged to negotiate with texts critically, to discover alternative readings, readings that might go against the grain of their initial preferences.

'Social science fiction', the third main topic, is not science fiction in the traditional sense of 'space opera'. Rather than a focus on high-tech battles in space, social science fiction is concerned with sociological issues, problematising the condition of women in society, whether that society is in the here and now, or in another place and time. As such, these texts do not revisit earlier literary works, rather they look to alternative presents and possible futures. The feminist theory in this topic also takes a different tack. Thus far the feminist theories offered have been feminisms of difference, working around and through the historical problem of social inequality

alongside theoretical and material configurations of difference. In this topic two of the three theory pieces look forward, towards a de-gendered future of dismantled boundaries, destabilising particularly the privileged categories of 'man' and 'human'.

For example, in 'One is not Born a Woman' Monique Wittig argues that, in order to release women from the definitional space as 'other', the category of man must be broken down (discursively, not biologically). Until then, the only possible mode of existence for women that does not implicate them within a masculine economy is lesbian separatism (Wittig, 1992). This is read alongside Joanna Russ' *The Female Man* which presents four parallel worlds. In one of these worlds the men have been annihilated by a virus some hundreds of years previously. It is a lesbian separatist utopia of sorts. Students found this text very challenging on a number of levels. The cross-over narratives are destabilising, endlessly undercutting narrative expectations, and of course the logistics of generations of a women-only world are problematic. Reading *The Female Man* alongside Wittig encouraged students to problematise the apparent biological annihilation of man in Russ' novel as an operation of discourse, thus further destabilising the primacy of literary verisimilitude and thereby facilitating a more critical approach.

By this time in the course the students have become quite adept at working the theory to enable them to engage more fully with literary texts, texts that they might otherwise find almost impenetrable. They have learnt how to use the theory to discover alternative, even multiple, interpretative avenues. Many students seemed to expect that feminist theory would pre-determine meaning, and were somewhat surprised to find that closure was not required or even expected.

Teaching *Fantastical Women* through a feminist pedagogy

In terms of teaching practice, my intention in this course was to invoke a teaching strategy used by a number of staff members in my department in advanced and honours courses. The model is that classes, for all intents and purposes, are run by a student panel in which every student participates throughout the semester. The class begins with a group presentation by the panel, with each person presenting for approximately 5 minutes. Handouts, which have been prepared in advance by the panel, are then circulated. Finally, the class is open to a full class plenary chaired by the panel. Additionally, students are offered some flexibility in their assessable tasks. This strategy is based upon a pedagogy of student-centred learning, which accords with the feminist practices of democratising the classroom space and minimising the power relationship amongst students, and between teacher and student (Freire, 2000; Crabree & Sapp, 2003).

I have found it necessary to modify this approach in two ways. First, I have taken into consideration the view that students do not necessarily interpret power in the same way that teachers do, and that many are not interested in the apparent 'gift' of empowerment. Foertsch claims that the democratising model is necessarily a double-edged sword. Consider, for example, the circular seating arrangement favoured for seminars as inclusive and democratic. This functions equally well as a 'highly

effective panopticon', it 'simultaneously moves everyone into an easily surveyed and policed front row' (Foertsch, 2000: 121). As Foertsch reflects: 'empowering students (remembering Foucault) always automatically empowers *me*' (121). As teachers we want to encourage student contribution, but some students experience this as coercion, and would prefer to 'hide'.

Getting the silent student to speak is a challenge I have encountered over a number of years teaching postgraduate courses in professional communication. These classes have a high level of international enrolment, and in some cases up to 80% of the group has English as a second language. Their silence is not usually a question of competence, or even confidence, but rather it is mostly to do with legitimacy. It seems that many students, especially young women, have been socialised into this position, according with bell hooks' view that many students have been 'trained to view themselves as not the ones in authority, not the ones with legitimacy' (hooks, 1994: 144). My usual strategy to overcome this problem is to provide ample time for students to try out their ideas in small groups. Small group discussion is almost invariably successful. In these classes I do not attempt a plenary, rather I ask every group to 'report' back to the class, which they do with surprising confidence. The problem is not that they have nothing to say, but they need an authorised space from which to say it. My first modification to the departmental model for *Fantastical Women* was, therefore, the addition of a 20 minute window for small group discussion immediately after the presentations with the hope of lubricating the plenary.

A second modification made to the departmental model was in response to the reluctance by students to engage with theory in the plenary. In the second week, the presentations by the panel went well, their handout questions were circulated, and group discussion proceeded noisily. During the plenary, however, while students were happy to wax lyrical on the literary text there was an evident reluctance to engage with the theory, despite the attempts of the panel. Clearly, if I wanted them to engage with the theory, I would have to provide them with more support. Thus the second modification came into force. In the first half hour of the next class I went through the theoretical reading step by step, making connections internally and also with previous theoretical readings. No reference was made to the literary reading at all. The class then resumed as originally planned, with the panel giving their presentations, the class discussing in groups, and then the plenary. After this modification, students seemed more prepared to discuss the theory. This may have been because I had clarified the reading for them, or it may have been my informal register, a deliberate strategy to put the theory into a conversational space, a dialogic space, rather than the more monologic, formal mode many student presenters used. In other words, I was legitimising a certain level of openness and uncertainty. As a result, students did seem more prepared to take chances, with, for example: 'I might have this completely wrong, but ...', and others occasionally come out of the woodwork with 'this could easily be aligned with Hegel's notion of ...'. Mostly these contributions directly engage with the reading at hand, making insightful links to the literary text.

It seems, then, that my initial expectations of the class were a little too high. Foertsch proposes that our ideal of classroom dynamics is probably quite the opposite of that of

the majority of students. In other words, we risk projecting onto the class our ideal of a discussion between fully-engaged, well-read and like-minded peers, whereas what most students want is to get through the day with the minimum of fuss (Foertsch, 2000: 123). This disparity in expectations is perhaps evidenced, at least in part, by the negative student evaluations that haunt practitioners of feminist pedagogy (Carillo, 2007; Crabtree and Sapp, 2003). Rather than judging students who give these negative evaluations as ‘not very mature’ (Safarik, 2002: 1740), it might be more appropriate to recognise that most of the students in the class are not as we were. Rather, they are just like most students are and always were. We were the ones who went on, and if we look at our classes today, we can see how few of us there are (Foertsch, 2000: 123).

My class is now a mixture of explication, reassurance and legitimation. My goal is to provide both a safe place for students to try out their ideas, and also to extend them by handing over to them, for even a short time, the leadership of the class. My authority is only partially relinquished, and yet I hope students find the class enabling without being coercive. As such it is, at best, a modified version of a feminist pedagogy.

Conclusion

Fantastical Women is a feminist project. It seeks to introduce students to feminist theory through something they know, or think they do. There is no doubt that the fantasy element was a drawcard, but it too had its own pedagogical imperatives. This feminist fantasy project used its marginal status to carve out an experimental space, to see if students could engage in a theory many of them apparently resist, and to continue to rework feminist teaching strategies. So, while it can be alienating operating from the margins, it also is a space of creative potential that is liberating. In this small way my own feminism moves from theory into the real world.

Endnotes

1. Special thanks to Elizabeth Wulff.

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