

## Tabitha Kenlon on Teaching Hannah Cowley in Dubai

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WSG member [Tabitha Kenlon](#), Assistant Professor of English at the American University in Dubai, reflects on a recent teaching experience...

In an attempt to integrate my personal [research](#) into my Introduction to Literature course, I assigned my students selections from Mary Wollstonecraft's *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* and Dr John Gregory's *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters*, as well as Hannah Cowley's play *A Bold Stroke for a Husband* in its entirety.

Our initial discussion of the play focused primarily on clarifying the plot and some eighteenth-century terminology (we had a debate on the true meaning of "making love"). By Act 2, though, the battle lines were being drawn. Most of the male students didn't understand how Victoria's male disguise could possibly be convincing and thought her scheme was "psychopathic," while most of the women admired her decision to take action to get back her husband and the family fortune.

All the students seemed to recognize quickly the rules guiding eighteenth-century conduct. They knew that Olivia was supposed to obey her father when he told her who to marry. The women were particularly amused by her behaviour to the suitor Don Vincentio, when she followed her father's guidelines so exactly that she parroted back some of his suggested topics of conversation word for word.

But many of the discussions split on gender lines. When a male student joked about Olivia's passion for Don Julio, which was based on just a glimpse of him at a party, a young woman pointed out that the men in the play judge the women by their physical appearance and asked why the women couldn't do that too. By Act 3, the same male student was willing to concede that the male characters only seemed interested in "physical stuff" with women.

I was curious about the reception the play would receive among students living in a predominantly Muslim society, at a school in which some female students have been rumoured to fail classes so they can stay longer in Dubai, a comparatively relaxed environment. One of my students last semester told me that her husband made fun of her when he caught her reading or doing homework.

Unsurprisingly, the students never made explicit links between the material and their own lives. Some of them made passing comments that even in the twenty-first century marriages were sometimes arranged and took place when women were young. Most of these observations came from female students. When students consulted me about their essays analysing the play, they often did make more direct connections. One young woman explained that she wanted to write about how parents who arranged marriages for their children only had their best interests in

mind and that children should trust their parents since they had more knowledge and experience. I asked her how she would feel if her parents arranged a marriage for her. She hesitated and then said she wouldn't mind, but her parents wouldn't do that – hers, she said, was not a “typical” Muslim family.

I am now toying with the idea of staging the play here, set in twenty-first century Dubai. One of my students (for fun!) created a poster and explained how the veiled women's eyes revealed their characters. The idea of women in veils is not new to these students; that was one plot device they accepted with ease, and they seemed intrigued that their culture did not have a monopoly on the concept.

Overall, it was a good experience, and I will certainly assign the play again in the coming semester. Students said the play is still relevant today because, as they put it, society doesn't really change – we still deal with sex, cheating, arranged marriages, social networks, gossip, and responsibility.