WSG Interview: Tabitha Kenlon interviewed by Felicity Roberts

This month WSG is posting the first of an occasional series, interviewing group members about their research, influences, writing tips, and anything else of interest that comes to mind while we’re at it.

In recent years, for students, independent scholars and career academics alike, blogging and social media have become an important way of working up ideas and making friendships. There are great blogs out there exploring the history of women, gender and sexuality, medicine, work, science and archaeology. But this online work is always inspired by, and flourishes with, older forms of generosity such as societies, reading groups and conversations. With these interviews we hope both to trace our shared genealogy and build new forms of community online.

Hi Tabitha, tell me a bit about yourself.

Hello! I’m currently at the American University in Dubai where I’m an Assistant Professor of English (my contract ends in June, though, so….). When I’m not grading student essays or advising the theatre club, I research eighteenth-century English novels, theatre and conduct manuals, with particular attention to women writers and characters.

What’s your current research?

I have two projects. My larger project is a book examining the history of conduct manuals from the beginning to the present. I’ll be focusing on volumes advising women, trying to trace the evolution of the female ideal and evaluate to what extent it has changed over the centuries. I’m also a member of the Women Writers Project’s Intertextual Networks collaboration, and my initial contribution on Shakespeare and Hannah Cowley went up in November.
Are there particular ways in which these two projects link up? Can you tell me a bit more why Hannah Cowley especially?

Excellent question! Both of these projects are continuations of work I started in my dissertation, which focused on eighteenth-century British plays, novels, conduct manuals and the performance of womanhood, how these media participated in a conversation about, and helped shape, appropriate female behaviour. I didn’t have space to cover all the wonderful women playwrights of the eighteenth century, so I chose Hannah Cowley because her comic heroines are so clever and conniving, but they aren’t “bad women”; whenever they flouted convention, such as dressing as a man and seducing a woman, it was for a good reason, like retrieving the wandering husband and mislaid fortune (perhaps another book will reunite these strands.).

Tell me about a formative influence on your work; it could be a person, a book, an exhibition, or a piece of advice.

I can think of quite a few, but I’ll try to limit myself. First would be Dr Priscilla Holmes, who helped me discover feminism in a sociology class at the University of Guam. Another significant moment was seeing Tom Stoppard’s The Real Thing on Broadway years ago. Five minutes in, I caught myself thinking, “I can’t wait to read this.” That made me consider the different ways plays function, as words both static and living; Of course my PhD dissertation committee was important. Professor Elizabeth Maddock Dillon introduced me to performance studies, and Professor Nicole Aljoe gave me a comprehensive exam on eighteenth-century novels and theatre that I actually enjoyed taking. I figured if I had fun taking a test, then that must be the thing I should study.

What’s your own personal recipe for researching or writing successfully?

I’m still figuring this out! Since I’ve been teaching four classes a semester and holding ten office hours a week, making time for my own research has been challenging. What I have learned is to put myself first. It might sound selfish, but if I say I’ll do my stuff after I’ve graded these quizzes, responded to these emails, prepped for these classes...there will always be one more thing to do and I’ll never get to my own projects. But if the first thing I do, even if only for an hour or two, is my research or my writing, it gets done and I still have time for all those other things (which tend to take less brain power and energy anyway). I didn’t grade a quiz for six weeks while I was working on my book proposal; the students didn’t even notice. And I got the book deal. Lesson learned.

A book deal! Can you say who it is with?

Yes, with Anthem Press, and the publishing date is probably late 2018/early 2019.
Are there any support networks you’ve found useful?

My current institution is fairly small so we are generally encouraging of each other, and a colleague and I developed a lecture series to allow professors to share their research. Maintaining the contacts I developed during my doctoral studies has been the best way to exchange ideas with other specialists. I’ve been involved with WSG since 2013, when I was staying at Chawton House and Marion Durnin, one of my “fellow fellows,” as we called ourselves, told me to take the train to London and attend a workshop. I did so, I met Angela Escott and other lovely people, and two years later I was part of the WSG panel at the British Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies conference. Even though it can be tricky from far away, I try to be involved with WSG and BSECS.

Of course I stay in touch with friends I made at Northeastern University, where I studied for the PhD. Sarah Connell, an office-mate and “writing buddy,” is the assistant director of the Women Writers Project; she told me about the Intertextual Networks collaboration, and through that I’ve chatted with other people working on interesting things. In the absence of substantial resources where I am geographically, I’ve been trying to develop a support network using technology. It’s important, with the difficult job market, to have encouragement both professionally and personally. Very few of my friends have the traditional academic career our advisors did, so just knowing how other people are navigating unfamiliar career paths and how scholarship shapes (or doesn’t) their jobs, is helpful and sometimes inspiring.

Finally, what’s the last thing you read or saw – it doesn’t have to be work-related?

I’ve just come back from a short holiday, and I always listen to a new book on the plane. This time it was Agatha Christie’s Murder on the Orient Express. I made a lot of accurate guesses, but I was still holding my breath the last half-hour. Hard not to love a good murder mystery. Of course, like a good academic, now I want to read a biography of Christie and a history of the Orient Express...