

Anglo Authors in the Early Republic and Trans-Atlantic Criticism Today Contexts for Reading: Transatlantic Rowson and *Charlotte Temple*



I. Overview and general prompts

In their insightful analysis of Susanna Rowson’s authorial career as a transatlantic enterprise, Melissa Homestead and Camryn Hansen announce their methodological approach early on, partly by saying what they will *not* do: “Although we leave the work of textual analysis across the range of Rowson’s literary works to other scholars, we take up the work of recovering America’s [sic] first best-selling novel as part of a transatlantic career that Rowson herself constructed and made visible” (620). In other words, they set close reading of Rowson’s broad array of publications aside so as to focus on a more biographical and history-of-the-book approach, arguing for her literary career as self-consciously transatlantic. Ever-ambitious for our class, we’ll try to do both: closely examine the internal features at least one specific primary text by Rowson (*Charlotte Temple*, her best-selling work in the US) and explore the array of ways that we can consider the writer’s authorial practice, when situated in historical context, as a prime example of the value of transatlantic studies.

Your first important decision will be this: to read the novel itself first, or to engage with the materials in the Norton edition that provide context. [The order we use below—first referencing the contextual readings and then the novel, doesn’t mean you must follow that sequence.] Note how the edition itself signals on its title page that it provides three bodies of material: “authoritative text, contexts,” and “criticism.” Edited by Marion Rust, a well-regarded Americanist scholar who focuses on the early part of the nineteenth century, this edition’s Introduction makes notable moves to position Rowson in a transatlantic framework (see, for instance, xvii) but also reflects in some ways a continuing impetus to link the author’s multi-faceted career to American identity formation in the post-colonial time of the early Republic. One thing to watch for as you work with the edition, in other words, is how (despite nods to transatlanticism) it often marks itself as an Americanist piece of scholarly editing. One aspect of our work this week, then, will be to consider how varying frameworks for editing and presenting primary material affect the way we interpret them—through varying lenses producing different understandings. **With this goal in mind, take a quick “tour” of the Table of Contents to see which voices are represented from the scholarly community, and which topics.**

This Norton offers many rich contexts indeed, so in choosing readings beyond the novel, we tried to emphasize resources that would support our efforts to define and apply a transatlantic approach—in this case both by celebrating strategies already in use and by considering omissions or “skewed” stances that might impede a transnational method.

II. The “packaging” of Charlotte Temple (and Rowson) in the Norton edition and beyond

A. Additional primary text readings from the Norton edition:

- 1) Susanna Rowson, “Preface to *Trials of the Human Heart*,” 356-359.

[You may also want to skim page 364, one section from the Preface to *Rebecca*, as it includes another reflection from Rowson on her efforts to balance her British and American identities.]

As noted above, Rowson put a good deal of rhetorical skill to work in her prefaces. You’ll want to read this one in part for the autobiographical context she presents—how she envisions herself as a transatlantic figure now affiliating with US identity, primarily—and why she adopts that stance. At the same time, consider how readers of her day might have responded to the self-characterizations presented across the preface, such as her move, early on, to describe herself as “a person of sensibility.”

- 2) Benjamin Rush, excerpt from *Thoughts upon Female Education*, 125-131.

SKIM while being on the look-out for distinctions Rush makes between female education in America and female education in Great Britain. What inferences can we draw related to the ongoing efforts of Rush and other US writers of this era to define the “American character” as distinctive? How does reading Rush potentially illuminate Rowson’s work as both national and transatlantic?

- 3) Mary Wollstonecraft, excerpt from the introduction to *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 131-135.

We may want to attribute the Norton editor Rust’s decision to include this particular excerpt from Wollstonecraft’s text—which was very popular in the US—to this section’s focus on female education, which was both a frequent theme in Rowson’s writing and a part of her daily practice as teacher-principal of a school for well-to-do young ladies in Philadelphia. In that context, look not only at the arguments Wollstonecraft presents to support feminine learning as needing to be “human,” but also ask yourself why this piece would have drawn enthusiastic response in the era when Rush and Rowson were trying to shape the direction of young girls’ and women’s education in the US. (Going beyond the Norton and forecasting more work on her later in the term, we’ll also take a look at a biographical portrait of Wollstonecraft by her partner; see below.)

- 4) Susanna Rowson, “Rights of Woman,” 138-140.

Like a number of other texts included in this edition, this poem would have been performed by a student at Rowson’s school for young (American) ladies. Thus, one goal for reading would

be to set this piece in dialogue with the treatments of gendered education in (2) and (3) above. Also, picking up on Homestead's and Hansen's treatment of Rowson as "still [having] strong cultural and linguistic ties to England" (643), you will likely see how this poem—composed in Pope-reminiscent couplets—helps mark Rowson as still aligned with British literary traditions, even as she seeks to establish her school as distinctively for "American" young ladies.

5) And, from outside the Norton:

William Godwin, *Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft* (1798), chp. 7: 1792-1795

(http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist_Archives/godwin/memoirs/chapter7.html) and

chp. 8: 1795-1796 (http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist_Archives/godwin/memoirs/chapter8.html)

William Godwin (1756-1836), philosopher, political idealist and radical, novelist, and husband to Mary Wollstonecraft after she became pregnant with their daughter Mary (later the famous Mary Shelley, author of *Frankenstein*), was devastated by her death due to puerperal fever following childbirth. To pay tribute to her genius, courage, deep commitment to justice, and strong sense of duty to those she loved, he penned a memoir shortly afterward. In keeping with his resolute commitment to reason and uncompromising truth, he included in his memoir the chapters that we are reading for next Wednesday, revealing details hitherto unknown to her transatlantic public, which by and large had judged her by her texts (according to the reader's politics. As Amy Rambow comments in "'Come Kick Me': Godwin's *Memoirs* and the Posthumous Infamy of Mary Wollstonecraft" (*Keats-Shelley Journal* 13 [1999]: 24-57), tell-all biographies were then an unknown genre to audiences on either side of the Atlantic. Because Godwin dared tell so much, many readers assumed that he had held even more back. And audiences were appalled by the revelation of Wollstonecraft's extra-marital sexual affairs, attempted suicides, and indifference to religious belief even on her deathbed. Her reputation suffered an immediate and overwhelming decline from which it did not recover until near the end of the 19th century.

One telling exception to this decline in America was the influential Sarah Josepha Hale, long-time editor of *Godey's Lady's Book* and creator of an influential compendium of biographical sketches, *The Woman's Record: or Sketches of All Distinguished Women*; already in 1855 Hale treated Wollstonecraft there quite sympathetically, blaming the British writer's lapses on cruel paternal treatment during Wollstonecraft's youth:

http://books.google.com/books?id=X7ZiAAAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=sarah+hale+women%27s+record&hl=en&sa=X&ei=96YXUozrKuqB2gW_hoDIDw&ved=0CC8Q6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=wollstonecraft&f=false. Another was the unsigned article by George Eliot in the 13 October 1855 *Leader*, which compared Margaret Fuller's 1843 *Women in the Nineteenth Century* and Wollstonecraft's *Vindication*. Eliot acknowledged "vague prejudice" against Wollstonecraft's book but underscored its thoroughgoing rationality and thereafter focused on the arguments both women made.

Nonetheless, Wollstonecraft became in the hands of many who were hostile to women's rights a prime case of what happens when women of strong will pursue independence and equal justice. She became, that is, a whipping girl frequently used against any hints of "uppity" sentiment or behavior.

The review of Godwin's *Memoirs* in the August 1799 *Monthly Magazine and American Review* nicely indicates reaction to the *Memoirs* while also documenting its transatlantic reception. As the reviewer commented, "in the memoirs of her life, and her Wrongs of Woman, [he] felt shocked, and even disgusted, at the licence she seems to allow to the unrestrained indulgence of the feelings." He was also shocked that she "discarded all faith in christianity" and was

“engrossed by an overweening solicitude about selfish enjoyments” (qtd. in Rambow 31)—“selfishness” here also encompassing her suicide attempts.

As you read the excerpts from Godwin’s *Memoirs*, consider what significance this work might have had for readers who had also recently read or were reading *Charlotte Temple*. Also consider what cultural rhetoric and politics emerge in the Godwin account when he deals with an Englishwoman and American “seducer” (a word, of course, that Godwin does not use).

B. Secondary scholarship:

From the Norton edition—

Camryn Hansen, “A Changing Tale of Truth: Charlotte Temple’s British Roots.” 183-190.

What is Hansen’s argument about Rowson’s own efforts at career management? How does Hansen position her own research in relation to prior study of Rowson, and why? Where would you locate Hansen’s essay in the context of increasing moves to see Rowson as transatlantic (or not), and how/why? How might you build on Hansen’s work yourself, should you wish to do more research on Rowson?

Lauren Coats, “Grave Matters: Susanna Rowson’s Sentimental Geographies,” 327-349.

In bringing together an analysis with debts to scholarship on sentimentalism with a focus on spatial analysis (a fairly new trend), what does Coats accomplish here? What inferences can we draw about her views of Rowson’s place in literary history based on such moves as the analysis of the gravesite in New York associated with Charlotte Temple (the character)?

And from beyond the Norton:

Paul Giles, *Atlantic Republic: The American Republic in English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 1-11, 21-30. [Introduction and section on Richard Price and Susanna Rowson]

As a scholar already recognized for his role in promoting transatlantic studies, Giles comes to Rowson from a different perspective than many of those who contributed to the Norton edition. In what ways is his work different from the essays by Hansen and Coats, for instance? In particular, what argument does he make for moving beyond recovery of (and focus on) *Charlotte Temple* to another of Rowson’s novels, *Reuben and Rachel*? Similarly, what’s gained by putting Rowson’s work in dialogue with Richard Price’s?

III. Susanna Rowson and *Charlotte Temple*

Both the novel *Charlotte Temple* and the experiences of its author will be important texts for us to consider in studying transatlantic culture. Although the first edition of the novel appeared in England, the US reprintings were the ones that raised the book to bestseller status. The 1790/91 British publication of the text by William Lane positioned it within his regular pattern of formula fiction, which usually involved paying authors a flat rate commission. Lane

has also been credited with bringing out Rowson's *Mary, or the Test of Honour* in 1789. Neither sold particularly well.

Something happened to *Charlotte Temple*, though, when it reached U.S. shores. Said another way, the book found its readership, becoming one of the earliest fiction bestsellers in America. Matthew Carey, famous to book history scholars for a wide array of successful publishing ventures, brought out the first American edition of Charlotte's story, and Cathy Davidson reports in *Reading in America* that Carey later wrote to congratulate Rowson on how many copies the book had sold: "far exceeding 50,000 copies, & the sale still continues," he crowed—and this in an era when a run of a thousand copies was considered typical. Davidson has identified over 200 additional editions of the novel from the late eighteenth through the nineteenth centuries (159).

Rowson herself moved to the US as well, carving out a successful career as an actress and, later, the Preceptress of a well-known school for elite New England girls. The curriculum for the school, her progressive philosophy of education, and her ongoing liminal position as a transplanted Englishwoman who touted her social affiliation with America while continuing to affiliate culturally with her native land—all these can be traced in the dialogues and prefaces she wrote in connection with her role as teacher. (Indeed, someone should write an article focused just on the brilliant rhetoric of Rowson's book prefaces!) She also wrote successful plays, patriotic songs, and more novels after her immigration.

Given this context of textual mobility for the novel itself and personal relocation for Rowson herself,¹ here are some questions we can consider while reading *Charlotte Temple*:

- Looking within the text itself: What content would have helped make the novel so popular in America after it failed to draw much of an audience in England? In this context, you might look at genre features, as well as particular elements of plot and characterization. You should try to position yourself as a reader in post-Revolutionary America. Identify particular features or moments in the text that would resonate with such readers, and consider more meta-level features of the novel.
- Why was the novel not a bestseller in England? What features within the narrative would have worked against its building and audience there, and how?
- Given that *Charlotte Temple* represents one of the first recovery projects of the feminist intervention into the canon, ask yourself such questions as these as you read:
 1. What was appealing about the novel to 1980s' feminist scholars? Why?
 2. What is its continued appeal as a classroom teaching text? Can you envision teaching the text yourself? If so, what strategies might you use and what topics

¹ Rowson actually immigrated to America twice, as she notes in one of her own book prefaces (which you'll be reading from the Norton edition of *CT*): she was first brought to the US by her parents as a child, while her father served in the British army; but returned to England after her father's Loyalist leanings during the Revolution made him a captive and eventually part of a prisoner exchange. She returned to America in adulthood as part of a group of actors recruited by a US-based promoter seeking to establish a theater troupe.)

address? How? In particular, how might you teach the text as an example for transatlantic study by undergraduates

3. How do you respond to the novel yourself? (Here, it might be worthwhile to address both your global-level response [like it/don't like it] and particular places in the novel where Rowson piques a reaction from you—and how/why.)

- In light of the brief context provided above and other Rowson texts and/or biography that you might know about, what potential do you see for further scholarship on Rowson, particularly scholarship that would help heighten awareness of her person, her career, and her writings as transatlantic?

- How would you position Rowson and her work in relation to others we've already explored a bit in the course—e.g., Dickens and Twain? As a “transatlantic” figure, how is she similar and different?

Recommendations for additional reading:

Davidson, Cathy. “The Life and Times of Charlotte Temple: The Biography of a Book.” *Reading in America: Literature and Social History*. Edited by Cathy Davidson. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1989. 157-79.

_____. *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America*. Oxford U Press, 1986. (See the index for multiple scattered references to Rowson and her writings.)

Desiderio, Jennifer, and Desiree Henderson. “Introduction.” *Studies in American Fiction* 38.1/2 (Spring and Fall 2011): xv-xxviii.

Homestead, Melissa J. and Camryn Hansen. "Susanna Rowson's Transatlantic Career." *Early American Literature* 45.3 (2010): 619-654.