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REVIEW ESSAY

"A Tale of Our Own Times"

Early American Women's Novels, Reprints, and the Seduction of the Familiar

Charlotte Temple: Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism

By SUSANNA ROWSON

Edited by MARION L. RUST

New York: Norton, 2011

518 pp.

Clarence; or, A Tale of Our Own Times

By CATHARINE MARIA SEDGWICK

Edited by MELISSA J. HOMESTEAD and ELLEN A. FOSTER

Introduction by MELISSA J. HOMESTEAD and Notes by ELLEN A. FOSTER

Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2012

481 pp.

*The Coquette; or, The History of Eliza Wharton and The Boarding School;
or, Lessons of a Preceptress to Her Pupils*

By HANNAH WEBSTER FOSTER

Edited by JENNIFER DESIDERIO and ANGELA VIETTO

Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2011

356 pp.

Emily Hamilton and Other Writings

By SUKEY VICKERY

Edited with an Introduction by SCOTT SLAWINSKI

Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009

224 pp.

The early American novels reviewed in this essay offer an opportunity to reflect not only on how we teach such novels but also on which ones we teach and how they affect our students' understanding of the collec-

tive body of work we call early American literature. Twenty-six years after the launch of Oxford University Press's groundbreaking Early American Women Writers series with editions of *Charlotte Temple* and *The Coquette* edited by Cathy Davidson, those novels have long since moved past the recovery phase. For a good portion of today's professoriate, *Charlotte Temple* and *The Coquette* have *always* been available in modern reprints. With that sea change in the academy, full-service editions such as those published by Broadview and Norton were overdue; in these new editions, the novels receive the scholarly treatment once reserved for the works of canonical male authors such as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville. Unfortunately, as editions of *Charlotte Temple* and *The Coquette* proliferated over the past twenty years, recovery work in women's novels slowed. It continues apace, however, with the publication of Sukey Vickery's *Emily Hamilton* and Catharine Maria Sedgwick's *Clarence*.

Charlotte Temple (1791, 1794) will be well known to readers of this journal, and I begin there. Marion Rust's edition of *Charlotte Temple* includes all the features that one expects in a Norton edition. The novel proper, in the form of an authoritative text, occupies less than 100 of the 518 pages in this edition. The remaining 400-odd pages include the customary "Contexts" and "Criticism" sections. Although US readers made *Charlotte Temple* famous, Rowson wrote the book while living in England and first published it in London in 1791. Rust is attentive to the problems associated with calling *Charlotte Temple* an American book. Its British origins shaped both the novel's plot and its sentimental orientation. As Rust wisely explains, "The worst mistake we can make, then, is to call this an American novel and then retroactively impose all sorts of qualities onto it that weren't in existence at the time, such as a secure sense of national identity as distinct from the mother country." Consequently, Rust's contextual and critical selections help readers "parse out the novel's overlapping British and U.S. contexts" (xxiv). In the "Contexts" section, a subsection titled "Women in Early America: Intellect, Education, Sexuality" features contemporaneous British and American authors such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Benjamin Rush, as well as modern critics such as Nancy Cott. "Reading in Early America" similarly mixes contemporaneous and modern excerpts, which explore questions such as these: How and what did early Americans read? How did gender inflect reading practices? How was the novel perceived? Critics exploring these questions include Linda Kerber,

William Gilmore, and Cathy Davidson. "The American Sentimental" excerpts novels, essays, and letters on that topic. The section "Selections from Rowson's Writings" includes the prefaces to five other novels as well as excerpts from her novels and her play *Slaves in Algiers* (1794). The "Criticism" section includes early reviews of *Charlotte Temple* by William Cobbett as well as essays by Jane Tompkins, Elizabeth Barnes, Julia Stern, and others. As the foregoing description illustrates, this is a fine, comprehensive edition—thoughtfully contextualized and grounded in important scholarship about sentimentalism, women's education, and reading practices.

For classroom use, I prefer editions that include contextual material as opposed to those that include only the text plus a scholarly introduction. On the other hand, inexpensive editions such as those produced by Penguin cost cash-strapped students less, while contextual material and critical essays run up the cost of volumes. How much contextual material do professors actually use, anyway? Does the usage justify the cost to students? When I taught Rust's edition of *Charlotte Temple* in a spring 2012 undergraduate class on American literature to 1820 (full disclosure: I had already ordered my texts and planned my syllabus before being asked to write this review), I was able to use only a fraction of the included material. I asked students to read Judith Sargent Murray's "Desultory Thoughts," an excerpt from Benjamin Rush's *Thoughts upon a Female Education*, Kerber's "We Own That Ladies Sometimes Read," an excerpt from Janet Todd's *Sensibility*, and an anonymous essay on novel reading. In general, I find contextual material more useful than critical essays, although some of the students chose to use the critical essays from this volume in writing their research papers. For a graduate class, however, I might well ask students to skim all the contextual material and select several critical essays for more careful reading. Norton editions provide graduate students with an excellent crash course into the scholarship on a particular work and the field of study associated with it. Further, for readers who do not have access to Readex's *Early American Imprints*, Chadwyck-Healey's *Early English Books Online*, Gale's *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*, or similar comprehensive, pay-for-access electronic archives, this contextual material helps level the scholarly digital divide—that is, the division between well-funded institutions able to afford expensive subscriptions to those databases and those institutions that cannot afford them or do not prioritize the humanities.

Jennifer Desiderio and Angela Vietto's Broadview edition of Hannah Foster's *The Coquette and The Boarding School* offers equally compelling contextual material, although in a lesser amount. While most readers of *Early American Literature* will be intimately familiar with *The Coquette* (1797), they are less likely to have read Foster's second novel, *The Boarding School* (1798). The novel's subtitle—"Lessons of a Preceptress to Her Pupils: Consisting of Information, Instruction, and Advice, Calculated to Improve the Manners, and Form the Character of Young Ladies"—pretty much tells it all. Mixing narrative with exchanges of letters, *The Boarding School* is straightforward conduct fiction and reveals the origins of the epistolary novel in letter-writing manuals. The plot is simple: after the death of her husband, Mrs. Williams opened a finishing school in her home to a select group of young ladies. School tuition provides Mrs. Williams with income, while the other students provide her two daughters with polished company, the right kind of social connections, and lifelong correspondents. Mrs. Williams contrasts vividly with other representations of mothers in early American fiction, especially the ineffectual Mrs. Wharton of *The Coquette* and the conniving Mrs. Hammond of the now-out-of-print and much-mourned *Kelroy* (Rush, 1812). The socially elite but nearly bankrupt Mrs. Hammond schemes to make money from the lottery and to sell her daughters into advantageous marriages, exposing the economic dilemma of genteel women, who had limited options outside of marriage for supporting themselves. *The Boarding School's* Mrs. Williams finds a useful and honorable profession for herself, however. Although *The Boarding School* is prosy and heavy handed, especially when compared to *The Coquette*, pairing the novels is illuminating. We're told Eliza Wharton lacks money, and yet her comfortable home with her mother seems to maintain itself. *The Boarding School* deals more pragmatically with women's economic needs.

Pairing the novels also offers a striking comparison of the novelistic treatment of seduced women and illegitimate children. Based on the real-life story of Elizabeth Whitman, who died alone in a tavern after giving birth to an illegitimate child, and bound by a certain amount of fidelity to her history, *The Coquette*, like *Charlotte Temple*, deals harshly with seduced women. There's no getting around the fact that Elizabeth Whitman died in childbirth, but the prevalence of maternal mortality seems to be over-represented in early novels, deployed to serve as a moral verdict on extra-marital sexuality. In actuality, maternal mortality was relatively low in late

eighteenth-century New England, much lower than in England or Ireland. According to Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's calculations in *A Midwife's Tale*, Martha Ballard, admittedly a highly skilled and successful midwife, "saw one maternal death for every 198 living births" (Ulrich 170), but her statistics square with those of her contemporaries; ironically, maternal mortality actually increased in the nineteenth century.¹ Pairing Foster's novels, however, offers a different perspective on extramarital sexual activity. Desiderio and Vietto argue that the "texts . . . work together as a pedagogical diptych of sorts: one half depicting the consequences of a young woman following vice and the other half showcasing the achievements of young women following virtue. . . . Published only one year apart, *The Coquette* and *The Boarding School* could easily be read as Foster's grand two-part lesson to the young girls and women of the new republic" (23).

The Boarding School is remarkably frank about the prevalence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies and illegitimacy in the early Republic. One of Mrs. Williams's daughters renews an acquaintance with a young woman her age who was seduced and abandoned and agreed to give up her child at the urging of her parents in order to avoid public opprobrium. When the Williams family shares this sad story with the students, one pupil bursts into tears and reveals that *she* was illegitimate and abandoned by *her* mother. Later, when the Williams girls come across a desperate young serving woman and her illegitimate child during a walk, they take the woman home, give her a job, and teach her to read. The novel offers readers a more compassionate examination of the outcomes of premarital pregnancies, which we know from the work of historians such as Daniel Scott Smith and Michael S. Hindus comprised around 30 percent of all first births in the Revolutionary era (561).² Most seduced women did not die the tragic deaths associated with Elizabeth Whitman/Eliza Wharton and Charlotte Temple, nor did out-of-wedlock pregnancies pose purely social or moral dilemmas. The legal system became less interested at this time in punishing women for moral failings and more concerned with who would assume financial responsibility for rearing an illegitimate child. Women frequently married their seducers or sued for financial support in the absence of marriage; sometimes the women went on to marry someone else entirely.³ *The Boarding School's* postseduction vignettes (each comprising just a few pages) read almost as recompense by Foster for turning Elizabeth Whitman's personal tragedy into fodder for fiction. The novel does

not sentimentalize the seduced woman. She made bad decisions, and these decisions are costly, but the novel avoids a dominant trope in much female-authored fiction—the slippery slope of sexual virtue, whereby one misstep, such as Charlotte Temple’s guilt over having read Montraville’s first letter, starts women on the path to destruction. Charlotte, the narrator tells us, “had taken one step in the ways of imprudence; and when that is once done, there are always innumerable obstacles to prevent the erring person returning to the path of rectitude” (Rowson 28). By contrast, *The Boarding School* not only avoids the slippery slope logic but also argues that illegitimate children should not bear the cost of adults’ bad decisions. Lacking the compelling characterization and scandal associated with *The Coquette*, however, *The Boarding School* never captured readerly imagination in quite the same way.

Given the pairing of these novels, Desiderio and Vietto’s edition not surprisingly privileges contextual material concerning women’s behavior. How and what should young women learn, how should they act in public, and how should they conduct their correspondence? The five appendices focus on the following topics: Elizabeth Whitman as a model for Eliza Wharton, letter-writing manuals and advice texts, women’s education, an excerpt from Eliza Southgate Browne’s *A Girl’s Life Eighty Years Ago* (1887), and a section titled “Mirth and Gaiety in the Early Republic,” which includes excerpts from dancing manuals.

I enthusiastically recommend both of these reprint editions, although I admit some misgivings at the proliferation of editions of these novels, which I think might have come at the expense of reprints of novels by other early American women writers. Granted, both *The Coquette* and *Charlotte Temple* were extraordinarily popular with contemporary audiences, and their continued popularity in antebellum America laid the groundwork for their resurgence today. While there’s something to be said for the popularity of a text as one index of its cultural relevance, marketplace “popularity” is somewhat misleading.⁴ The particular circumstances of novel printing in the early United States render popularity a fairly problematic metric for measuring either the interest level of early audiences or an individual work’s textual engagement with American or transatlantic cultures. The lack of a national printing industry, a national market for books, and efficient transportation networks meant that most novels were printed in

very small numbers and were available only in local or regional markets, facts which also drove up the production costs of books and made novels expensive. In such a publishing environment, shorter novels cost less and thus held a significant marketplace advantage. Consider the length of three of early America's most popular novels: *The Coquette*, *Charlotte Temple*, and William Hill Brown's *The Power of Sympathy* (1789). Not only were these novels concise and thus relatively cheap, but none is densely plotted. They are all quick and relatively easy reads, factors that undoubtedly facilitate their current popularity as instructors squeeze in novels to already-crowded American literature courses.

An unintended consequence of the multiple academic editions of *The Coquette* and *Charlotte Temple* is that, from a student perspective, early American fiction appears populated with weak, indecisive women, dying for a lack of love—or perhaps too much love, of the wrong kind—both of which problems render them unable to act in their own interests. There are exceptions, and perhaps most relevant is Michael Drexler's recent Broadview edition of Leonora Sansay's *Secret History* (1808). And yet there still seems to be a crucial gap in modern novel reprints in terms of how women have been represented, particularly with regard to agency, labor, social class, and economics. No women labor in *The Coquette*, with the exception of serving women who disappear into the background, and *Charlotte Temple*, we are told, is utterly unfit for labor. After several years immersed in a research project that has given me the opportunity to study individuals outside elite or even middling circles, I've become increasingly sensitive to the fact that while genteel women might have been able to focus on the domestic economies of their respective homes, the majority of eighteenth-century American women, whether black, white, or Indian, were unable to draw a sharp distinction between household labor and the labor that supported that household. I find troubling the ways in which certain novels, such as *The Coquette*, emphasize the genteel poverty of the Wharton women, while utterly obscuring the feminine labor necessary to sustain this gentility. There are novels that address this lacuna, such as Sally Wood's *Dorval* (1801) or Sarah Savage's *The Factory Girl* (1814), but they remain available only to the digitally privileged or those able to travel to archives.

If *The Boarding School* teaches readers about discipline and self-control, and the value of female friendship in striving to embody those traits, we

see those qualities exercised fully in Sukey Vickery's *Emily Hamilton* (1803), edited by Scott Slawinski as part of the University of Nebraska's Legacies of Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers series. The titular character falls in love with a married man, but unlike Eliza Wharton, Emily Hamilton never compromises her moral standards, and she successfully resists her father's attempts to marry her to an unsuitable man. *Emily Hamilton* does not simply rewrite the romance plot of *The Coquette*. Lambert, the man her father would have Emily marry, is no Boyer, respectable but dull. Lambert is a cad, and Emily perceives his true character even when her father fails to do so. Vickery affirms the ability of women to choose wisely for themselves when Lambert's past is revealed. In this and several other instances, *Emily Hamilton* supports the historical trend toward self-directed, companionate marriage.⁵ Belmont, the married man with whom Emily falls in love, had married his first wife in good faith at the instigation of their parents. He learns later that his wife passionately loves another man and married Belmont only because her father threatened to disinherit her. This arranged marriage leads to the unhappiness of all involved. Belmont and Emily honorably refuse to act on their mutual attraction, and their reward is that they are able to marry after the death of Belmont's first wife. Slawinski persuasively argues that *Emily Hamilton* represents an important development in the literary history of the novel through its "turn to model heroines" and its attention to social realism (xxxiv).

Sukey Vickery was not only a novelist; she began her writing career as a poet, with her work appearing in the *Massachusetts Spy*, published first by Isaiah Thomas, Sr., and then by his son, Isaiah Thomas, Jr. Slawinski includes in his edition twenty-one poems that appeared in the *Spy* from 1801–02 either by or to "Fidelia"; after that time, Vickery's writing interests shifted to fiction, from which she hoped, most likely futilely, to profit. Her poetry ranges in type from elegies to religious poetry to a poem in honor of John Adams. "Fidelia's" verse prompted admiring responses from other poets, and Slawinski reports that it initiated a Della Cruscan-like exchange among Vickery and three other poets whose work appeared in the *Spy* (xiv–xv). This edition also includes nine unpublished pieces, including additional poems, letters, and the only extant fragment of Vickery's diary. Vickery's poetic range and interest in fiction make her a good foil for Judith Sargent Murray, as she seems to bridge the literary distance be-

tween Murray and Catharine Maria Sedgwick, particularly a work such as *Clarence* (1830).

With Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie* (1827) enshrined in the canon after having been reprinted in the Rutgers American Women Writers series, which focused on works from the 1820s-1920s, many readers of Sedgwick remain familiar only with her historical fiction. Subtitled "A Tale of Our Times," *Clarence* is an engaging novel of manners set primarily in New York, predating not only the novels of manners by Henry James and Edith Wharton but also those of James Fenimore Cooper, who is sometimes identified as authoring the earliest American novel of manners. The novel traces the social interactions and ultimate marriage of Gertrude Clarence, an heiress who is thrown into the social whirl of the early Republic and rejects its falsity. *Clarence* betrays the considerable influence of eighteenth-century fiction on Sedgwick in the novel's initial dependence on coincidence. Without ruining the plot surprises, I can say only that they involve secret identities, kidnappings, lost and found heirs, inheritances, and lawsuits—and that's merely the first few chapters. Add to that list proposals, engagements, elopements, piracy, supercilious British travelers, suicides, and a masquerade, and we have a considerably complicated plot. It's a long book.

Clarence's transatlantic and hemispheric orientation will especially interest readers of this journal. The fortunes made, lost, and stolen throughout the novel almost all had their origins in the West Indies. Although Sedgwick never traveled to that region, her novel suggests the degree to which the social and commercial worlds of New York depended on wealth generated in the Caribbean by shipping slave-produced goods. The novel matter-of-factly relates the circumstances under which one character, Flavel, had an affair with a mixed-race daughter of a French merchant. "I would have married her," Flavel protests, "but I was then still bound by legal ties" to another (85). Fulfilling the trope of the tragic mulatta, his mistress, 'Eli Clairon, drowns herself rather than be forced to marry another man, leaving behind their son to the machinations of his grandmother and to a father whose wealth "made me uncertain of the truth of my boy's affection" (86). After his son kills himself, Flavel leaves "the West Indies for ever, execrating them as the peculiar temple of that sordid divinity, on whose altar, from their discovery to the present day, whatever is most precious, youth, health, and virtue, have been sacrificed" (86). Flavel flees the

West Indies, but his money, the reader intuits, is tainted from its origins and continues to be associated as much with greed and sorrow as with joy and the independence that wealth can bring.

Melissa Homestead and Ellen Foster, editors of this volume, chose to reprint a slightly modernized version of the 1830 edition of *Clarence*, rather than the revised 1849 edition, which had been intended to create a standard edition of Sedgwick's works. They explain in their joint note on the text, "our primary aim is to present the novel in its 1830 context and as growing out of Sedgwick's experiences in the 1820s" (45). To that end, Homestead's biographical introduction traces Sedgwick's emulation of—and growing disillusionment with—British novelist Maria Edgeworth. Sedgwick dedicated her first novel, *A New-England Tale* (1822), to Edgeworth. Although they carried on a correspondence, Sedgwick came to resent what Homestead calls the "colonial condescension directed at her by Edgeworth and Edgeworth's friend, the British naval officer and travel writer Captain Basil Hall. Writing back to Edgeworth and Hall and their assumptions about the lack of manners, social distinction, and fashion in American society, Sedgwick launched the American novel of manners" (13). The contextual material included in this volume supports the editors' goal of presenting the novel in its original context. Appendices include Sedgwick's correspondence, images of places mentioned in the novel, reviews, and the preface to and advertisements for the revised 1849 edition. By using the 1830 edition and emphasizing that context, the editors also help us see how Sedgwick influenced a generation of writers after her, including Susan Warner, Maria Susanna Cummins, and Harriet Beecher Stowe—as well, possibly, as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville.

Each of the volumes reviewed here represents a considerable investment of the editors' knowledge, and each has been carefully introduced and contextualized in relevant material. These are high-quality teaching editions. The jury is out, however, as to whether *Emily Hamilton* and *Clarence* will be able to carve out space for themselves in course syllabi that have been dominated for the past two decades by *Charlotte Temple* and *The Coquette*, and, to a much lesser extent, Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie*—to consider only novels by early American women authors. Publishers analyze the market, conduct focus groups, and print books that they hope will

sell, but the answers are still sometimes elusive. Why do we teach the early novels that we do and adopt the specific editions that we use? Do we teach those texts because they reveal central facets of early American culture that we wish to explore with our students? Or do we teach them because of their aesthetic qualities or their dialogic engagement with other works on our syllabi? To what extent does textbook price govern our edition selections? Does the attractiveness of *The Coquette* and *Charlotte Temple* derive, at least in part, from the fact that they *are* in print and readily available? Do we rely too much on those familiar novels that are in our comfort zone, those novels for which we have all our pages neatly marked and correlated with our teaching notes? In short, have we been seduced by the seduction novel, by its very familiarity and availability? I have heard much mourning in the past decade from other scholars of women's writing that the recovery of early and nineteenth-century American women's writing seems to have slowed. If we wish it to continue, we need to step outside our comfort zones, embrace the unfamiliar, and explore how other novels might alter the literary histories we tell.

NOTES

- 1 Ulrich notes that as male doctors began replacing midwives, the number of maternal fatalities initially stayed the same, but complications, or at least the diagnosis of complications, increased. She speculates that these complications resulted in part from the use of forceps and medication (172).
- 2 Ulrich notes even higher rates of out-of-wedlock pregnancies under Martha Ballard's care: "Between 1785 and 1797 Martha delivered 106 women of their first babies. Of these infants, forty, or 38 percent, were conceived out of wedlock. The great majority of the women concerned (thirty-one of the forty) had already married the fathers of their children" (155–56).
- 3 For scholarship concerning eighteenth-century legal treatment of fornication, premarital pregnancies, and child support, see Ulrich; Dayton; M. Smith; and Nelson.
- 4 Adams and Barker point to some of the difficulties in determining what, exactly, "popularity" tells us about a book: "Extensive reprinting of a text cannot be taken as a direct measure of popularity: it is at best an indication. What we really need to know is how many of the copies were actually read. What happened to the copies printed? What levels and areas of the reading public did they reach, and to what extent did copies not reach a reading public at all?" (58). Adams and Barker argue that we must also consider "how many people read or heard read a particu-

- lar copy,” a question that requires investigation into libraries, reading rooms, and private lending practices, and “the number of copies available in proportion to the population of a particular community” (59).
- 5 For scholarship on marriage trends, especially the turn in the late eighteenth century toward the companionate or affectionate marriage, see Deglar; Rothman; Jabour; and Coontz.

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