Liminal Spaces

Cross-Dressing, Monetary Transfers and Other Real and Imaginary Crossovers in Susanna Rowson's *Slaves in Algiers*

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Feminist readings of Susanna Rowson's 1794 play *Slaves in Algiers* have by now become a critical staple, one that is almost unquestioned. Marion Rust refers to the play's "incipient feminism" ("Activism" 237); Amelia Howe Kritzer maintains that the female characters in the play "fashion a collective definition of American womanhood that contests women's exclusion from the subordination within dominant formulations of American identity" (152); Patricia L. Parker describes the play as Rowson's "first feminist statement on stage" (68); and Elizabeth Maddock Dillon contends that the play "explicitly argues for the inclusion of women as rights-bearing subjects in the new nation" and describes it as "Rowson's attempt to transgender freedom" (407). Although Rust has already drawn attention to Rowson's "ability to appeal in a single play to potentially divergent points of view" ("Activism" 228), pointing out the play's inconsistencies on issues of race, identity, and foreign politics (i.e. a policy of ransom vs. military response), none of these tensions has destabilized the scholarly consensus regarding the play's inherent feminism.

Indeed, both the prologue and the epilogue include bold feminist statements from Rowson. Yet, even though she frames these statements in a way that makes her authorial intent clear enough, I intend to argue that the play itself fails to accomplish and solidify Rowson's ostensible aims. This position comes in distinction to Dillon, who has already observed this discrepancy ("[t]he language of equality that she invokes in framing the play seems at odds with the domestic norms of the comedy enacted in it" [410]), but does not see it as disqualifying. Instead, she suggests that it enhances the play's "less abstract, more personal, and more limited" (411) notions of liberty, and women's

liberation in particular. This approach, typical of criticism of the play, dismisses its inconsistencies by emphasizing the evidence of the prologue and the epilogue, which are strictly speaking no more than addendums to the play. In some cases, it could be assumed that such subversive material could only be expressed in the safety and subtlety of such a marginal position; in this instance, however, the explicitness of Rowson's comments renders this possibility unlikely. On the other hand, shifting attention from the margins to the center, that is, to the body of the play itself, can to a great extent undermine (though by no means cancel out) the strength of its feminist framework and, by implication, subversive effect.

Feminist readings that assign weight to these supplementary and hence seemingly liminal sections of the play are particularly challenged in view of (or, in my reversed perspective, when *framed by*) the liminal spaces in the play itself. Following Dillon's reading of the play as a liminal space of "transgender freedom" (407), the present chapter attempts to reconsider the play's feminist appeal by exploring its many such spaces.[1] Liminal spaces usually hold the inherent promise of a liberating potential, by involving forms of transgression across boundaries. Interestingly, however, a close reading of three such liminal actions in the play—transvestism, religious conversion, and monetary exchange—challenges rather than confirms *Slaves* as a nascent feminist text, and in fact tips the scale towards a more conservative reading of the play than is usually granted.

Arguably, what has thus far been taken for granted and read as "Rowson's powerful vindication of women's rights" (Gross 11) is in effect closer to the conservative concept of republican motherhood, famously coined by Linda K. Kerber, according to which political significance is embedded in the traditional maternal role, defining women's civic identity as contingent on their domestic function. In other words, and unlike Kritzer's "Playing with Republican Motherhood," which maintains that Rowson fulfills her feminist claims and endows the female characters with effective political strength, I argue

1 Liminality implies ambiguity, a blend of low and high, and situations that are "betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (Turner 94). Victor W. Turner further suggests that liminality refers to people or situations that cannot be categorized according to traditional criteria of classification, and are on the margins (94-130).

that the play offers no real subversive interpretation of the concept but rather maintains its traditional understanding.[2]

Although Rowson's protagonists are powerful women, with the middle-aged Rebecca's leading role a rarity that deserves Kritzer's commendable emphasis (153-54), the power they wield is after all directed at performing their familial roles as daughters, wives, or mothers (biological or spiritual; in effect or potentially). Moreover, it is important to remember that the women exercise their strengths only in a foreign land and in the context of captivity, where even their femininity recedes in the face of their American superiority vis-à-vis their barbarous captors. Outside of this framework, on the other hand, the American women "maintain checks on their own behavior" (Kritzer 158); they do not take advantage of their newly gained competences, and they do not attempt to transcend the gendered power relations with their male *American* relations. Fetnah, the only woman who endeavors to do so, is significantly not an American, and Rowson makes sure that she will never become one. Thus, rather than imbue these scenes with feminist content, Rowson's conservative treatment seems to invalidate their revolutionary potential and weaken the play's bid to be read as a feminist text.

Accordingly, I will examine the play's use of cross-dressing, religious conversion, and monetary exchange in an attempt to highlight the traditionalist, rather than feminist, tendencies of its gender politics. Contrary to Dillon's contention that Rowson argues "for the public and political, rather than private and domestic, role of women" (410), I will claim that the play's use of traditionally feminine attributes and concepts, and the discourse of safety in particular, renders it no more than another traditional version, Rowson's version, of republican motherhood.

Cross-Dressing

Cross-dressing, which has featured in many situations of real captivity (Sorensen 179), is a natural component of this kind of story and in line with the play's comic spirit and the exotic background of Moorish Algiers.

2 Kerber described republican motherhood as "Janus-faced" (485), acknowledging the fact that although the idea of republican motherhood made room for questioning hierarchies "within the family and outside it," it more often played a conservative role, "deflecting the radical potential of the revolutionary experience" (484-85).

It would also, theoretically, be an interesting reflection of the liminal and indeterminate circumstances of captivity. However, the only two characters that cross-dress in the play are Ben Hassan and his daughter Fetnah; in other words, the American captives do not partake in the practice.

Considering the hybrid nature of transvestism and its traditional association with contamination (through costumes), this may come as no surprise. Rowson's Americans are, despite their dire situation, in no psychological state of liminality, which their hypothetical cross-dressing would have otherwise highlighted; rather, they are emblems of resilience and stable identity: "There is transculturation of the captor, but Anglo-American captives' sense of their identity remains unchallenged" (Sorensen 173). On the other hand, both Hassan and Fetnah are of hybrid identity, former English Jews who converted to Islam and moved to Algiers. Hence, they are "tarnish[ed]" (72), to use the word Rebecca employs to refer to apostasy, and their transvestism confirms rather than disrupts their mixed, unstable positions. Lise Sorensen concludes that "Rowson thus places racial identity center stage in a play that explores the virtues of freedom" (175). Like Sorensen (and others), Dillon also emphasizes the racial aspect of this steadfast, Anglo-American identity when she writes that "Rebecca is not defending herself against a corruption by an Anglo-American rake but against a racialized, un-American miscreant" (415). This particular use of cross-dressing may thus explain why transvestism fails to disrupt or reshape gender relations and hierarchy in the play.

Although neither the transvestism of Hassan nor that of Fetnah has a subversive or challenging function within the action of Slaves, there are nevertheless important differences between them. As a rule, male and female acts of cross-dressing have been understood differently. For one thing, male transvestism is seen as far more culturally significant, its conspicuous image inherently bolstering the conservative pecking order. As Alisa Solomon argues, "to make male-to-female drag the point from which all discussion of cross-dressing follows simply reinstates the presumption of the male as universal" (qtd. in Ferris 6). This is because for a man to dress as a woman undermines his virility and masculine authority, placing him "in a position of shame" (Howard 25). The subsequently comic effect of male-to-female transformation thus relies on the prejudice against women as inferior to men and in this way reinforces the extant sexual hierarchy.

Accordingly, Hassan's transvestism suggests that he is predisposed to effeminacy, an androgyne rather than an "ordinary" male. His effeminate inclinations are indeed evident in his everyday conduct, for example, in his anx-

ious response to danger (no manly behavior), which echoes Rebecca's reaction to the point of repeating it verbatim, though significantly without Rebecca's appeal to "heavens":

> REBECCA: Oh heavens! What will become of me?
> BEN HASSAN: What will become of me? (56)

Once dressed as a woman, Hassan's ungrammatical and heavily accented language becomes surprisingly articulate and almost dialect-free. He also expresses a (feminine) longing for safety: "I wish I was in any safe place" (62), a motif which he shares with the American women in the play and which further attests to his proximity to the feminine.

However, while his cross-dressing is inflected by the conventional gender hierarchy, Hassan's masculinity retains a presence in the story, as seen in other responses to him and his disguise. On the one hand, Sebastian, the Spanish slave, does not recognize Hassan's masculinity, taking him for an old woman even after the latter's veil falls. The American Henry, on the other hand, recognizes Hassan even without the latter taking off the dress (73; at least, there is no indication in the play that Hassan has done so).[3] These opposite responses indicate an androgynous rather than wholly feminized nature; he can pass for both man and woman, being both. In Hassan's cross-dressing, paradoxically, the dual nature that you see is also what you get.

In principle, androgyny presents a challenge to the notion of a "true" sexual identity, exposing the culturally imposed nature of gender, and "undercut[ting] the power relations that inform and are informed by gender" (Long 187-88).[4] In the case of Hassan, however, this potential disruption of gender hierarchy, and by extension of the prevalent social order, is less subversive than it would be if not for Hassan's portraiture as the play's ultimate villain. Hassan's androgynous nature is an external manifestation of his notorious

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3 Henry demonstrates a capacity to see beyond both Hassan's and Fetnah's disguises and identify the true nature of each, a capacity that Sebastian and the other slaves do not share and that may be informed by (or conversely signal) his white, bourgeois (class) superiority (Rust, "Activism" 234).

4 Androgyny could also, and oftentimes did, represent a desire for spiritual wholeness. In fact, it has carried such positive connotations (regardless of biological representations) since classical Greece. Judeo-Christian mystical interpretations of the first Adam (before the Fall) as a harmonious and innocent androgyne were influential in this respect, and affected ensuing Romantic notions of the unity of mankind (Busst 61-62).

moral, ethnic and religious hybridity and a sign of his contaminated, "tarnished" body; his hyperbolic and farcical feminization becomes a sign of his deficient and inconsistent character. It is no wonder that he can transform genders as easily and as unscrupulously as he shifts from any one of his identities to the other. Ironically, only the malleable Hassan does not convert to Americanness at the end of the play. This is not because he cannot, but rather because he so easily can, and so he is pronounced ineligible by Rebecca, America's most constant (but also white, "ladylike," and virtuously Christian) gatekeeper.

Rather than destabilizing heteronormative conventions and disrupting the existing order of things, Hassan's transvestism replicates and in fact reinforces the male-female-dichotomy. His rejection of the "two-sex-model" is rejected in turn, restoring a status quo in which "there are two stable, incommensurable, opposite sexes and that the political, economic, and cultural lives of men and women, their gender roles, are somehow based on these 'facts'" (Laqueur 6). Instead of relaxing gender boundaries, Hassan's cross-dressing becomes a symbol of the menace of hybridity as a major threat to Rowson's "ascriptive" definition of identity (Dillon 408) and reveals her deep concern with American identity rather than with its gendered nuances.

Fetnah's transvestism is both similar and intriguingly different from that of her father. It is similar in that Fetnah, too, is unable to disguise utterly her "true" gender identity. It is different in that this "true" identity is not as ambiguous as that of her father. For one, Fetnah cross-dresses as a *boy* rather than as an adult man; the stage instructions read: "Re-enter Sebastian, forcing in Fetnah habited like a *boy*" (49, my emphasis). Secondly, Fetnah dresses as a boy for a legitimate purpose, that of gaining her liberty.[5] Throughout the scene, which is significantly brief (50-51), the American Henry refers to the disguised Fetnah as "this *innocent youth*" and as "*young, innocent, and unprotected*" (50, my emphasis). When the other slaves do not share Henry's view and attempt to kill the veiled Fetnah, she immediately reveals herself as "*poor little* Fetnah" (50, my emphasis), echoing Henry's diminutive description.[6] It is clear that

5 See by comparison the American Ellinor in Sarah Pogson's 1818 play *The Young Carolinians,* who disguises herself for the same purpose, despite her Anglo-American ("pure breed" or non-hybrid) identity.

6 It is interesting to note that Frederic uses the adjective "little" when addressing Fetnah's father, Hassan ("my little Israelite" [22]), as well as Fetnah ("my sweet little infidel" [39]). Heather S. Nathans points out how such labels ("Israelite" and "little") have

Fetnah's transvestism does not serve to underscore any innate (and inappropriately) masculine assertiveness or destabilize her femininity, but rather to enhance the latter. Unlike her father, her stable gender identity allows her to be an object of respect. Rowson does render Fetnah's femininity too assertive in other ways, however (as I will show in more detail later on), and must therefore contain her; this is the explanation I will offer for Rowson's decision not to let her complete her national and religious transformation, marry Frederic and leave Algiers at the end of the play.

Monetary Exchange and Transfer

Monetary exchange, like transvestism, entails transmission or conversion. It implies liminality, or the potential to complicate the boundaries between those with and those without this form of power. Indeed, Hassan's cross-dressing is directly linked to the transfer of money and the loss of power that marks the beginning of his end. It is significant that the instant Hassan cross-dresses as a woman, he loses control of the ransom bills (which could have otherwise saved him); whereas the first act exposes Hassan's unstable masculinity, the monetary loss reinforces it by putting him on an equal footing with women. Deprived of his monetary might, the effeminate Hassan becomes as helpless as the formerly enslaved Rebecca. It is not accidental that the plot is resolved and the slaves are released at the same time the ransom money reaches the right hands and can buy the captives' liberty (as historically it usually did), reminding readers that the Barbary crisis was, in essence, an economic struggle over trade and shipping rights (Baepler 219).

This method of attaining freedom aligns monetary transmission with the political transmission of liberty (Warner 104), representing the latter as a comparable exercise of power. Transmission is a form of interaction that assumes mediation, distance, and deferment, that transforms what is transported; it comes in contrast to communication, which "aspires to overcome differences of space and time" (Warner 103; see also Debray).[7] Drawing on this distinc-

become ingrained in the Anglo-American vernacular to underscore the "diminished, outsider status" (23) of Jews in America.

7 William Warner relies on Regis Debray's distinction between communication and transmission, according to which "transmission assumes that distance and deferral […] become part of the transmission" (Warner 103). Transmission involves a unilateral, collective and hierarchical transference of highly cherished values and is therefore also

tion, Rowson's insistence on the validity of the monetary transfer implies that she believes in a rather straightforward model of transmission, instead of a more egalitarian communication, of liberty. This is also implied by the ending of the play, which maintains the geographical separation between the Americans and the converted Algerians. The implication here is that Rowson has no interest in genuine communication with the Algerians even once they have been transformed. Liberty is not a value that is discussed and communicated by egalitarian means. High on the American list of values, liberty is not negotiable, but has to be transmitted as is, by monetary (or militaristic) methods. Rowson's colonialist approach is echoed in the words that seal the play: "[M]ay Freedom spread her benign influence thro' every nation, till the bright Eagle, united with the dove and olive-branch, waves high, the acknowledged standard of the world" (75).

In general, money, which is conventionally earned and negotiated by men, plays a major role in the play as a masculine form of force, similar to the military mutiny that eventually enables the captives' release. Indeed, the association between money and military power is consistent with Rowson's view of the solution to the actual Algerian crisis. Rowson maintained that Americans should pay their way back to freedom: "Each hand must give, and the quick sail unfurl'd, / Must bear their ransom to the distant world" (8). While Rowson believed that America "should cede to the monetary demands of the Barbary states," as Rust expounds, she also made sure to include a successful captive rebellion in the play because she understood the importance of a "militaristic perspective, which held that without a navy to back up the terms of any agreements between the United States and the North African governments, ransom wouldn't work" ("Activism" 228). Accordingly, the role that money plays in the drama implicitly undermines the effect of the women's speeches and reveals them for what they really are: rhetorical *supplements* to the more effective masculine activities. The influence of the American women's most dramatic speeches is consistently connected to other monetary and military developments; it is highly significant, for example, that even if fueled by Rebecca's idealistic speech, the Dey's conversion to democracy eventually takes place under military pressure.

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collective and political. Communication, in contrast, engages in egalitarian negotiations and implies communality and unity: "[C]ultural transmission begins where interpersonal communication ends" (Debray 98).

Hence, it is a signifier of superior character and advanced intelligence to comprehend the practical power of money, which Rowson endows with a particularly conservative agenda, once again upholding white, American superiority. When Zoriana, the Dey's daughter, expresses her wish to give her gold and jewelry to ransom Henry, she in fact enacts her conversion from an infidel who conceives of wealth as "commodity fetishism" (Conway 673) to a Christian who possesses a more advanced, abstract understanding of the use-value of money: "[H]ere is more gold and jewels. I never knew their value, till I found they could ransom you" (35). Joe Conway observes that anti-monetary and iconoclastic tendencies are common to utopian literature (671) and quotes Richard Halpern on Thomas More's *Utopia*: "[R]itual debasement of gold is in some ways *the* quintessential Utopia act"; it institutes "the ascendancy of use value over exchange value" (Halpern 145, qtd. in Conway 671, original emphasis). Thus, in endowing money with idealism, Zoriana becomes the mouthpiece of a utopian view, according to which money and valuables are used (use-value) for a nobler, more abstract purpose. Zoriana's apprehension of the use-value of her possessions implies her overcoming her heathenish (here, Algerian) conceptions and is indicative of her genuine conversion to Christianity and enlightened Americanness.[8]

The Dey similarly exhibits signs of an advanced understanding of the use-value of money when he refuses to ransom Olivia:

> Woman, the wealth of Golconda could not pay her ransom—can you imagine that I, whose slave she is; I, who could force her obedience to my will, and yet gave life and freedom to those Christians, to purchase her compliance, would now relinquish her for paltry gold; contemptible idea. (68)

The Dey's budding monetary understanding and Zoriana's Christian altruism are signs of the cultural maturity of the two; they also foreshadow the mass coming-of-age of all Algerians at the end of the play and mark the latter's move away from philistine, fetishistic tendencies traditionally perceived as characterizing savage cultures and towards what Conway describes as "the iconoclastic tendencies of Anglo-Protestant modernity" (674).

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8 By comparison, once the ransom money is restored to Rebecca, she immediately acknowledges its use value and plans to use it to release her son and cheer many other "children of affliction": "[H]ere's a letter addressed to me—the money is my own—Oh joy beyond expression! My child will soon be free. I have also *the means* of cheering many children of affliction, with the blest sound of liberty" (59, my emphasis).

Religious and Ideological Conversion

Conversion is a familiar trope of the transformation of identity in comedy, one that in fact serves "as a malleable trope for inconstancy […] not so much an act of faith, but a conversion of value that is grammatically convenient and reflects unstable, often fuzzy, boundaries of ethnic, racial and sexual identities" (Sicher 273). Accordingly, conversion is used in *Slaves* to dissociate Hassan from the constancy that is the hallmark of the steadfast Rebecca Constant, the ultimate American woman. Furthermore, Hassan's untrustworthy transvestism is also closely aligned with his conversion from Judaism to Islam. Rowson's representation of Hassan's inconstancy and infidelity seems to reflect a traditional unease about the Jewish body and conveys a sense that his infidelity is inherent rather than convertible: "However much the Jew may satanically disguise himself, he remains internally unchangeable, and thus would be unconvertible" (Sicher 275; see also Nathans 178-79). Not only is conversion itself suspect, but Jewish conversion is doubly so. This rejection of Jewish conversion is notably incompatible within the context of a play that promotes the conversion to American identity.

Rowson's *Slaves* is considered the first American play to feature Jewish characters (Liptzin 24; Harap 205);[9] however, this depiction overlooks the complexity of Hassan and Fetnah's religious identity. In this play, both father

9 Jewish characters also feature in later dramas of captivity that were written between 1794 and 1823 and that dealt with the Barbary theme. Louis Harap lists *Slaves* as one of six American plays written between 1794 and 1823 with Jewish characters. As in Rowson's play, none of the Jewish characters in these plays is American, and all the plays take place in foreign locales. The other plays are: William Dunlap's *Bonaparte in England* (1803), James Ellison's *American Captive* (1812), John Howard Payne's *Trial Without Jury* (1815) (an adaptation from a French drama), Mary Carr Clarke's *Benevolent Lawyer* (1823), and Jonathan Smith's *The Siege of Algiers* (1823) (Harap 204). Smith's *The Siege of Algiers* is exceptional in its positive portrayal of the Jewish character, but was never performed. In all these captivity plays, Jews are seen to handle money, possibly due to their historical role as bankers in the Barbary States. It was in this role that they probably negotiated with American representatives to free captive Americans and ships (Harap 205). But their negative portraiture in the captivity plays is also strongly influenced by the British tradition of the stage Jew, a stereotypical and anti-Semitic stock figure who, like Hassan, speaks ungrammatically and in dialect, and is greedy, miserly and treacherous (Harap 204-19). Similar portraitures of Jews can be found in other captivity novels such as Royall Tyler's 1797 *The Algerine Captive* or Peter Markoe's 1787 *The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania* (Gross 2).

and daughter have converted to Islam, bear typical Algerian names and are in effect Muslims. Indeed, when Hassan tries to convince the already wedded Rebecca to marry him, he relies on the Muslim law allowing polygamy rather than on Jewish law, which prohibits it: "Ish, but our law gives us great many wives—our law gives liberty in love" (21). Nevertheless, Rowson chooses to ignore Hassan's conversion altogether and bases his character on the stock figure of the stage Jew; her modern critics follow suit. This rejection (of Hassan's conversion to Islam) contradicts the idea of American identity as choice and compromises Rowson's claim for the universality of liberty (Jews are inconvertible).[10]

Moreover, the Barbary struggle, although economic in essence, was framed, at least in Europe, as a fight between "Christian knights and Islamic pirates" and mostly represented "the centuries-old ideological schism between Christianity and Islam" (Baepler 219). In a play that is historically grounded in the Barbary crisis of 1776-1815, and which features the drama of American captives in the hands of *Barbary* corsairs, it is thus all the more notable that the main villain is a British-Algerian, Muslim-Jew.[11] The mighty Algerian-Muslim Dey, for example, would have formed a more reliable representation of a Barbary captor. Alternatively, why not turn Hassan into a North African Jew, which would also be more historically accurate? The fact of Hassan's Judaism becomes even more far-fetched when considering that

10 The notion of identity as choice and the universality of liberty have been often emphasized in readings of Rowson's play. Rust, for example, writes that "America, it seems, was a state of mind. If one thought like one (cherishing benevolence, loving liberty)—as even the Moors in her play came to do—one was one. This was the message of Rowson's play, in which all but one character ends up swayed by the captives' point of view" ("Activism" 230). And yet, Rowson's depiction of conversion, particularly Jewish conversion, thoroughly undermines this message in favor of upholding racial boundaries.

11 Rowson's choice of topic was certainly political. With the 1783 Treaty of Paris, British protection of American shipping interests was discontinued, and a series of attacks by Barbary pirates on American ships in the Mediterranean soon followed. Ransom money demanded by the Barbary states and paid by the U.S. government did not solve the problem, and between 1784 and 1815 many American ships and more than 400 American sailors were captured as the American government wavered between monetary and military solutions (Rust, *Prodigal* 214-15). As mentioned before, Rowson does not favor either of these options and presents them both in her play: Ransom money is solicited as a rebellion is taking place.

at least officially, there had been no Jews in England, where Hassan and his daughter allegedly come from, since their expulsion in 1290.[12]

While both Jews and Moors were perceived as Other, their otherness was—significantly—not of the same type. Jews aroused suspicion "because they embodied a cultural and racial difference that was impermeable to conversion" (Sicher 274), because they were not confined to one country, not to mention that they were held responsible for Christ's crucifixion. Jews also symbolized a monetary corruption (Gross 2) that, unlike the Moors, ruled them out as possible partners for commerce. The Barbary corsairs, in contrast, were enemies marked by inferiority and menace but not instability (Gross 8). Indeed, in Rowson's play, the indigenous Muslim-Algerians are not as inherently tarnished and threatening as the former British-turned-Algerian Muslim-Jew Hassan, whose inconstant, corrupt, and nomadic nature seems to pose the greatest risk to American identity.

It is also possible, however, that Rowson, who was born in England, was influenced by the fact that many Americans believed that Britain actually supported Barbary piracy as a response to America's successful revolt (Margulis and Poremski ix). Featuring Hassan as originally British acknowledges this circumstance, while the emphasis on his Judaism conveniently renders his British origin relatively negligible.

Jewish daughters were, generally, not viewed as equally damnable and irredeemable as their male fathers but were instead held "beautiful and eligible for conversion" (Sicher 276).[13] Their racial differences could be overcome through spiritual conversion and marriage, as in the case of Jessica, Shylock's Jewish daughter in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. Rowson, however, replicates Efraim Sicher's paradigm of the conflicted wicked Jewish father and his beautiful daughter only partially: Although Fetnah is eligible for conversion, Rowson does not enable her to fully realize her new religious

12 According to Paul Baepler, Christian Barbary corsairs were no rarity: "Christian renegades commanded two-thirds of the seventeenth-century corsair flotilla" (225). At the same time, featuring the Jewish Hassan rather than the Muslim Dey as the main rogue of the play complicates claims in the spirit of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, which posits Islam in terms of a universal Other, such as Baepler's own thesis about the role of the captivity genre in molding North African Muslims into America's "diabolical foil" (239; see also Richards 155).

13 This may have to do with the fact that in Christian society, lineage is determined by men, whereas in Judaism it is the mother who determines the child's religious (Jewish) identity.

identity and marry Frederic, let alone physically cross over to America. After all, as both an infidel *and* a Muslim Jew, Fetnah is twice tarnished and thus her mixed genealogy poses a threat to "the gene pool of the new Republic" (Sorensen 175).

In another sense, however, Fetnah's enduring religious and ethnic alterity is evident in the way that she is at least spared the tragic death of her British-American predecessor, Charlotte Temple. I contend that Fetnah remains in Algiers in part because she is also irrevocably sexually tarnished.[14] It is Fetnah's own brazen description of the Dey's love-making that attests to her breached chastity: "[W]hen he makes love, he looks so grave and stately, that I declare, if it was not for fear of his huge sceymetar, I shou'd burst out a laughing in his face" (14). Like Charlotte, this description is enough to convict Fetnah and seal her fate; unlike Charlotte, she is not expected to conform to the Christian standards of Anglo-American women and is therefore allowed to live. She is nevertheless destined for geographical confinement, a telling fate in a play that aligns liberty with geography: "[M]ust a boy born in Columbia, claiming liberty as his birth-right, pass all his days in slavery" (18).[15]

Similarly, all Algerians who convert to "Americanism" remain at a safe distance from American soil. Although the conversion of the Moors seems to support the idea that it is enough to believe in liberty to assume an American identity, the play's all too convenient solution to the potential mass immigration of the "new" Americans in fact undermines the abstract notion of American identity. In other words, the very act of conversion is equivalent to inconstancy and implies a "tarnished" entity. Thus, both the twice-converted Fetnah (who has transferred her allegiance first to Islam and then to liberty), and the once-converted Moors (who have pledged themselves only to liberty and who are therefore somewhat less tarnished in this weird hierarchy of hybridity), are inevitably flawed by the very, and only, act that could redeem them. Consequently, neither is fully eligible for American identity. Pointing at

14 By comparison, the more fortunate character Melissa, of Rowson's lost play *The Americans in England*, is spared not only because she is an American and a Christian, but not least because she is not "tarnished" and has somehow maintained her purity (Rust "Activism" 247).

15 Eileen Elrod, by comparison, suggests that Fetnah (as well as Semira and Olivia) "provide a dramatic contrast" to Charlotte's "innocence […] fatal passivity" and "weakness" (169).

the play's "anti-Semitic, anti-immigrant components," Margolis and Poremski add that "Rowson believed, like others of her time, that the influx of Jews and other non-Anglo immigrants could only weaken the United States" (xxv).

The Discourse of Safety

Still, I would like to suggest that neither Fetnah's Jewish identity nor her sexually tarnished body is the main reason she is sacrificed in the name of filial duty, remaining in Algiers with her biological father, whose humanity is doubted throughout the play, instead of uniting with her surrogate ideological mother Rebecca. Rather, it is mainly because unlike Rebecca and Olivia, Fetnah is not only "an *emblem* of *female* liberty" (Rust, *Prodigal* 231, my emphasis), but a potent feminist activist who can effectually (not only declaratively) threaten the political balance of gender power in America. Eileen Elrod has argued that "Fetnah's remarkable agency includes defiance of sexual stereotypes" because she is "[u]nintimidated by the Dey's official sexual power over her" (169). But then, Fetnah seems to be unintimidated by all men. Before cross-dressing as a male (boy), she advises Selima, one of the Dey's harem women: "Pshaw! You're so fearful of his anger, if you let the men see you are afraid of them, they will hector and domineer finely, no, no, let them think you don't care whether they are pleased or no, and then they'll be as condescending and humble" (47). This counsel is typical of Fetnah, who advocates for liberty from the very start: "I don't like to be confined" and "I wish for liberty" (13), she announces at the outset of the play. Although we are told that she has learned those lessons from Rebecca—"[Rebecca] taught me, woman was never formed to be the abject slave of man. Nature made us equal with them, and gave us the power to render ourselves superior" (16)—she is in fact the first and only woman in the play to express and apply them to gender relations with such unequivocal (and straightforward) conviction. As has already been mentioned, the only other places where similar feminist statements are made with similar gusto are, significantly external to the play, the prologue, and the epilogue, where Rowson as herself famously declares: "'Women were born for universal sway; / Men to adore, be silent and obey'" (77). But Rowson is careful not to bestow this liberty on any of her fictional American ladies inside the play itself.

Fetnah's liberal ideas, moreover, are never checked, contained, or rendered impotent by bourgeois manners. Rebecca, by comparison, continually main-

tains a bourgeois appeal of small talk and polite conversation, even while engaging in her own form of protest. For example, rather than challenging or confronting the treacherous Hassan outright, Rebecca responds to his offer to be her "very good friend" (19) as if it is genuine, made in good faith (an answer strikingly mismatched in this situation): "Thank you, Hassan, but if you are in reality the friend you profess to be, leave me to indulge my grief in solitude, your intention is kind, but I would rather be alone" (19); similarly, she politely acknowledges his false kindness for not sending her to the slave market or the Dey's harem and apologizes for her current inability to offer ransom: "That is indeed true, but I cannot at present return your kindness" (20). Rebecca also weeps, performing her femininity, upon hearing that she might stay confined for life: "Alas! I am very wretched," she says, with the stage directions simply stating "weeps" (20). Fetnah may be afraid of the Dey or disgusted by him, but she speaks her mind in a straightforward manner—"What of that, I don't love him" (15)—and she does not cry.

In general, Rebecca's advocacy is less vocal and more contained than Fetnah's and is marked by the discourse of safety, in keeping with the feminine model of separate spheres. Confined to Hassan's abode, Rebecca reads a poem whose lines, "[t]he soul, secure in its existence" (18), quietly serve to express her protest and resilience. Although Kritzer praises Rowson's choice of intellectual activity for Rebecca (that is, not the traditional needlework), in a way, reading the poem keeps Rebecca respectfully silent. When Rebecca eventually speaks, her speech is not entirely her own but echoes those very lines: "[H]owever sunk in adversity, *the soul secure in its own integrity* will rise superior to its enemies" (21-22, my emphasis). Earlier in the text, Rebecca also describes how hope and "intellectual heavenly fire" help her "soar above this mortal world, and all its pains or pleasures" (18). Rebecca's words suggest her success in securing for herself an invisible separate sphere that protects her. The use of the word "secure" in this context evokes the security of a home away from home. She advocates for the paradigm of such separate spheres by demonstrating both how it can be maintained even under the dire circumstances of captivity, and the value it imparts.

Rebecca thus generates a sense that a separate sphere—of a "soul secure in its own integrity" (22)—is the only effective means to shun danger. In contrast to Dillon, who argues that Rowson sees no political relevance in the distinction between public and private, I suggest that the play's discourse actually maintains it. Although Hassan leaves Rebecca alone after her speech, this is not so much due to her political discourse, as Dillon asserts, but rather owing

to Rebecca's traditionally feminine qualities. Hassan's response aptly demonstrates this in his aside (his comic dialect relatively suspended, probably a sign of respect to the gentle and genteel subject of his speech): "'Tis a very strange woman, very strange indeed; she does not know I got her pocket book, with bills of exchange in it; she thinks I keep her in my house out of charity, and yet she talks about freedom and superiority, as if she was in her own country" (22). Hassan seems more charmingly perplexed by Rebecca's naiveté than impressed by her fervent idealism. Apparently, a woman's feminine qualities still seem to be her most effective resource. Similarly, Olivia's power to affect the Dey depends not so much on her bravery as on her feminine qualities: "How her softness melts me" (65) asides the Dey, very much like Hassan before him, upon hearing Olivia's plea to release her father and fiancé.[16]

Perhaps nowhere is Rebecca's adherence to her proper feminine place more evident than when she and her son Augustus escape danger, and the boy, already familiar with the conventions of gender roles, takes on the part of the male protector: "Don't be frightened, mother, thro' this door is a way into the garden; if I had but a sword, boy as I am, I'd fight for you till I died" (56). His mother, although the adult of the two, does not contest his lead and obediently follows. Rebecca conveniently yields to the traditional division of gender roles when under the guidance of an American male, even if only a boy.

Fetnah, by contrast, does not seem to share Rebecca's notion of feminine security (whether spiritual or physical), perhaps because unlike American women, she has never been indoctrinated by it. When Frederic wants to bring Fetnah to a safe place, that is, to put her in her proper place as a woman ("You, my dear Fetnah, I will place in an inner part of the grotto, where you will be safe" [52]), her response is nothing like Rebecca's polite yet circular speech, as she passionately protests: "What, shut me up!—Do you take me for a coward?" (52). When Henry explains: "We respect you as a woman, and would shield you from danger" (52), Fetnah assertively retorts: "A woman!—Why, so

16 Indeed, as noted earlier in the discussion of monetary and military power, the effect of Rebecca's fervent and principled speech towards the end of the play—"for never shall Olivia, a daughter of Columbia, and a Christian, tarnish her name by apostasy, or live the slave of a despotic tyrant" (72)—cannot be viewed outside the broader context of the slaves' rebellion. The Dey converts to democracy only under military pressure (even if also fueled by Rebecca's idealism), and his alteration is inexplicably swift and complete, as befits a comedy. Similarly, the Dey does not understand the content of Fetnah's discourse of liberty and dismisses it as (her) "childish caprice" (41).

I am; but in the cause of love and friendship, a woman can face danger with as much spirit, and as little fear, as the bravest man among you.—Do you lead the way; I'll follow to the end" (52). Fetnah's rejection of Frederic's protection distinguishes her not only from Rebecca but also from Jessica, who is rescued by Lorenzo in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. Unlike Jessica and Rebecca, Fetnah dictates a relationship that rejects the role of men as protectors.

The American men gallantly yield to Fetnah's spirited speech, but it is nevertheless condemned by the lewd Sebastian. Sebastian's low-class stature positions him on a par with Fetnah and thus qualifies him to oppose and mock her, highlighting the sexual effect of her speech: "Bravo! Excellent! Bravissimo!—Why, 'tis a little body; but, ecod, she's a devil of a spirit.—It's a fine thing to meet with a woman that has a little fire in her composition. I never much liked your milk-and-water ladies" (52). Sebastian's approach further intensifies Fetnah's profound alterity vis-à-vis the play's American "milk-and-water ladies." None of the American women in the play is ever referred to in such vulgar terms, let alone Rebecca, who receives an entirely different verbal treatment from Sebastian, who describes her as "a most lovely, amiable creature, whom we must accost with respect, and convey hence in *safety*—she is a woman of family and fortune" (57, my emphasis).

Unlike Fetnah, after all, Rebecca, as we have seen, speaks in a proper, ladylike manner and uses appropriately feminine gestures that seem to safeguard her chastity and keep harm at bay. Even when confronting the Dey, Rebecca bravely voices her essentialist credo not with belligerence but rather with melodramatic pathos. Her declaration of identity is no declaration of feminist independence: "[F]or never shall Olivia, a daughter of Columbia, and a Christian, tarnish her name by apostasy, or live the slave of a despotic tyrant" (72). She uses similar pathos in response to Hassan's sexual advancements: "Hold, Hassan; prostitute not the sacred word by applying it to licentiousness; the sons and daughters of liberty, take justice, truth, and mercy, for their leaders, when they list under her glorious banners" (21). The speech emphasizes religious and ethnic purity but does not address freedom in contexts that are not despotic, let alone Christian. More specifically, hers is not a feminist argument either. Nowhere does Rebecca protest Hassan or the Dey not as a Christian but as a woman: "By the Christian law, no man should be a slave" (73), she says to the Dey. Fetnah, by contrast, is far more candid and direct in applying those principles to her situation: "[B]estow your favor on some other, who may think splendor a compensation for the loss of liberty" (16). Fetnah

alone speaks on behalf of women as such: "a woman can face danger with as much spirit […] as the bravest man among you" (52).

Rowson's Republican Motherhood: *Slaves in Algiers*'s Feminism Reconsidered

Finally, it seems that Rebecca and Olivia are consistently motivated by their innate Christian sentiment and maternal and filial duties.[17] That is to say, for Rebecca and Olivia, the struggle for liberty is entwined with, even motivated by, their Christian duties as mother and daughter from the outset of the play. Rebecca contemplates her son's fate as a slave (18) and declares that "for his sake I have endured life" (70); when she gets hold of her ransom money, she thinks about releasing her son and many other "children of affliction" (59). We are also to understand that Olivia initially embarked on the fateful journey as a dutiful daughter because her father's ill health required that he travel to Lisbon, and she was willing to sacrifice her life for his sake and liberty. The play's emphasis on maternal and filial motivations (as on the joys of family reunions) further diminishes its ability to be read as empowering women as individually worthy of liberty.[18] Even if in Algiers, Rebecca and Olivia function as moral teachers and inspiring tutors to local women (Zoriana and Fetnah), the audience knows they will eventually resume their main positions as *wives and mothers* (or, in Olivia's case, a future mother) when they return to America and public order is restored.

Not so Fetnah. Fetnah's behavior as a dutiful daughter marks an abrupt shift in her conduct. Her eventual loyalty to her father is an incongruous turn given her political convictions thus far and seems to stem not so much from her innate femininity as from Rowson's need to defuse the tension introduced by her active politics. Fetnah's literal and liberal understanding of the United States as "a dear delightful country, where women can do just as they please"

17 Zoriana's attraction to Christianity similarly demonstrates itself in filial terms: "[T]ho' I'm fixed to leave this place, and embrace Christianity, I cannot but weep when I think what my poor father will suffer; Methinks I should stay to console him for the loss of you" (32).

18 Dillon adds the following (although in the context of her discussion of Rowson's complex British origin): "Enacting closure through the reunion of parents and child […] works to shift the locus of republican political identity and agency away from prodigal acts […] and toward filiopiety" (421).

(73) may be a reasonable conclusion of the lessons she learns from Rebecca, but it is nonetheless a dangerous conclusion: "Fetnah's romantic desires have become too politically (rather than personally) scripted" (Dillon 419). Fetnah is dangerous exactly because she demonstrates the potential political effect of Rebecca's teachings and the ability *to act* upon them. It is this activism that, to quote Rust, "most differentiates her from the American women of the play [...] what they offer she enacts" ("Activism" 236). Fetnah thus represents a form of republican motherhood gone wild in the sense that it is implemented literally and unchecked in the traditionally masculine public sphere. Her practical shrewdness means a transgression of the feminine separate sphere; mainly, it means that she can actually exercise and exert her influence outside of it. While this kind of activism is tolerable, perhaps even valuable, in Algiers, where her prowess can accelerate processes of democratization, it is far too dangerous for America and its republican mothers, and thus Fetnah, who carries Rebecca's idealism a step too far, must be contained.

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