

Sowing the Seeds of Virtue

Susanna Haswell Rowson's Contributions to Conduct Literature

Verena Holztrattner

The early Republic marks a highly formative period in American history. In the aftermath of the Revolutionary War, especially questions related to gender took center stage. With the dissolution of traditional gender hierarchies during the war, new roles had opened up for women—and many women were not willing to vacate them once the war was won, leaving the nation's returned patriarchs as well as hitherto unquestioned gender roles in a state of disarray.¹ The shared conviction that the Republic stood or fell with the virtue and proper conduct of its citizens further encouraged a close examination of the social roles of men and women at the time (Kierner 2); how, it was asked, should the independent American citizen look like, conduct themselves, and participate in the public and private life of the Republic, in order to secure its

1 The Revolution, Linda K. Kerber points out in *Women of the Revolution*, was “a strongly politicizing experience” (11) for American women. During the war, women frequently assumed public roles traditionally reserved to men: many were left in charge of family businesses and households; some assumed active roles in the Revolutionary War by forming supportive associations, such as the Ladies of Philadelphia, who sought to “render themselves more really useful” (Reed n.pag.) by collecting donations and sewing clothes for soldiers; yet others assisted the revolutionary cause by taking on positions as couriers and spies, or by traveling with the Continental Army as camp followers to tend to the wounded (Coletta n.pag.); the most ardent female revolutionaries, such as Deborah Sampson Gannett, even cross-dressed and joined the army in disguise (Rust 24). By shifting both women's and men's perception of women's abilities, rights, and roles in society, the Revolutionary War “radically changed women's place in the new republic” (Eldred and Mortensen 26); while this “new place” had yet to be delineated, the way had been cleared for a collective reassessment of by then outworn gender roles (see, for instance, Rust 23, 195; Kerber 12; Kritzer, “Playing” 150).

future existence. Gender roles and relations, in short, had to be renegotiated with an eye to the newly established American Republic and the needs of its citizens.

Efforts to provide Americans with gender models were as manifold and diverse as the authors who contrived them. Writers introducing themselves as concerned fathers, caring mothers, mentors, and friends set out to instruct young Americans, as Sarah E. Newton observes in her guide to American conduct books, “in the formation of good moral character and the acceptance of proper gender roles” (*Learning* 1). Texts of this kind are part of a highly popular (yet in the context of the early American Republic little examined) literary tradition: the advice or conduct tradition.² The best-known format within the conduct tradition is the conduct book, a highly didactic handbook “to right doing and right living” (Newton, *Learning* 11). Traditional conduct books are predominantly composed of prescriptive advice propagating and perpetuating conservative conceptions of the appropriate conduct of young men and women;³ Donald Fraser’s widely read conduct book *The Columbian Monitor*, for instance, includes a “recipe for agreeability” in women, listing “modesty, obedience, and complaisance” as a “good woman’s” key “ingredients” (143); similar

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- 2 The origins of conduct literature can be traced back as far as Renaissance Europe. In fact, the majority of conduct texts read in the American colonies in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were imported from Europe (Hemphill 34; Kierner 10). Several British conduct classics were reprinted in America, such as Lord Chesterfield’s *Letters to His Son* (1774), a conduct bestseller in both Great Britain and the U.S.; others found their way into American households in the form of conduct compendiums, that is, handbooks composed of excerpts from the most popular conduct texts at the time. Taken the strong popularity and wide dissemination of British conduct literature in colonial and (post-)revolutionary America, it is not surprising that little research has been done on the work of American conduct authors. However, originally American contributions to the conduct tradition offer, as shall be shown, intriguing insights into the complex processes of formulating new gendered standards of behavior for the citizens of the newly established Republic.
 - 3 Conduct books read at the end of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were generally written by and targeted at white middle-class men and women (Newton, *Learning* 4; Kierner 10). While Newton mentions some texts that addressed working-class readers (*Learning* 3), the great majority of conduct books at the time was targeted at a middling readership. African American readers would not be addressed in conduct literature until the second half of the nineteenth century. The texts to be discussed in this essay are exclusively concerned with the experience of white middle-class girls and women.

observations can be encountered in *Advice to the Fair Sex*, another prototypical American conduct book, which aims to “inculcate virtuous principles, [...] refine manners, [...] and] instruct the Fair Sex in the Duties of Life” (4). Through conduct books, Newton argues, guidelines for good behavior were “codified, legitimized, and institutionalized” (*Learning* xi); at a time when established social structures were in a state of flux, they were thus powerful literary vehicles in the forging of new gendered norms of behavior.

Conduct advice was not only disseminated through handbooks, however; several committed conduct writers turned to fiction, poetry, and drama in their attempt to promote “proper” gendered conduct in the most evocative, memorable, and entertaining ways. Though lesser-known today due to difficulties of categorization and definition, these literary conduct texts have doubtlessly played a significant role in reconceptualizing manhood and womanhood in the early Republic.⁴ Each literary genre appropriated for conduct purposes offered not only a distinct set of rhetorical tools and strategies to writers but also what Daniel Chandler calls specific “frame[s] of reference” to readers (7)—both within and beyond the texts. These frames—most importantly genre conventions, but also genre-specific reception contexts—helped readers correctly interpret the texts’ content and their authors’ intentions (7). Conduct advice offered in novels or poems, for instance, both of which genres traditionally read in the privacy of the home, would have been received differently than conduct models embodied by actors on stage and witnessed collectively in the public space of theaters. Similarly, the polyvocality and dialogic structure of plays would have had different effects on audiences than the univocality of the lyric persona offering advice in conduct poems.⁵

One element unifying all conduct texts regardless of their genre is their authors’ shared belief that young men and women ought to be *taught* their

4 The heterogeneity of conduct literature coupled with the wide range of themes tackled in conduct texts has complicated the formulation of a clear-cut definition of the conduct genre. Some conduct writers, for instance, placed a stronger emphasis on courtesy and etiquette, producing texts which, according to Newton, ought to be categorized as “etiquette books” or “guides to gentility” rather than conduct books (*Learning* 4). While conduct texts may include advice on proper behavior in society, genuine conduct literature, Newton argues, primarily offers advice on proper conduct in life” (*Learning* 6).

5 While this simplified conception of genre has been legitimately challenged by scholars such as Jacques Derrida, who insisted on the impurity, the “madness of genre” (81), it is a useful way of looking at the different properties of novels, poems, and plays with conduct-related themes.

respective roles in society, that proper gendered conduct needs to be *learned*. Gender roles, by implication, were viewed as performative constructs constituted by learned acts, which, in the context of the early American Republic, were contrived, recorded, disseminated, and preserved by conduct writers.⁶

In this article, Susanna Haswell Rowson's contributions to the literary conduct tradition will be examined: *Mentoria; or the Young Lady's Friend* (1791/1794); *Slaves in Algiers; Or, A Struggle for Freedom* (1794), *Miscellaneous Poems* (1804), and *A Present for Young Ladies; Containing Poems, Dialogues, Addresses* (1811).⁷ Since the author's personal and professional aspirations are reflected in both content and form of her writing, the texts will be discussed in chronological order and with reference to the author's biography.

Rowson (1762-1824), one of the strongest female voices of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in the U.S., was among the most fervent participants of the public renegotiation of gender roles. Her contributions to the conduct tradition stand out for several reasons. For one thing, Rowson probed the persuasive potential and conduct-related efficacy of virtually every literary genre and style in the course of her career. Convinced that "example is ever more efficacious than precept" (*Mentoria* 23), she deliberately turned away from the largely prescriptive conduct handbook format and instead interwove her views on proper conduct into novels, poems, dialogues, and plays. For another thing, Rowson, unlike most of her contemporaries, did not exclusively tap into the tried and tested "good-versus-bad" dichotomy but sought to offer complex gender models and sophisticated conduct advice. While she endorsed several traditional notions on appropriate conduct, she also cleared space for alternative and more permissive gender models. Her untiring efforts

6 Conduct authors' surprisingly progressive understanding of gender concurs with Judith Butler's theory on the performativity of gender. Roughly two centuries later, she postulated that bodies become their gender "through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time" (523). Aware of the performative nature of gender, conduct writers hastened to provide scripts and scores to *direct* gender performance in the U.S. according to their social and moral visions.

7 Rowson's best-known publication, her novel *Charlotte Temple* (1791/1794)—dedicated, as the author explains in her preface, to (female) readers "who are so unfortunate as to have neither friends to advise, or understanding to direct them, through the various and unexpected evils that attend a young and unprotected woman in her first entrance into life" (5)—, also displays several qualities characteristic of conduct literature. In this essay, however, a focus will be placed on the author's lesser known yet equally intriguing contributions to the conduct tradition.

to shape an ongoing gender discourse as a teacher, poet, novelist, and playwright, and her determination to challenge fossilized conceptions of gender render her one of the most significant conduct writers of the early American Republic.

Rowson was particularly interested in the role of girls and young women, which is why her conduct advice is largely targeted at “the young and thoughtless of the fair sex” (5), as she puts it in the preface of her best-known publication, *Charlotte Temple*. With the exception of *Slaves in Algiers*, the texts to be examined in this article have received only little scholarly attention; all of them, however, offer intriguing insights into a flourishing conduct tradition, the first publicly staged gender debate in the American Republic, and Rowson’s position within it as both an author and one of the earliest champions of female abilities and gender equality in the U.S.

***Mentoria; or the Young Lady’s Friend* (London 1791/Philadelphia 1794)**

A girl just entering the state of womanhood [...] is surrounded with innumerable dangers; her reputation is of as delicate a texture, and may be as easily injured, as the fairest blossom; [...] too often those who most pretend to admire its sweets, will rudely pluck it from its parental stalk, deprive it of all its beauties, then throw it from them like a loathsome weed, leave it to perish unpitied and unregarded, and to be trod to the earth by every unfeeling passenger, who may perhaps cast on it a look of contempt, and cry, “Behold the once lovely.” (Rowson, *Mentoria* 31-32)

Though born in England, Rowson spent most of her childhood in Massachusetts with her father, Royal Navy Lieutenant William Haswell. During the Revolution, however, the Haswell family, who refused to pledge allegiance to the revolutionary cause, was taken prisoner and, in 1778, sent back to England. Upon her return to England, Rowson assumed a position as a governess to support her family who was facing severe financial difficulties. It marked, as Wendy Lement notes, her “first encounter with teaching” (4), a profession which would henceforth occupy a constitutive role in her life and writing. *Mentoria; or the Young Lady’s Friend* was both written and first published in London in 1791, and is perhaps Rowson’s most conventional contribution to the conduct tradition. It is “a novel based on [Rowson’s] experiences as

a governess" (41), Marion Rust claims, which perhaps explains the author's preoccupation with painfully naïve girls in the novel. Henri Petter biting (albeit not quite untruthfully) describes the anecdotes featured in the novel as "painfully predictable in descriptions and pathetic uses" (70); a closer look at their content and form, however, offers some compelling insights.

Mentoria is a two-volume-strong prototype of "usable fiction"—a term coined by Petter to describe texts which combine "an unobjectionable subject matter with the guise of fictional reports, correspondences, and narratives" (63).⁸ Written, as Rowson explains in the preface, out of her "anxious desire" to assist young women in the cultivation of "amiable virtues" and the pursuit of "true happiness" in life (ii-iii), *Mentoria's* "unobjectionable subject matter" is the conduct of girls on the verge of adulthood. The "fictional guise" Rowson deemed most suitable for this purpose is the epistolary format.⁹ With the exception of a poem and a short fictional biography of the narrator to set the scene, *Mentoria* is composed of fictive letters, penned and/or compiled by the governess Helen Askham, or, as her fictional addressees and former charges,

8 Novels, albeit highly popular, were viewed with great suspicion in eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century America. Benjamin Rush, for instance, warned against the corrupting effects of novels, especially sentimental novels, insisting that "[t]he abortive sympathy which is excited by the recital of imaginary distress, blunts the heart to that which is real" (12). His concerns were echoed by numerous prominent public figures at the time, most importantly Thomas Jefferson and John Turnbull, painter of "Declaration of Independence" (for a detailed survey on the hostility to fiction in eighteenth-century America, see Herbert Ross Brown's *The Sentimental Novel in America, 1789-1860*). Like many of her contemporary novelists, Rowson sought to deflect criticism stirred by the novel genre by adding to her texts lengthy "disclaimers" avowing the purity of her intentions. The poem featured on the title page of *Mentoria*, for instance, first and foremost seeks to appease potential skeptics and critics: "Detested be the pen whose baneful influence / Could to the youthful docile mind convey / Pernicious precepts, tell loose tales, / And paint illicit passion in such colours, / As might mislead the unsuspecting heart, / And vitiate the young unsettled judgement. / I would not for the riches of the East, / Abuse the noblest gifts of heaven thus, / Or sink my Genius to such prostitution." While the merging of fiction and conduct advice did indeed encourage "a more tolerant acceptance of imaginative writing" (Petter 63), Rowson still felt compelled to restate her high-minded intentions throughout the novel.

9 Rowson was by no means the only author to turn to the epistolary form in her effort to propagate her notions on proper conduct; Lord Chesterfield's previously mentioned *Letters to His Son* was constructed in a similar manner, as was the anonymous *Advice to the Fair Sex*, and Hannah Webster Foster's *The Boarding School; or, Lessons of a Preceptress to Her Pupils* (1798).

the daughters of Lord Winworth, call her, “Mentoria” (20). The voice Rowson adopts in the novel alternates between two tones: it is the voice of a mature friend, warm and benevolent, yet simultaneously the strict, strongly didactic, and often patronizing voice of a “preceptress” (21). Coherent storylines and traditional plot and character development are absent in *Mentoria*; as a hybrid between novel and conduct book, it relies, instead, on its epistolary frame to merge, as Newton notes, “lesson-giving letters and illustrative anecdotes into a more-or-less coherent whole” (“Wise” 147).

Conduct advice in these letters is largely interwoven with brief anecdotes featuring young women who stray from the path of virtue and are punished soundly for their transgressions. “A girl just entering the state of womanhood [...] is surrounded with innumerable dangers” (31), Mentoria warns her charges in her second letter to them. It is one of many foreboding proclamations intended to impress upon her young, female addressees the importance of filial duty and the dangers of unregulated passion. Through the voice of Mentoria, Rowson endorses many contemporary ideals of appropriate female conduct; her largely sympathetic portrayal of female offenders and the wrongdoers’ ability to recognize and repent their errors, on the other hand, sets them apart from the pure evil female wrongdoers depicted in most traditional conduct literature. In fact, Mentoria’s chief fallen heroine, Agnes, attains an almost martyr-like status: “If thou hast any children, tell them my story” (75), Agnes implores Mentoria on her deathbed. “[T]each them to subdue their passions. We are incompetent judges of what will promote our own happiness. Oh! that I had never—” (75). Agnes’s last request, namely that the story of her downfall be used to secure other women’s future happiness, is an emphatic declaration of female solidarity and endows the penitent with a certain measure of heroic stoicism and selflessness—qualities not usually attributed to women straying from the path of virtue.

Slaves in Algiers; Or, A Struggle for Freedom: A Play, Interspersed with Songs, in Three Acts (1794)

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. (Rowson, *Slaves* 80; Sebastian about Fetnah)

“The stage is undoubtedly a very powerful engine in forming the opinions and manners of a people” (763), the American author and women’s rights advocate Judith Sargent Murray observed in 1798, pinpointing one of the theater’s key qualities in the post-revolutionary United States: its power to shape the views and guide the conduct of the citizens of the newly established Republic. The range of opinions and manners negotiated on stage in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was wide: biting political satires and propaganda plays were performed alongside comedies of manner mocking imported fashion fads as well as dramatized commentaries on current events affecting life in the young Republic. Among the most pervasive topics raised in American drama at the time was identity, more specifically U.S. Americans’ quest for a distinct national, political, cultural, and social “character.” In the process of forging social identities appropriate for citizens of the Republic, the performative demarcation of gender roles assumed a particularly prominent place on stage. Many playwrights took advantage of the public interest in reassessing fossilized models of masculinity and femininity to advance their visions of American men’s and women’s places in the new social order. “As a forum for urban diversity, theater was a likely venue for the advocacy of female rights” (209), Rust notes—a venue especially female playwrights and actors explored and exploited for their own benefits.

Today, Rowson is chiefly remembered for her contributions to the early American literary canon as a novelist; in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, by contrast, Rowson’s popularity and high public profile were very much linked to her contributions to post-revolutionary American theater as an actress and playwright. Especially her engagement with the New Theatre in Chestnut Street, Philadelphia, and the Federal Street Theatre in Boston earned her considerable public recognition during her lifetime.¹⁰ The foundations of Rowson’s stage career were laid in 1792, when she and her husband William Rowson, who had previously been engaged as musician and actor in the Royal Horse Guards and at Covent Garden Theatre, started performing together in several British theaters. One year later, the Rowsons were recruited by Thomas Wignell and left for the United States as members of Wignell’s

10 On the original title pages of several of Rowson’s published novels the author is introduced as “Mrs. Rowson, of the New-Theatre, Philadelphia” (see, for instance, *Mentoria*; *Charlotte Temple*; *Trials of the Human Heart*). These biographical references suggest that publishers assumed that Rowson’s (prospective) readers would recognize the author’s name from playbills, reviews, or the stage.

and Alexander Reinagle's theater company, the New American Company. They performed in several American cities, including Annapolis and Philadelphia, before eventually settling down in Boston in 1796 to join John B. Williamson's theater company at the Federal Street Theatre.¹¹

As an actress who had toured British and American theaters for several years, Rowson had a thorough understanding of the workings of theater and was well aware of the opportunities the stage offered. Her only extant play, the comedy *Slaves in Algiers*, was first performed at Philadelphia's New Theatre in 1794 and was received, according to Rowson, with "unbounded marks of approbation" (*Slaves* 56). *Slaves in Algiers* is a prime example of how drama can serve as an efficacious tool for the performative renegotiation of norms and the playful promotion of alternative ways of living. Aside from the much-discussed political and cultural dimensions of the play, Rowson's remarkably resourceful female characters and the unconventional gender role distribution within the play render *Slaves in Algiers* a particularly intriguing text. In the play, conduct advice is exclusively offered by way of example and is consequently less explicit than that found in traditional conduct texts; the absence of conduct precepts is compensated, however, by Rowson's compelling portrayal of women's qualities within the play, which makes her female characters powerful role models for her female audiences.

Although male characters outnumber female characters in *Slaves in Algiers*, Rowson's women are the ones who stick out.¹² It is them who sway the play's

11 For more detailed accounts of the Rowsons' stage careers see Highfill, Burnim, and Langhans 123-28; Meserve 116-17; Dudden 9-11; Kritzer, Introduction to *Plays* 7-12; Seilhamer 143; Rust; Vail; and Nason.

12 The ethnic division of the female characters in *Slaves in Algiers* into Americans and Moriscans—that is, Algerians "educated in the Moorish religion" (60), as is explained in Act 1—adds a somewhat unexpected and highly intriguing dimension to the play; however, Rowson "Americanizes" the female Algerian characters so thoroughly that for the purpose of this analysis, the purported cultural divide will be disregarded. Fetnah, who, as we learn in the first scene of the play, drew her "first breath in England" (60), holds a "natural antipathy" (71) to "Algerian manners" and thus does not consider herself a "Moriscan" at all, and Zoriana emphasizes repeatedly that she is "a Christian in [her] heart" (67) and therefore determined to act in accordance with Christian values (70). Both Algerian women share the same set of ideals and traits as the American female protagonists Olivia and Rebecca and thus function just as much as role models for Rowson's American audiences. For a detailed discussion of the cultural, political, and racial dimensions of the comedy see for instance Rust 214-32; Dillon; and Richards 143-65.

action, speak its most consequential lines, and determine its outcome. All female characters exhibit strengths traditionally ascribed to men only. Intelligence, courage, and determination are their hallmarks, as is their conviction that they are in no way inferior to men: “[W]oman 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” (60-61), Fetnah, the favorite of Muley Moloc, Dey of Algiers, the play’s chief villain, declares in the first scene of the play.¹³ Fetnah, who is distinguished above all by her boldness and “ready wit” (75), also serves as Rowson’s champion of female courage: “[I]n the cause of love or friendship, a woman can face danger with as much spirit, and as little fear, as the bravest man” (80), she insists—a credo all women prove true in the course of the play.

In the play’s epilogue, written and spoken by the author herself (Rowson also acted the part of Olivia in the original production of *Slaves in Algiers*), Rowson reiterates her call for female empowerment. Directly addressing the “ladies” in the audience, Rowson delivers the arguably most provocative and, with regards to the renegotiation of gender roles, consequential lines of the play: “Women were born for universal sway; / Men to adore, be silent, and obey” (94). While the intended tone of Rowson’s epilogue is hard to fathom from a contemporary perspective—was Rowson just being playfully ironic or did she intend to leave the audience with a serious sociopolitical message?—there is some evidence concerning its effect on audiences. The critic Peter Porcupine [William Cobbett], for instance, commented at length on Rowson’s bold insistence “upon the superiority of her sex” (23) in his critical essay on Rowson’s writing, *Kick for a Bite*. While his review is first and foremost an open attack on “the whole tribe of female scribblers and politicians” (20), Porcupine also confesses to “strange misgivings hanging about [his] mind, that the whole moral as well as political world is going to experience a revolution” (24). The lingering “misgivings” provoked by Rowson’s dramatic subversion of traditional gender hierarchies serve as evidence of the

13 The portrayal of women in *Slaves in Algiers* is particularly intriguing when compared to Rowson’s characterization of the female heroines in her novels. As Rust notes, “[t]hose familiar with Rowson only from *Charlotte Temple* might be surprised by the humor and energy found among the playwright’s female personae. Where Charlotte’s signature gesture was collapse, women such as Rebecca, Olivia, Zoriana, and Fetnah respond to their captivity [...] with outspoken defiance” (226). Faye E. Dudden, too, draws attention to the absence of the “passive, sentimental heroine” in *Slaves in Algiers*: “In Rowson’s play, a woman captive becomes a virtual missionary of republicanism to the North Africans, and her teachings on liberty extend to matters of gender” (9).

strong reverberations of the ongoing renegotiation of gender roles and hierarchies through literature.

Though progressive, even radical, in many respects, *Slaves in Algiers* does not fully eschew traditional female virtues. Filial duty, for instance, is depicted as one of the primary markers of a decent young woman, and sympathy and compassion as qualities no woman should lack. In spite of their bold refusal to passively accept their confinement and objectification, the three young women in the play, Zoriana, Fetnah, and Olivia, leave no doubt that they are fully aware of their responsibilities as daughters: “I cannot but weep when I think what my poor father will suffer” (69), Zoriana, the Dey Muley Moloc’s daughter, admits when scheming to free her father’s favorite slave, Olivia; Olivia, meanwhile, is determined to sacrifice her life to save that of her father, Constant (67); and at the end of the play, Zoriana resolves to remain in Algiers rather than leave for the United States to console her father Ben Hassan, the comic villain of the play: “While my father was rich and had friends, I did not much think about my duty, but now he is poor and forsaken, I know it too well to leave him alone in his affliction” (93). The mature American captive Rebecca serves as the play’s champion of sympathy, compassion, and moral uprightness, and represents its “mouthpiece for right thinking” (Rust 223). It is she who detains her fellow American captives at the end of the play from punishing the comedy’s villains, pledging that, however evil, “no man should be a slave” (91).

What distinguishes Rowson’s approach to traditional markers of female virtue from most of her fellow conduct authors’ is her insistence that these qualities are expedient and worth preserving because they empower women. The strongest ties between her female characters are their bonds of friendship, which are nurtured more than anything else by the women’s ability to feel compassion and act sympathetically. It is by forming female networks, as Jeffrey H. Richards points out (165), that Rowson’s women eventually manage to overcome all obstacles placed in their way. What Rowson hence shows is that women could, in fact, profit from what was widely considered their innate “qualities of the heart,” if they were employed to the ends of female camaraderie.

Miscellaneous Poems (1804)

“Children, like tender osiers, take the bow, / And as they first are fashioned,
always grow.” / Thus spoke the bard; and ‘tis a moral truth, / That precept and
example, taught in youth, / Dwell on the mind till life’s dull scene is past; /
Clinging about us even to the last / And women, pray for folly don’t upbraid
them / Are just such things, as education made them. (Rowson, *Poems* 105)

Rowson’s engagement with the Federal Street Theatre in Boston only lasted one season. In 1797, the theater closed and Rowson decided to retire from the stage. She turned, instead, to a profession which had once before guaranteed financial security to her and her family: teaching. Her move to redirect her professional aspirations could not have come at a more auspicious moment. Women’s education, which had not been of great concern in the North American colonies up until the late eighteenth century, entered the limelight in revolutionary America and voices in favor of expanding educational opportunities for women multiplied. In “An Oration upon Female Education” (1791), for instance, schools for young women are advertised as key institutions in the rise of the American nation; only through thorough schooling, the anonymous author insists, could American girls acquire the skills expected from model American citizens. Advocates of female education vindicated their position in the education debate by focusing attention on the importance of “good” mothers in the early American Republic, laying the foundations of an ideology Linda K. Kerber described as republican motherhood.¹⁴ “[S]ons and daughters of every age, are indebted to their mothers for the seeds of virtue and knowledge” (48), the anonymous author of “An Oration” postulates; in order to prepare American girls for their crucial role as nurturers of future generations of American citizens, their education needed to become a top priority in the Republic.¹⁵

14 Republican motherhood describes an ideology which emerged at the end of the eighteenth century in the United States. It is based on the idealized notion of American mothers as “custodian[s] of civic morality” who “guaranteed the steady infusion of virtue into the Republic” (Kerber 11) and instilled in their (male) offspring a patriotic mindset and public spirit.

15 Rush expressed similar sentiments in his public address to the visitors of the Young Ladies’ Academy in Philadelphia roughly seven years earlier (6), and Rowson, too, repeatedly called attention to what was then considered the most decisive reason to advance female education. In the preface of one of her textbooks, *Biblical Dialogues*, Row-

In the same year the Federal Street Theatre shut its gates, Rowson opened her own school, the Young Ladies' Academy in Boston. It proved a great success and was soon considered one of the most prestigious girls' schools in America—laurels which reflected on Rowson's reputation and rendered her a well-known and highly esteemed public figure in the early American Republic. Her return to the teaching profession brought with it new thematic preoccupations and priorities, many of which are mirrored in her literary contemplations on female conduct. Her poetry collection *Miscellaneous Poems* (1804) offers advice for young women which is clearly informed by Rowson's experience as a teacher and reflects her teaching philosophy and her views on women's abilities. Whereas some poems, most notably "Maria," which tells the story of the seduction and fall of an innocent young woman, are still very much in line with traditional conduct advice for girls on the level of content—that is, heed your parents' advice or else you will find yourself "[w]retched, forsaken, and undone" (73)—other poems paint a different, much more progressive picture of women.

In "Women as They Are," for instance, Rowson suggests that women are God's "last, best work, his master-piece" (115) and share all virtues and talents believed to be exclusively male. In the first eight stanzas of the poem, Rowson enumerates the most pervasive negative stereotypes ascribed to women such as sentimentality, simple-mindedness, and vanity; in the final and strongest stanza, however, all clichés are exposed as unjust prejudice: "Pardon me, sir, I'll speak, I'm not afraid; / I'll tell you what [women] are, what might be made" (114), the author boldly begins her call for a thorough rethinking of women's position in society. She then goes on to insist that were men to reject popular misconceptions regarding women's intellectual capacities and treat them, instead, as reasonable beings, they would find in women equal partners, or as Rowson puts it, "friends, your purest joys to share" (115). For Rowson, proper education of both sexes is the crux of the matter, for "women, pray for folly don't upbraid them, / Are just such things, as education made them" (105). In the poem's final lines, Rowson re-endorses traditional gender relations, arguing that women ought to serve as the guardians of men's comfort and

son elaborates on her position in the education debate thus: "When I became engaged in the momentous business of instructing females of the rising generation, whose future conduct as wives and mothers was to stamp the moral and religious [sic] character, and ensure in a great measure the virtue and consequent happiness of another age, I could not but feel the great responsibility of the undertaking" (iv).

domestic bliss (155); her call for better educational opportunities for women and her adamant questioning of unfounded prejudice against women render the poem nonetheless a noteworthy contribution to the gender and conduct discourse of the early nineteenth century.

***A Present for Young Ladies;
Containing Poems, Dialogues, Addresses &c. &c. &c. (1811)***

[S]ince innumerable instances may be produced of female courage, fortitude, talent, and virtue of every discription [sic], why should not we start forward with generous ardour in the pursuit of what is praiseworthy, and substitute for the evanescent graces of beauty the durable attractions of a cultivated mind. (Rowson, *Present* 84)

As founder and head of the Young Ladies' Academy, Rowson had the autonomy to decide what and how her pupils ought to be taught. The curriculum she developed was exceptionally well-rounded for the time, covering "ornamental branches of education" ("An Oration" 51), such as literature, drawing, and music, but also science, math, geography, history, and drama. In the course of her teaching career, Rowson published several textbooks, including a spelling dictionary, *An Abridgement of Universal Geography* (1805), and *Exercises in History, Chronology, and Biography* (1822). They reflect her versatility as a teacher and writer, and stand as lasting records of her contributions to the first efforts to institutionalize female education in the American Republic. *A Present for Young Ladies* is not so much a textbook than a compendium of "bagatelles" Rowson used in her classroom. Written "for the amusement and information of very young minds" (n.pag.), it consists of easily accessible texts of different genres and styles, including poems, public addresses, and a universal history. Conduct advice is offered in various guises, most intriguingly, perhaps, in the shape of dialogues.

Rowson's dialogues, all in all six, were written for the recital of her pupils both in the classroom and at public exhibitions. They represent, as Lement notes, "some of the earliest examples of dramatized pedagogy" (9) and children's theater in America.¹⁶ Drawing from the everyday experience of her stu-

16 A further example of dramatized pedagogy is Rowson's *Biblical Dialogues* (1822), a collection of short dialogues between the members of the fictional Alworth family aim-

dents, that is, of white, middle-class girls, the dialogues all operate according to the same basic structure: up to three “little misses” discuss topics such as parent-daughter relationships, marriage, education, and amusements, with always one or two girls respectively occupying the role of the idle and self-obsessed “bad pupil” and one representing its counterpart: the obedient, diligent, and modest model student. In the course of each dialogue, the “good pupil” points out her companions’ moral flaws, calls attention to their errors, and reminds them of their duties, often by paraphrasing advice received from mature female friends or relations. In the second dialogue, for instance, Lucretia explains the dangers of idleness by quoting her aunt, who taught her that girls “who lead indolent lives, / Are indifferent daughters, and make wretched wives” (23). Each of the dialogues ends with the disobedient wrongdoers repenting their behavior and promising to rectify their mistakes. “Direct me, assist me, my sister, my friend, / To find out each error, correct and amend” (30), Maria implores her sister in the third dialogue, before vowing to henceforth strive to emulate the latter’s model conduct.

With their focus on modesty, delicacy, and chastity—the three most cherished feminine virtues in traditional conduct literature, according to Newton (“Wise” 144)—Rowson’s dialogues reaffirm fossilized conduct conventions for young girls. What distinguishes the dialogues from traditional conduct literature is Rowson’s move to place her thoughts into the mouths of her pupils, using their voices to propagate her views and argue her case. In casting them as “conduct mentors,” Rowson encouraged her female students to look to “their peers for guidance” (Lement 10) and, in doing so, demonstrated the merits of female friendship and camaraderie. By inspiring her pupils to slip into different personae, Rowson moreover allowed them to performatively explore different characters and roles, and to rehearse proper conduct in the sheltered environment of her classroom. The annual exhibitions held at Rowson’s Young Ladies’ Academy provided pupils with a unique opportunity to practice performing and speaking in front of actual audiences—an ambitious and bold exercise at a time when public speaking was considered an exclusive right of white men.

ing to help children understand the bible. In the preface of *Biblical Dialogues*, Rowson explains her choice of genre, sharing her experience with using dialogues in the classroom: her pupils, she insists, read the recitals “with avidity” (v). Her observation suggests that reciting (and presumably performing) dramatic texts was an integral part of Rowson’s lessons.

Whereas the dialogues in *A Present for Young Ladies* primarily promote traditional female conduct, Rowson's "Sketches of Female Biography," published in the same compendium, offer quite different kinds of conduct advice and female role models.¹⁷ "The importance of women in every civilized society is generally acknowledged" (84), Rowson stipulates solemnly at the beginning of her biographical chapter on women of genius throughout history. Almost forty pages of the compendium are dedicated to the life stories of "exemplary women" (84): From powerful Russian empresses to acclaimed Italian actresses, from celebrated English writers to French intellectuals—Rowson's history of women's achievements introduces a wide range of female "celebrities" and constitutes a valuable record of "noteworthy women" up to 1811. While Rowson emphasizes that intellectual and political abilities never interfered with these women's domestic duties and feminine virtues, all of her accounts highlight that women of all ranks and stations are as "capable of the highest refinement, and most brilliant acquirements" (88) as men. Rowson's paramount aim in enumerating these women's attainments outside the "private sphere"¹⁸ is to convince her female readers that it is both possible and laudable to seek knowledge and make oneself venerated. In the conclusion of "Sketches of Female Biography," Rowson maintains that it is her "full conviction, that what women have attained heretofore, women may attain again" (121)—a clear appeal to her young readers to exploit their full potential and strive to emulate the heroines of the past.

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- 17 Rowson was convinced that biography was a particularly useful genre for the instruction of young female readers since it could simultaneously "inform the mind, improve the taste, and amend the heart" (*Present* 83-84).
- 18 The assumption that the life of men and women in the age of the American Revolution can be split into two clear-cut "spheres"—the male public and the female private sphere—is among the most persistent and misleading to date. In his essay "Gender and the Public/Private Distinction in the Eighteenth Century," Lawrence E. Klein challenges this binary opposition. According to Klein, the distinction between public and private is too crude to accurately reflect the many dimension of men and women's life at the time (101-02). "[B]inary oppositions are a frequent, important and powerful tool with which people, past and present, attempt to tidy up their mental and discursive worlds. [...] However, the binary opposition does not adequately explain the complexities of [...] human experience in practice" (98).

Conclusion

“[C]onduct literature by nature is conservative and slow to reflect new cultural ideas” (*Behave* 70), Newton postulates in her guide to American conduct books. It aims at upholding idealized notions of gender roles and conduct and in doing so guarantees the social and moral stability of society. This description, while certainly applicable to the conduct tradition in general terms, neglects one important aspect: the context in which conduct texts were produced. At the close of the eighteenth century, when the social order had yet to be restored and fractured social structures rebuilt, conduct literature had to assume different functions in order to remain relevant for the citizens of the still fragile American Republic. Rowson was among those who recognized and met the new demands of American readers; taking advantage of the spirit of change the Revolution had evoked, she offered new versions of conduct advice for women which highlighted the benefits of granting them a say in the goings-on of the new Republic. Her tentatively subversive yet never confrontational ideas on female conduct, her ardent advocacy of female abilities, and her call for equal education for boys and girls are themes that run through all of her publications, alternately taking shape in letters, poems, dialogues, and plays. Without openly contradicting longstanding gender ideals and thereby risking her reputation as an author, actor, and teacher, Rowson managed to contrive powerful female role models which illustrate what might not be gained by granting women the right to actively participate in the life of the young Republic. It is for this reason that her literary contributions to the American conduct tradition and ipso facto to the forging of new role models for women merit recognition.

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