Eighteenth-Century Fiction

Volume 23 | Issue 1 Article 20

9-24-2010

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Recommended Citation
Fichtelberg, Joseph (2010) "Review of: Susanna Rowson, *Reuben and Rachel; or, Tales of Old Times*, ed. Joseph F. Bartolomeo," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*: Vol. 23: Iss. 1, Article 20.
Available at: http://digitalcommons.mcmaster.ca/ecf/vol23/iss1/20

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Review of: Susanna Rowson, *Reuben and Rachel; or, Tales of Old Times,* ed. Joseph F. Bartolomeo

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Susanna Rowson. *Reuben and Rachel; or, Tales of Old Times*, ed. Joseph F. Bartolomeo. Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2009. 418pp. CAN$19.95. ISBN 978-1-55111-839-0.

At last, Susanna Rowson has come of age. With Marion Rust's major critical study, *Prodigal Daughters*, her Norton Critical Edition of *Charlotte Temple*, the edition of *Slaves in Algiers* edited by Jennifer Margulis and Keren Poremski, and Joseph Bartolomeo's valuable edition of *Reuben and Rachel*, we can begin to see the range and subtlety of a major early American artist. Long dismissed as a popular sentimentalist, Rowson has been acquiring increasing depth and gravity over the past twenty years through sophisticated studies by Julia Stern, Elizabeth Barnes, Christopher Castiglia, Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, and others. It may well be that a full appreciation of Rowson had to await an enhancement of our own critical categories—the application of feminism, nationalism, psychoanalytic method, and transatlantic approaches to her diverse texts. An unusually successful popular writer and public figure, Rowson was also exquisitely attuned to the stresses of her revolutionary time, capable of conveying the anxieties of seismic change in a rich, if conventional prose. Nowhere does she do this to greater effect than in *Reuben and Rachel*.

Reuben and Rachel (1798) capped a remarkable decade in Rowson's career, one that included the publication of *Charlotte Temple* (1791), *Rebecca* (1792), and *Trials of the Human Heart* (1795), as well as her patriotic farce, *Slaves in Algiers* (1794). These texts feature wandering heroines seeking work (*Rebecca*), protection (*Charlotte Temple*), or social esteem (*Trials*). Only *Reuben and Rachel* presents all three. A panoramic celebration of American prospects, the novel surveys ten generations of Italian, Spanish, English, colonial, and Native American figures as they struggle for dignity and security, ending inevitably in Reuben Dudley's flag-waving testament to "a young country, where the only distinction between man and man should be made by virtue, genius and education" (368). That this hymn to white Anglo-Saxon Protestantism raises a certain queasiness in contemporary readers has everything to do with Rowson's art, which simultaneously embraces and questions the vast changes it depicts.

Rowson's preface to *Reuben and Rachel* proclaims her intention "to awaken in the minds of my young readers, a curiosity ... [about] the history of their native country" (38). As in all her works of the 1790s, the novel features scenes of instruction, easily grasped moral exempla sustaining a wider narrative frame. The lessons here involve a genealogy of upright characters facing down challenges to their integrity as they cross cultural, ethnic, and religious lines. Thus Ferdinand, the son of Christopher Columbus, marries Peruvian princess Orrabella, whose

father is all too happy to ally with benevolent Christians, and it is Columbus himself who fights to restrain the brutality of avaricious Spaniards. Returned in chains to court after his third voyage, during which he is accused of improprieties, he represents a self-sacrificing, colour-blind idealism; his refusal to part with his chains, even after he is exonerated, serves as an emblem of saintly colonialism. That saintliness reappears in his descendants—in the fortunes of William Dudley, taken captive at age fifteen by Narragansetts and rising to the position of tribal chief after marrying the sachem's daughter, as well as in the adventures of his grandson Reuben, who emerges from another captivity with an Indian beauty in tow, even after he marries his sweetheart. Such incidents suggest a Whiggish appraisal of young America poised to redeem its ancient promise on the world stage.

From this standpoint, the novel celebrates the triumph of republican virtue, yet it does so in a way that also underscores a tough-minded critique. In almost every generation, Rowson's characters face down avarice and intolerance—often religious intolerance. For Columbus's granddaughter Isabelle, the challenge is a prohibition against marrying a Protestant, yet she renounces her inheritance by wedding Thomas Arundel. Their daughter Columbia endures the religious persecution of Queen Mary, and Columbia's granddaughter Isabelle Gorges similarly rejects a wealthy suitor so that she may wed her cousin in secret. In the post-revolutionary generation the problem is greed: Reuben Dudley's estate is stolen from him by an avaricious ward of his father, and Rachel must conceal her marriage—and suffer as a result—in order to protect the schemes of a husband who is afraid of offending a rich aunt. The inevitable triumph of virtue proclaims the ecumenical spirit of a new America.

But that boundary-crossing optimism also betrays a deep distrust of a modern world where revolutionary change often comes at the price of security and honour. In every one of Rowson's texts in the 1790s women endure terrible trials: they are cast naked in a public sphere that ruthlessly robs them of dignity and security. Charlotte's gradual descent into rootless madness is echoed by Rebecca's perilous career as a governess for home-wrecking adulterers, by Meriel Howard's run-ins with predatory suitors (*Trials*), by Rebecca Constant's false imprisonment after her ransom has been paid (*Slaves*), and by Rebecca Dudley's marriage to the fatuous Hampden Auberry. The poor heroine of *Reuben and Rachel*, who lives alone after her secret marriage, soon finds herself homeless and penniless, hounded by a calumny that convinces even her husband that she has been unfaithful. Overcome by "violent" emotions "accompanied by a delirium [that] brought her to the verge of the grave" (345), Rachel is an emblem, like Columbus, of how piety itself can be jeopardized in a world of self-strivers. Honour in

this revolutionary era, Rowson seems to say, may be as fleeting as these tales of old times.

In his excellent introduction, Bartolomeo explores the artistic effects of Rowson's conservatism. The daring of the novel's first book, he argues—evident in the many powerful women and Native Americans—gives way to a more conventional tale of property and propriety in the second book, as Reuben seeks an estate and Rachel seeks domestic bliss. Rowson's own search for security may well have influenced this greater caution: as an educator whose republican loyalties had been recently assailed, Rowson could not afford to alienate readers at the end of a politically turbulent decade. Yet, however much she muted her contemporary characters, Bartolomeo observes, she "did not abandon" (32) the expansive vision that enabled her own literary success.

True to Rowson's intentions, this is a popular rather than a scholarly edition, with general and relatively few notes and an appendix providing contemporary reviews and excerpts from Judith Sargent Murray, Phillip Freneau, and Joel Barlow. Bartolomeo also reproduces the delightfully barbed three-way exchange between William Cobbett, John Swanwick, and Rowson following her performance of *Slaves in Algiers*. Cobbett labelled Rowson a pornographer. Defending her, Swanwick challenged Cobbett to a duel, and Rowson called him a "reptile." Their anger suggests that, despite her caution, Rowson had the power to stir readers in her time and, it seems clear, in our own.

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